

# The primary education dilemma

MANZOOR AHMED

PRIMARY school teachers are marching on the street again demanding better salaries. Demonstrations and protests by teachers have been an on-going phenomenon. Some 180,000 teachers in 37,700 government primary schools, who serve two thirds of the primary school students, have now decided to stop teaching until their demands are met. Another 80 thousand teachers of some 20,000 registered non-government schools also have threatened a siege of the Prime Minister's office if their salaries and working conditions are not improved. They were not satisfied with a 10 percent increase in salary granted recently at a cost of Tk 45 crores included in the new budget. How is the teachers' legitimate demand for better rewards linked to the urgent need for improving the state of primary education in the country?

No one concerned about education will disagree with the teachers' claim to better remuneration. The protesting teachers have made the point that the salary of a government primary school teacher is less than the salary of the driver of a government vehicle. The teachers of the registered non-government schools, whose salaries are also paid by the government, receive almost 50 percent less. The teachers of a category of schools, called the community schools, which enroll over 400,000 students, are paid only an "allowance" of Tk 750 a month. The position of teachers of the ibtidayee madrasa, which have over 28,000 teachers and serve 5 percent of the primary school children, is similar to that of the registered non-government school. It is evident that, as a society, we have failed to take care of the people in whose hands are reposed the future of our children.

It is no news that our primary education is plagued by serious problems. Even official statistics indicate that at least 10 percent of the primary school age children did not enroll in any school in 2004 and 48 percent of the students dropped out before completing five years of primary education.

There is no system at present of public examination at the end of the primary stage to assess what children learn. Independent studies by Education Watch and others show a deplorable picture. A 2002 Education Watch nationwide sample survey showed that one-third of the children in grade five were functionally illiterate. It is a matter of pride that boys and girls are enrolled equally in primary and secondary education. But this achievement is undermined by the fact that almost half of the students, both boys and girls, drop out and a large proportion of those who stay on do not learn much.

Will the deplorable situation in quality, and lingering problems in access, in primary education change in a major way, if the salary of teachers is increased by 20, 30 or even 50 percent? It is doubtful that this will be the case. Various studies including the annual reports of Education Watch have pointed out many causes of the poor quality of

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Agitating primary school teachers.

primary education. Very short teaching time in two-shift schools, large class sizes that do not even allow elbow room to students, lack of teaching aids and supplementary reading, and poor physical environment are the norms rather than the exception.

Teachers themselves are a part of the problem. Although the majority of teachers in government schools have Bachelors and Masters degrees and have received teacher training, Education Watch as well as other studies show that teachers' training and formal degrees did not make any difference in student's level of achievement in our schools. One reason for this is no doubt the absence of appropriate conditions, described above, that did not permit teachers to do his or her job properly. The quality and content of teacher training and poor academic supervision of teachers are also responsible.

In the case of non-government schools, madrasas and community schools which cater to about one-third of the primary level students, teachers do not, on an average, have the same level of formal educational qualifications as that of government schools and the large majority have not had pedagogic training. Appointments to teaching positions in these institutions have been very often through kinship and personal relationships, rather than by adherence to

recruitment criteria and due process. Many of these people may lack the basic capabilities to become effective teachers.

Improvement in primary education and doing educational justice to our children require substantially larger investments on teachers' remuneration and incentives as well as on creating in schools and classroom the necessary condition for effective teaching and learning. There have to be more resources and proper use of these resources for essential quality inputs in classrooms, and better preparation and training of teachers and supervision and support for teachers, once they are sent to classrooms. The head teachers should be well qualified by education and training, capable of being a true leader in the school and the community, and recognised as such by official status and remuneration for them.

The extra investment and costs in school facilities, learning materials, and better training and supervision of teachers, on the one hand, and in teachers' remuneration, on the other, cannot be justified if commensurate improvement in quality of education cannot be ensured. There has to be, therefore, agreed performance criteria and accountability regarding outcomes and results reflected in students' achievement. The resources have to be managed effectively to produce the learning

outcomes. There has to be a tripartite compact between teachers, school managing committees and the government to guarantee better management of resources, better performance by teachers and students and increased resources both for teacher's salaries and essential learning provisions in schools.

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each school have to be a part of the process as key stakeholders. The Second Primary Education Development Programme ( PEDP2) of the government must find a way to address these vital issues creatively and with imagination.

There has to be a delicate dialogue about how the tripartite compact can be brought about. The interest of the children and serving their educational needs must be the paramount concern. There is a need for trial and experimentation of the model before it is widely applied - which can be undertaken in several districts in each division - involving research centres and NGOs with strong experience in education. Politicians on both sides of the aisle have found it expedient to make liberal promises which served partisan interests. They must promote and support this delicate dialogue in the interest of education and children.

Education reform and change cannot succeed with teachers as the discontented adversary. Both teachers and the government have to find an approach to make reform and change a common cause in the interest of children, while also serving the legitimate interests of teachers.

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# Why disabled people are crucial to development

DANIEL NELSON

INDIAN researcher and activist Minal Doshi has a mission: to get the world's policymakers to pay attention to disabled people. If they fail to do so, she warns, the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), the internationally agreed targets for improving the lives of the majority of the world's population will also fail.

It is true, in the words of activist Indumathi Rao, regional advisor for a South Asian network, that in many parts of the world "the MDGs look like stars and moon up in the sky...Most of the goals in the past have failed to move beyond mere catchy slogans." But most development agencies are geared at least on paper - to achieving the UN-backed goals.

So they remain the best hope for reducing poverty worldwide. Doshi, however, realised that the eight basic Goals - which include halting the spread of HIV and AIDS, halving extreme poverty and providing universal primary education - have a major flaw: they do not mention disability.

Most estimates say one person in 10 is disabled, a word that covers everything from legs blown off by landmines to mental illness, and from epilepsy to deafness.

That's about 600 million people, who the World Bank says "are more likely than other people to live in grinding poverty...they live at the bottom of the pile."

"I realised that international funding would eventually be directed only at areas covered by the MDGs, and that groups representing people and issues not included in the Goals including the disabled - would find it harder and harder to get funds", she recalls.

During a meeting on disability in the Indian city of Ahmedabad organised by the Disability, Knowledge and Research Programme (funded by the UK Department for International Development), she suggested that the UN be petitioned to acknowledge disability as a key factor in achieving the Goals.

Participants at the meeting backed the suggestion - and left it to her to take the idea forward.

Doshi admits that she was not particularly well qualified for the task: "I am just a ground-level worker but I saw a lot of people doing good work getting agitated and upset about the whole issue. I didn't understand the approach of the human rights organisations that took up the issue and I didn't know how to deal with the UN."

**Minal Doshi emphasises that supporters of the initiative are not pressing for a new and separate Millennium Development Goal on disability. What they want is to interweave disability into the existing Goals. Since the sheer number of persons with disabilities makes them the largest group of people vulnerable to extreme poverty and hunger, they want the UN to acknowledge that disability is a key indicator of poverty.**

Nevertheless, she wrote a draft petition and got the 500 signatures that were considered necessary to show there was support for the initiative.

During this first stage of the work she temporarily left her social work activities in India for a stint at the Third Millennium Foundation, a New York-based organisation working on tolerance and human rights issues "a perfect opportunity to be where the UN is and try to understand its work."

She was also made a visiting scholar at Columbia University, where she was able to share ideas about her new project with the School of International and Public Affairs.

She has been meeting lawyers, academics, disability groups and attending UN meetings. The second draft of the petition ([http://www.disabilityindia.org/m\\_dgsign.cfm](http://www.disabilityindia.org/m_dgsign.cfm)) has been completed and is being circulated for feedback.

Is she confident that she will be able to break the resistance to any

change in the Goals, which were agreed only after a lengthy process of negotiation?

"I feel the petition has a good chance", she says. "Everyone I have spoken to is taken aback at first because they have not heard or thought about the argument that says disability impacts on the economic and on development. This reaction tells me we are onto something good."

She emphasises that supporters of the initiative are not pressing for a new and separate Goal on disability, which is not practical politics. What they want is to interweave disability into the existing Goals. For example, since the sheer number of persons with disabilities makes them the largest group of people vulnerable to extreme poverty and hunger, they want the UN to acknowledge that disability is a key indicator of poverty.

Similarly, for the education Goal they want the wording to recognise the UN's own estimate that 98 per cent of children with disabilities in developing countries are not in

school.

The London-based Healthlink Worldwide which co-manages the Disability KaR programme and organised the Ahmedabad meeting - considers the omission of disability from the Goals as "grievous". James Wolfensohn, former president of the World Bank, has said that "unless disabled people are brought into the development mainstream, it will be impossible to cut poverty in half by 2015 or to give every girl and boy the chance to achieve a primary education by the same date..."

Still, Doshi admits to uncertainty "because this is my first venture into the area of human rights". In addition, she is still working largely on her own, has not yet received much media coverage, has a lot to learn about lobbying and needs the support of big organisations and, ultimately, of a national government prepared to espouse the issue and push it through the UN: individual petitions to the world body end up in the paper shredder.

She has meetings lined up with Sallit Shetty, director of the UN's Millennium Campaign, and with Jeffrey Sachs, UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan's Special Adviser.

In August, she plans to show the petition to participants at a week-long meeting at the UN on disability. "This is one event where everyone who matters in the field of disability development will be available. It's a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to bring the issue up."

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# War on terror: Are we on wrong track?

DR. MD. ABDUR ROUF

WE have many things to do. Among those we need to prioritise the things according to comparative importance. This is true in all spheres of our life. Right prioritisation followed by action ensures welfare -- wrong prioritisation followed by action causes harm and sometimes spells disaster. Recently, mankind has devastatingly failed to prioritise actions from among many. A war on terror has been launched. This is not only a low-priority action -- it is also ill-conceived, motivated and disastrous. Such an action has been put on the top of mankind's priority agenda.

Terrorism is a phenomenon not defined. War on terror started after the 9/11 attack on USA. Since then the invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq by USA and her allies are major steps in the war on terror. In Afghanistan and Iraq, the people who are fighting against foreign occupation, and in Palestine those who are fighting against Israel, are branded as terrorists. Islamic militant groups in some other countries are also called terrorists. Osama-bin-Laden is branded as the front-running terrorist of the world. These terrorists with all their terrorist activities have so far killed only few thousand people. But according to some estimates US forces in Iraq have killed more than one hundred thousand civilians. Then who are the notorious terrorists in terms of killing innocent people? Poverty, disease, illiteracy, climate change should have been the real concerns for mankind rather than war on terror. About 40 million people across the world die of tobacco related diseases every year. About 530,000 women die a year in pregnancy and at childbirth. Terrorism has caused much less death than those diseases.

The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) remain at the risk of non-achievement owing to shortage of funds. There are eight goals and eighteen targets of the MDGs ranging from poverty alleviation, achievement of universal primary education, promotion of gender

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equality and empowerment of women, improvement of health standards etc. Poverty, disease, illiteracy, gender inequality have wreaked havoc on mankind. But ironically more funds are being spent to fight terror -- a low-profile problem.

The disastrous management failure during hurricane Katrina in USA in the late 2005 simply doesn't justify USA's spending on recent wars. It is argued that war on terror diverted US resources from disaster prevention thus causing the management failure. According to experts, climate change caused by emissions of greenhouse gases would result in more storms, floods, desertification and sea level rise but the USA has pulled out of the Kyoto Protocol that aimed at addressing the issue. The USA has refused to adopt legally binding targets to cut the emissions of greenhouse gases. The Bush administration claims that new technology rather than legally binding targets is the way to tackle climate change. Global warming will cause sea level rise that will force the people of Kolkata, Shanghai, New York and other low-lying cities to be evacuated. The Kyoto Protocol has been signed by 140 countries but USA didn't sign it presumably because if the Protocol is implemented fuel price will rise and five million Americans will lose their jobs. US energy giants like EXON and MOBIL are reported to have been influencing the US administration not to sign the Kyoto Protocol. To protect the petty interests of its oil giants, the US administration is working against the interests of mankind. The

emission of greenhouse gases poses a threat to civilization more catastrophic than the much-vaunted weapons of mass destruction and terrorism. Disregarding climate change most of mankind's efforts today are directed towards regime change.

To fight in Afghanistan and Iraq more than US\$300 billion has been spent in four years. It is now revealed that the Iraq war was waged on wrong, fabricated grounds. Instead of war, had this huge amount of money been spent on welfare activities of even the American people, it could have done much for the welfare of the people of America, people of Iraq and many other people of the world because of triple down effect. The OECD countries promised to provide 0.7 per cent of their GDPs annually as foreign aid to the developing countries. But so far, the level reached is 0.22 per cent, which currently converts to around US\$60 billion a year. Promised 0.7 per cent converts to US\$191 billion. While many of the poor countries are not getting US\$131 billion (difference between promised US\$191 billion and actual disbursement of US\$60 billion) from the OECD countries as foreign aid, the US has spent US\$300 billion in recent unnecessary wars. Over US\$130 billion has been spent by the US on missile defence since President Reagan gave his 1983 'Star Wars' speech, but so far, there is not a single device capable of reliably intercepting a long-range ballistic missile. These are the instances of wastage of resources when millions of human beings cannot eat two square meals a day.

In many countries defence spending was higher than spending in other activities. This was a major cause of concern. It was argued that instead of defence, had the spending been on welfare activities, the lives of people would have been much better -- the earth could have been turned into a nice place for living. But such a noble idea has not been turned into reality; the worst has happened. With the launch of war on terror, defence spending has reached new heights draining off resources from welfare activities.

Human values are making quicker steps towards oblivion. The cases and dimensions of violation of human rights have become frequent and many. Respect towards others' religion, culture, opinion appear to be a value of the past. All these signify that the civilization has taken a U-turn. Values are the cementing force of society and civilization. Erosion of values would exert devastating consequences upon mankind.

Rather than symptomatic treatment, the situation demands identification of the real causes. When the real causes are identified and eliminated, the situation will improve. With symptomatic treatment the harshness of the problem is reduced for the time being. War on terror is a symptomatic treatment of the situation. People in authority do not try to identify and address the real causes behind the problem. Therefore, the situation is sure to aggravate.

Today, the overwhelming efforts of mankind are employed to fight terrorism while millions of people suffer the scourge of poverty; millions of children instead of going to school go to hard work for subsistence; millions of mothers die during pregnancy and childbirth. Isn't it mankind's top-most priority to wage fierce war against poverty, diseases, illiteracy and climate change instead of so called war on terror? The sooner good senses prevail the better.

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# Should Iran abandon its nuclear programme?

M. A. BINYAMIN

THE recent standoff over Iran's nuclear programme has put the world communities between two fires. The western world under -- US hegemony -- has miserably failed to honour Iran's inalienable 'right' to have a nuclear programme. Since then the big powers have been locked in a high voltage diplomatic offensive to deal with the flaming issue. It appears from recent observations that the entire diplomatic and non-diplomatic efforts on the nuclear imbroglio of Iran are an exercise in futility. Even the US threat to launch Iraq-style pre-emptive and unilateral military action against Iran could not dissuade that country from enriching uranium -- an 'absolute right' of the Iranian nation. It may be noted here that the next stage of enriching uranium can lead to the production of nuclear weapons. The western circle suspects Iran of doing so and is up and about to put a stop to it forever by any means, fair or foul.

The big five of the United Nations Security Council Members, who possess nuclear weapons, are also discreetly divided. Britain, France and Germany, led by the United States, vehemently oppose Iran's nuclear programme while Russia and China appear to have taken the most calculated and lenient view of the issue. Obviously, all the connected parties view this issue from the perspective of their political, strategic and economic interests. Geo-strategically Islamic Republic

**Big global oil consumers have focussed their total attention on the vast Iranian oil reserves -- the second largest after the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Secondly, Islam-phobia is the major irritant for the US, EU and their allies. Iran is officially an Islamic Republic and the people are pledge-bound to uphold their national interest and ideological values at any cost. In the past, the US-led coalition has disbanded Afghanistan and Iraq on fake pleas. Are they contemplating to do the same in case of Iran?**

of Iran is situated in the vicinity of Israel -- the most trusted, number one ally and major recipient of US financial and non-financial assistance. The state of Israel, brokered by western powers, was installed after the Second World War in the forcefully occupied Palestinian lands turning the Palestinians into virtual refugees. Since then Israel has been playing the role of shadow pentagon of the US in the Middle East with all its might and mane.

In 1981, Israel attacked the nuclear facilities of Iraq and destroyed them through remote control device. The next prey of the US-Israeli duo was Libyan nuclear infrastructure. After the fall of Iraq scared Libyan leader surrendered unconditionally before the US without being attacked militarily. The Libyan government dismantled its nuclear infrastructure, bundled and shipped out all the debris to Uncle Sam. The latest

target of the US-Israeli entente is Iran. Intriguingly, North Korea's name appears to have been banished from their hit list for the time being or forever. God only knows. All attention is now focused on how to tame Iran; pressure is mounting, day in and day out.

Reports have it that the deposed Shah of Iran first kicked off the nuclear programme under the tacit approval and technological support of the US. Later on, the programme was suspended and the US supply line was snapped following the overthrow of Shah and take over of the Iranian government by the Revolutionary forces under the leadership of Ayatollah Khomeini. Incidentally, the Islamic Republic of Iran is being presided over now by such a personality who was once one of the mastermind proponents of the Iranian Revolution. Iranian governments in the past have been trying to attain self-sufficiency in power

generation in order to meet the demand for adequate and constant supply of electricity. Mr. Ahmedinejad, the undaunted leader as he seems, keeps on trying too, to develop the much needed and talked about nuclear programme for commercial use. As bad luck would have it his antagonists smell a rat.

Israel is widely believed to possess a good number of nuclear weapons, whereas Israeli authorities as well as their mentor, the US, are keeping mum on the issue. They admit assert nor brush aside the allegation -- a tactic just to hoodwink the peace-loving people around the globe. So far as available reports go Israel has already installed over two hundred nuclear devices in its Demona nuclear sites. It also tested a device in the year 1979 as per a US research disclosure. The US, EU allies and International watch dog like U.N. and International Atomic Energy Agency also appear to be perfunctorily dealing with the issue.

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