

INTERNATIONAL LITERACY DAY

Can we achieve MDG in Universal Primary Education by 2015?

AHM KISHOWAR HOSSAIN

THE Millennium Development Goals are the world's time-bound and quantified targets for addressing extreme poverty in its many dimensions -- monetary poverty, hunger, disease, lack of adequate shelter and exclusion -- while promoting gender equality, education, and environmental sustainability. They are also basic human rights -- the rights of each person on the planet to health, education, shelter, and security as pledged in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the UN Millennium Declaration.

The eight goals that have been set up by the Millennium Summit at UN Headquarters in 2000 are: Goal 1 eradicate extreme poverty and hunger; Goal 2 achieve universal primary education; Goal 3 promote gender equality and empower women; Goal 4 reduce child mortality rate; Goal 5 reduce maternal mortality rate; Goal 6 combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases; Goal 7 ensure environmental sustainability; and Goal 8 develop a global partnership for development.

To achieve universal education by 2015, the target is to ensure that children, boys and girls alike, are able to complete the full course of primary schooling. Bangladesh must achieve these goals: increase the primary school enrolment rate from about 73.3 percent of 1992 to 100 percent by 2015, increase the primary school completion rate from 62 in 1994 to 100 percent by 2015 and reduce the dropout rates from 38 percent in 1994 to 0 percent by 2015.

Bangladesh has achieved rapid progress in schooling during the last two decades. The gross pri-

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mary enrollment rate, which was only 61 percent in 1980, increased to 72 percent by 1990 and to 96 percent by 2000. However, as in other developing countries, gross enrollment rates tend to be greater than net primary enrollment rate because of the late entry of children (beyond age 6) into primary school and the resulting enrollment of average children (those above age 10) at the primary level (World Bank Report).

There are large variations in the net primary enrollment rate across regions. The rural areas of Faridpur, Tangail and Jamalpur for instance have net primary enrollment rates of only 48 percent. On the other hand, the rural areas of Khulna, Jessore and Kushtia have net primary enrollment rates of 74 percent. At 84 percent, outer urban Dhaka (urban areas outside the Standard Metropolitan Area of the city) has the highest primary completion rate, followed by rural Dhaka, urban Khulna, and rural Sylhet and Comilla. The rural areas of Noakhali and Chittagong rank at the bottom (World Bank Report).

Bangladesh has made significant progress in basic education in recent years. According to the national report of the population census 2001 the rate was 47.5 in 2001. Among other estimates on adult literacy, the interim-PRSP

2003 and BHDR 2000 (BIDS-UNDP 2001) report estimated it at 56 per cent, while the World Development Report 2003 of World Bank reports (WB 2003) show this at 59 percent. An alternative estimate by CAMPE (Campaign for Popular Education) in Education Watch 2002 is much lower than the government's claim. It is around 38.8 per cent (15 years and above). This wide variation is perhaps mainly because of differences in defining the indicator and in collecting information. Although evidence indicates that there is a significant differential across rural and urban regions, and also by gender, both the gaps in adult literacy have been narrowing down in recent years. In other words, there is no denying the fact that there has been continuing improvement in the field of adult literacy in the 1990s.

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For improving the situation even

further several challenges have been identified. These included: infrastructure problem such as lack of school, class room and poor communication system; unavailability of teachers, unskilled teachers and low salary structure for teachers; high dropout rates among students; non-availability of teaching tools and resources; shortage of stipend; school management problem compounded by political bias etc. Some additional concerns include: natural disasters, lack of awareness among parents, poverty and child labour. But the biggest challenge to MDG-2 in Bangladesh is to ensure adequate finances to keep up the momentum and to ensure quality education for all. Keeping the most optimistic scenario of population stabilization by 2035 in mind, Bangladesh spent an estimated \$928 millions in 2005; and the amount increased annually to reach \$1.7 billion by 2015 to maintain the momentum for achieving MDG-2.

It would not be an exaggeration to say that Bangladesh has done a remarkable job in the field of primary education on its way to meeting the MDG-2 of universal primary education by 2015. By overcoming several challenges, Bangladesh will surely achieve the Millennium Development Goals in the field of primary education.

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Year	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003
Net Enrolment Ratio	73.7	82.5	83.3	78.5	81.5	81.4	78.3	80.0	86.6	-	82.7

A unique education project

Learning with pleasure

SHAILA PARVEEN

LEARNING is interactive and full of fun at BRAC pre-primary and primary schools. I wish I were a student there. This is how I felt when I, along with ten students and another lecturer of BRAC University, visited one such pre-primary school and a primary school at Mahjira, Bogra recently. Some special features have made this education project unique in providing informal pre-primary and primary education.

These pre-primary schools prepare children who are over the age of five but under six for government or non-government primary schools. BRAC primary schools enroll children who usually do not have the opportunity to continue schooling because of poor economic background, ethnic difficulty etc. This education project aims to promote female education. That is why, seventy percent of the students are girls. Moreover, BRAC trains local educated women and employ them as school teachers.

The sense of discipline of the children is reflected in the organized way they keep their sandals in front of the entrance of their one-room schools. There is no traditional wooden bench or desk in the classroom. Children sit on the floor covered by a mat made of cane and put their belongings in front of them. Each young learner has a set of equipment which consists of a piece of slate for writing, a slate pencil, a piece of cloth or sponge for cleaning the slate, a bundle of sticks used for counting, a pack of crayons for drawing pictures etc.

The process of checking attendance of the students is very interactive. Children stand up in the classroom and from one side a student announces his or her name by saying 'my name is-' and then turns to the student standing beside him or her and says: 'What is your name?'. The student who has been asked answers saying 'my name is-' and turns to the next student and asks his or her name. The process continues until all the children who are present in the class room have declared their names.

Special curricula have been designed for pre-primary and primary education. For example, children learn Bangla alphabet, English alphabet, counting, rhymes, fables etc. at pre-primary schools. They also learn to sing and dance. Each class is divided into four or five groups. A group

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consists of six or seven students. Each group has a group leader. Before performing any group activity, such as singing, dancing, reciting rhymes etc., the group leader stands in front of the class and announces his or her name and the title of the group. Usually, names of different flowers are chosen to be the group-titles. The leader also introduces the group members. Group-wise participation develops a bond of friendship and feeling of sharing idea, thinking among the children.

Learning becomes effective as the teacher relates real-life examples with the subject matter. Children are encouraged to share their own experience relevant to the topic being taught. While we

were visiting we saw that the teacher was teaching Bangla alphabet to the children. On the particular day a Bangla letter 'Talebbosho' was being introduced. The teacher started by asking whether the children had seen 'shak' (spinach). The spelling of the Bangla word 'shak' starts with the letter 'Talebbosho'. The children answered that they have eaten 'shak'. Then the teacher asked about other Bangla words which are spelled with 'Talebbosho' being the first letter and showed relevant pictures. The teacher made the children pronounce the particular letter and the words again and again so that it gets imprinted on their minds.

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some particular subject. These slow learners get additional lessons after the class so that they can keep pace with the rest of the class. There is no ranking based on the performance and speed of learning. That is, it is never declared that who is the first in the class and who holds the second position and so on. Just like the song of Tagore 'Amra Sobai Raja' ('we all are kings') reveals the message of equality, children feel that they all are equal.

In fact BRAC pre-primary and primary schools are teaching the children in such a way that they can learn with enjoyment and interest which will ultimately lead them towards a better future.

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SHAB-E-BARAT

Of prayers and penance

SYED ASHRAF ALI

TO a true Muslim night and day has each its own beauty and utility as has been frequently pointed out in the Holy Quran and Hadith. Of the nights in a year there are six which may safely be marked out for their grandeur and majesty, serenity and sacredness. These are Lailat-ul-Qadr, Lailat-ul-Mi'raj, the nights of two Eids, the Night of Arafat and Lailat-ul-Baraat. On these auspicious occasions a person's prayers, his or her outpourings of the heart's sentiments, the reverential expression of the soul's sincerest desires before its Maker, never fail to evoke the most coveted response from Benign Providence. No wonder, Lailat-ul-Baraat is celebrated as an auspicious night in every nook and corner of the subcontinent and in various other Muslim countries.

Unfortunately, however, there are some who inadvertently claim that Lailat-ul-Baraat has no religious significance in the eyes of Islam. Nothing can be farther from the truth. It is true that Lailat-ul-Baraat has not been specifically mentioned in the Holy Quran (although mention is there of Lailat-ul-Mubarakatun), but there are numerous authentic Hadith and historical evidence which testify so eloquently to the fact that the holy Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) himself used to attach great importance to this extraordinary night. He not only said special prayers in this sacred night but also visited graveyards and prayed for the departed souls on this holy occasion. He even instructed Ummahatul Mu'mineen (his pious wives) to honour the sanctity and divine excellence of this blessed occasion.

Lailat-ul-Baraat, the glorious night on the 15th of Shaban, is popularly known as Shab-e-Barat in this subcontinent. Both the words Shab in Persian (and Urdu as well) and Lailat in Arabic mean "night", and Baraat stands for Salvation or Privilege. (Some, however, inadvertently think that the word Baraat means "Fortune," and the auspicious night is the Night of Fortune). Lailat-ul-Baraat is the Night of Salvation or the Night of Privilege. It is on this Night of Privilege that Rabbul Alameen, in His infinite Rahmat, blesses each and every person with a unique opportunity to receive the most coveted Divine Mercy.

Records are there that on one occasion the holy Prophet (pbuh) spent half of this auspicious Night of Salvation through a Nafl prayer of two rakahs and the rest of the Night through a long Sijdah or prostration. What is more, he (pbuh) used to offer this prayer with inimitable dedication and unfathomable concentration. Hazrat Ayesha Siddiqah (RA) reported that on one such occasion the holy Prophet (pbuh) was so deeply absorbed in his medita-

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tion and remained so long in prostration that she became awfully nervous and thought that he (pbuh) had shuffled off the mortal coil. On another occasion, according to Hazrat Ayesha Siddiqah (RA), the Apostle of Allah (pbuh) said his prayers in the Night with such unparalleled devotion and dedication that his feet got swollen.

Hazrat Ayesha Siddiqah (RA) also said, "I missed Allah's Messenger (pbuh) one night and found him at al-Baqi (Jannatul Baqi)". He (pbuh) said, "Were you afraid that Allah and His Messenger would act wrongly towards you?" I replied, "Messenger of Allah, I thought you had gone to one of your wives." He said, "On the middle night of Sha'ban Allah Most High descends to the lowest heaven and forgives more sins than the hairs of the goats of Kalb." (According to an estimation, the tribe of Kalb during that period had more than 20,000 goats). Tirmidhi and Ibn Majah transmitted it. It is also reported that the holy Prophet (pbuh) said, "Allah forgives every Muslim in this Night. He does not however, forgive the Mushrik, the jealous, the cruel, and the adulterer." Baihaqi transmitted it.

"According to popular belief", corroborates the Encyclopaedia of Islam, (published in Leiden, the

Netherlands) "in the night preceding the 15th of Sha'ban the tree of life on whose leaves are written the names of the living is shaken to decide who is going to die in the coming year." It is claimed by some that it is the Sidratul Muntaha, "the Lote-tree of the extremity," a tree in the seventh heaven having its root in the sixth, which is shaken to decide who is going to die. (Sidratul Muntaha has been mentioned twice in the Holy Quran).

It is not only the renowned traditionalists who champion the sacredness and excellence of the Night of Salvation but even a great and universally accepted saint and scholar like Hazrat Syed Abdul Qadir Jilani (RA), popularly known as Hazrat Bara Pir Sahib, testifies in his Guniyat Talebin, that Bibi Ayesha Siddiqah herself heard the holy Prophet (pbuh) saying, "Allah opens the Doors of Mercy and Grace for mankind on four Nights -- the two Nights of Eids, the Night of the 15th Sha'ban, and the Night of Arafat." (The two other Nights, Shab-e-Qadr and Shab-e-Mi'raj, have been specifically referred to in the Holy Quran). "The Doors remain open till the Fajr prayer."

Lailat-ul-Barat (or Lailatul Bara'a), the Night of Quittancy in the words of Encyclopaedia of

Islam, is indeed a solemn and sacred occasion of Divine Excellence which has to be celebrated in a befitting way, not through candles and crackers, not through mere halwas and rotis, not through extravagance and merry-making but through prayers and penance as was done by the holy Prophet Muhammad (pbuh). It is true that hundreds and thousands of Muslims in the subcontinent celebrate this Night through zealous and active participation in private and congregational prayers held in mosques. Unfortunately, however, there are many among us who, through sheer ignorance or utter carelessness, turn this auspicious Night into a mere occasion of pleasure and gaiety, fun and frolic, forgetting the very essence of this glorious Night.

Let all of us pray with all the earnestness the following Dua which the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) himself said: "O Allah, I seek refuge in Thy Good Pleasure from Thine Anger, and in Thy Forgiveness from Thy Punishment, and I seek refuge in Thee from Thee" from Thy wrath. I cannot reckon the praise due to Thee. Thou art as Thou hast glorified Thyself."

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The night of salvation

KAZI AULAD HOSSAIN

SHABAN is the eighth month of the Islamic calendar, and Muslims all over the world celebrate the 15th night of this holy lunar month as Lailatul Barat (Night of Salvation) with due solemnity and fervour. What do we mean by the term Lailat-ul-Barat? Lail is an Arabic word and it means night, and the real meaning of the word "Barat" is Salvation. So the term "Lailat-ul-Barat" means Night of Salvation.

According to a sacred Baihaqi Hadis, Asiya Siddiqah (RA) the consort of the holy Prophet Hazrat Muhammad (peace be upon him) has stated: "I have heard the holy prophet (pbuh) saying on the 15th night of the lunar month of Shaban while offering his prayer. 'Oh Allah! Because of Your forgiveness I want go get rid of Your punishment. Through Your pleasure I want salvation from Your anger. I want shelter from Your 'Azab' (punishment). You are great. I don't have the power to praise You fully. You are as You have praised Yourself."

Although nothing has been specifically mentioned about Lailatul Barat in the Qur-an, its great importance and significance have been described by the holy Prophet (pbuh). According to Hazrat Ibn-e-Ma'za, one of the six great compilers ("Siasita") of Al Hadith, the holy Prophet (pbuh) has

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observed: "Almighty Allah comes down from His highest seat of authority ("Arsh") to the lowest heaven and immediately after sunset asks: "Is there any one from among the supplicants seeking forgiveness whom I can forgive? Is there any one who wants to get rid of the predicament he is in? Is there any one who wants to recover from the ailment he is suffering from?"

According to another saying of the holy Prophet (pbuh) we learn: "During the 15th night of the lunar month of Shaban offer prayers to Merciful Allah and observe 'siam' (fasting) on the following day for Benign Allah bestows His bounties on His 'bandas' (servants).

And forgives persons who seek His forgiveness except persons who believe Allah has a partner and who cut off connection with relatives."

There are tycoons, traders, rich, wealthy and resourceful persons in our society. A question may arise that if some of these wealthy and moneyed people are dishonest and if they supplicate the Meriful and Most Gracious Allah for forgiveness of their sins

and to gain bounties of Bounteous Allah then will their supplications be granted? The answer to this question is an emphatic "No." Again if a person believes that Almighty Allah has a partner then his prayers will also not be accepted. Let us not forget that Allah is not only Bunteous, and Just, he is also very Strict.

We also learn from Ummul Mumeneen Hazrat Aisha Siddiqah (RA) that the holy Prophet (pbuh) besides offering special prayers to Almighty Allah on Lailat-ul-Barat used to visit graveyard and pray for salvation of the departed souls.

Lailat-ul-Barat or the Night of Salvation is no doubt an auspicious occasion and under no circumstances its sanctity should be spoilt. But it is a matter of great regret that our grown up children and youngsters indulge in bursting crackers and noise making on this sacred night. We must avoid such frivolous pastime for Islam does not sanction such useless and unnecessary merrymaking. Such frivolous activities should be avoided also because they certainly cause vexation to the devo-

tees engrossed in offering prayers and supplicating Merciful Allah in the nearby mosques and houses, and also to the old and ailing persons living in the neighbourhood. The Qur-an also does not sanction such senseless misuse of money as clearly indicated is Sura Baqara guardians of the children, Imams of the mosques, teachers of the educational institutions, social leaders, among others, can play an active role and take positive action towards reframing our grown up young children from such harmful acts. Let us not forget that Islam is a scientific religion and it guides man from cradle to grave. Let other communities illuminate their houses and display fireworks for which they may have their own reasons. But we Muslims cannot blindly follow them.

Let the Muslims of the second largest Muslim country Bangladesh celebrate this auspicious Night with due solemnity and fervour in view of the facts stated in the foregoing paragraphs.

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