

Feature Education

# Need for Primary Education's Reform

by SY Bakht

THE 'problematic' school system needs to be dramatically improved to bring about success for the government's compulsory primary education programme, says Cole P Dodge, the outgoing UNICEF representative in Bangladesh.

"The government has an excellent policy on compulsory primary education but the delivery of services has been much more problematic," he adds.

In an interview with The Daily Star, Dodge also dwells on his experiences of over three years here, on the progress of various UNICEF programmes, the role of non-government organisations (NGOs) in the developmental process, possible fields of regional cooperation to improve the condition of children, the role of the media and on his personal and family life.

"What I will remember most about Bangladesh is the very good work experience which I have had here," he says "there have been more successes for children in Bangladesh than any other country that I worked in."

Cole P Dodge served as the UNICEF representative in Uganda and Sudan before being posted in Bangladesh in 1989. He now joins as the UNICEF Regional Director for east and southern Africa based in Nairobi, Kenya.

Noting that the compulsory primary education programme is a commitment of this government, Dodge points out that its implementation is going to require for the government to actively pursuing, requesting and encouraging society at large to become involved in education.

However, he says "sometimes I think the government lacks the vision to see that education is something that must be achieved by society and not just by the government."

The ministry of education, Dodge adds, should mobilise the cooperation of maktabs, mosques and other related institutions as well as the NGOs and other communities, not to compete with the ministry, but to complement its programme to provide education for all children.

Referring to the general trend of the formal sectors being 'notoriously inefficient' compared to the informal sectors in the country, Dodge laments "so it is also true with the education sector that the teachers' associations and unions have effectively whittled down the amount of time spent in the class room teaching to a bare minimum."

Bangladeshi primary school teachers spend only about 440

hours per year in the class rooms compared to 1,200 hours in China, he notes. Teachers in India, Indonesia and other regional countries also spend more time teaching than in Bangladesh.

He also observes that poverty is a principal motivating factor for parents to educate their children while pointing out that this is what made the Bangladesh Rural Advancement Centre (BRAC) schools so successful.

"The valuable works done by the Pathokoli Trust is worthy of mention," he says "and I am pleased to see that Pathokoli has survived, though it is much smaller than it was under the former government."

"People who are caught in the vicious cycle of poverty see education of their children as the only escape from it and that is why nearly four out of five six-year-old children are enrolled in school."

**Cole P Dodge served as the UNICEF representative in Uganda and Sudan before being posted in Bangladesh in 1989. He now joins as the UNICEF Regional Director for east and southern Africa based in Nairobi, Kenya.**

However, he says that the school system needs to be 'dramatically' improved so that these children can be retained in school.

Programmes on water and sanitation, health and education are the three basic areas where UNICEF is involved.

"Eighty per cent of the people in rural Bangladesh now have access to tubewell water for drinking," he says of the water programme started 20 years ago.

He acknowledges that the "less well known but recently popularised" programme on sanitation, although conceptually a part of the water programme from 1972 onwards, received a smaller budget allocation and achieved lower levels of coverage. But he hastens to add "this has been rectified and in the new 1993-95 programmes, sanitation will receive 40 per cent of the water and sanitation budget allocation."

Moreover, he points out, recent surveys show that the sanitation coverage has increased from eight per cent in 1988 to 25 per cent in 1991.

"If this is true, it means that Bangladesh is on the threshold of a sanitation revolution," he declares, adding "my hope is that when the coverage goes up to the 50, 60 and 70 per cent levels, then you will see real improvements in the

health of people.

Only when the human excreta is safely disposed off in pit latrines that the population can get rid of the seasonal epidemics of diarrhoea and contagious fecal diseases like hepatitis and polio, Dodge adds.

In the health sector, he terms the Extended Programme on Immunization (EPI) as a "phenomenal success." While noting that the EPI coverage was only 38 per cent in 1989.

"By 1990 we realised that for the first time a social programme in Bangladesh had broken the 25 or 40 per cent coverage barrier and had reached 70,80 and in some cases even 90 per cent of mothers and children under one year of age," he recalls.

Dodge also acknowledges the help extended by various government ministries, NGOs, service clubs and the press coverage in generating support

for the EPI drive.

"Notable support came from the Rotary International which really mobilised their clubs throughout the country and internationally and today, Rotary pays for all the polio vaccines for example," he adds.

Dodge notes that it is important to recognise that not a single new employee of the government was hired and not a single vehicle was purchased for the programme.

"But none of this could have happened without the support of the family planning programme," he says "and I must emphasise that the family planning programme and the family welfare workers were the backbone of EPI."

He points out that while the major donors initially resisted the idea of family planning workers doing EPI, repeated studies showed that they did a good job in immunisation and, in addition, the success rate in promoting condoms and pills also increased.

"So it is interesting to note today that the contraceptive prevalence rate has jumped to 40 per cent and EPI stands at 80 per cent," he notes.

In the health sector, UNICEF is also involved in the oral rehydration therapy programme, providing essential drugs and also providing the government assistance for training and supporting several

NGOs in their health programmes.

The third programme UNICEF is involved in is in the education sector. "UNICEF was the largest donor in the field of primary education until the World Bank general education project was approved a couple of years ago," he says.

Dodge also has some word of praise for the work relating to children done by the NGOs. He says that the NGOs have done "phenomenally well" and are making a "significant contribution" to the country and the Grameen Bank and BRAC are well recognised around the world for making profound contribution for improving the lives of the people here.

On regional cooperation to improve the condition of children, Dodge says that there are a number of things the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) nations could do to dramatically improve the condition of children.

He singles out the iodation of edible salt as an 'obvious' one, while noting that iodine deficiency is a problem in most of these countries and that salt produced in India is sold in Nepal and Bangladesh and some salt from Bangladesh goes into other countries.

"If all table salt were iodated at the salt crusher it would then improve the condition of pregnant women and children dramatically," he adds.

Has the media played a supportive role for improving the conditions of children? Are there any areas where more media attention is needed?

"I wish the press were more active and did more investigative journalism and had a sustained and qualitative interest in social issues, particularly quality newspaper reporting on issues related to children," he says.

Although, he adds, media support in covering social issues was 'excellent', he hoped that the press would 'really get into the education bandwagon and pressure government, religious institutions and NGOs into assuring that primary education is available for every child in Bangladesh.'

Referring to the success achieved in oral rehydration therapy, EPI coverage, water and sanitation, legislation for compulsory primary education and ratification of the convention on the rights of the child, he concludes: "I hope that these can be put together in such a way that you will indeed have much progress for children in the decade to come."

# Islam as partner in Inter-Religious Dialogue in Focus

THE world of Islam and several insights into its perspectives and interrelationships came into prominent focus when Prof. Dr. Annemarie Schimmel, Emeritus Professor at the University of Bonn for Islamic Science, was felicitated on her seventieth birthday at a function held at the university amid much academic and public enthusiasm.

The rare opportunity of delving into the seemingly

Arabia, India, Pakistan and the United States of America, Prof. Burgel related details of her writings, publications and lectures as well as the illustrious names of politicians, economists, religious scholars, scientists and social figures who crossed her path in influencing her world view of the Islamic faith.

Prof. Annemarie Schimmel, who taught Religious History in Turkish at the University of Ankara and spent 20 years

Islam and its symbolism are reflected in two of her works published in 1982 and 1984 — "As Through a Veil: Mystical Poetry in Islam, 1982" (English) and "Stern und Blume, Die Bilderwelt der islamischen Poesie, 1984", in German.

A special appeal of Prof. Schimmel's scientific work relates to the study of Indo-Islamic literature and which is distinguished by her comprehensive interpretation of the

This was also followed by translations, incorporated into "Pearls from the Indus. Studies in Sindh Literature (1986)". With these lively portrayals of literary and religious history, Prof. Schimmel has created a body of knowledge that is still vibrant in the modern pluralistic world.

No less distinguished has been Prof. Schimmel's interest in the calligraphy and art of Islam. Her research skills are amply shown in "Islamic Calligraphy (1970)" and "Calligraphy and Islamic Culture (1984)" where her feeling for the multi-layered meaning of Islamic calligraphy as the artistic expression of the printed religious word is quite apparent.

Prof. Schimmel has, through her colossal works, opened a window of understanding to Islamic culture and its exponents, building bridges across narrow national boundaries and bringing people in the Islamic culture closer in an increasingly shrinking world.

The Bonn function also saw Prof. Dr. R. Wielandt of the Department of Oriental Studies at the University of Bamberg deliver an illuminating lecture on the theme "The West and its Christians — a possible dialogue partner for contemporary Muslims?".

Stating that such a dialogue did exist for long time, the professor pointed out, however, to its inadequacy in a post-colonial and post-ideological world that demanded more openness and a capacity for appreciating the position of the other.

The fact was that Islamic partners operated under quite another paradigm inasmuch as Islam was considered a strong but closed religious faith, with no loopholes, and providing solutions for all of life's problems and situations.

She made it clear, though, that if Muslims were regarded as living an Islamic-centred world, no less was the fact that Eurocentrism had to be overcome too.

On balance, Prof. Wielandt gave an optimistic assessment of the potential for a dialogue between today's Muslims and the Christians of the West in a continually evolving process.

Appl. the Bonn function concluded with a liting 'Persian music' recital rendered by Bahman Yasaei and Azita Mostowfi, providing glimpses of yet another facet of the rich Islamic culture.

— (IN-Press)



Internationally renowned Islamic scholar Prof. Dr. Annemarie Schimmel, Emeritus Professor for Islamic Science at the University of Bonn was felicitated in Bonn on the occasion of her seventieth birthday. A large number of academicians, officials and well-wishers attended the function held at the university premises. Prof. Schimmel is seen here along with other members of the Faculty on the occasion.

Photo: INP/University Bonn

mystifying attitudes and tenets of the Islamic faith in its ramifications in various parts of the world was made possible by the organised efforts of the Oriental Seminars of the universities of Bonn and Bern as well as the Department of Oriental Studies at the University of Bamberg through a projection of the manifold scholarly activities of Prof. Schimmel concerning a scientific study of Islamic societies, influenced by the cultural, sociological, political and economic backdrops of their respective regions.

If it was thought that the observations, experiences and incisive scholarly works of Prof. Schimmel that spanned several decades could not be compressed into a perfectly interesting and intelligible laudatory exercise, Prof. Dr. JC Burgel (Oriental Seminar of the University of Bern) proved it otherwise.

Launching into a discourse on the highlights of Prof. Schimmel's career that took her to various corners of the world, including Turkey, Saudi

teaching and researching as Professor for Indo-Muslim Culture at Harvard University, among others, is the author of numerous publications in German, English, Arabic and Turkish languages that reflect her contributions in 3 main fields: a) the classical Islamic religiosity and mysticism, b) the Indo-Muslim culture (a special focus of her scientific interest) and c) Islamic art, particularly Islamic calligraphy. Along with scientific work in these areas, there have also been expressive translations from Arabic, Persian, Turkish, Urdu and Sindh poetic texts into German and English.

Prof. Schimmel's work in the area of Islamic religious history is primarily in the realm of mysticism. Significant here is her study "Mystical Dimensions of Islam (1975)" where she has analysed the mystical traditions of Arabs, Turks, Iranians and Islamic Indians, especially the Sufi tradition.

Her deep understanding of the classical mystical poetry of



# DANIDA to Finance Mongolian Education Project

THE Danish International Development Agency (DANIDA) has decided to provide USD 1.5 million towards financing a USD 2 million non-formal education project in Mongolia.

The project was prepared by UNESCO to meet the basic learning needs of more than 15,000 illiterate and semi-illiterate Mongolian nomadic families living in the Gobi desert, which covers about one-third of the country. DANIDA informed UNESCO of its decision to finance the project in mid-April.

The Mongolian government, which is carrying out a series of reforms towards a market economy, last year invited UNESCO to study the prevailing situation and suggest ways of reorganizing the education system, as well as prepare project proposals for presentation to donor agencies for funding.

The project offers a one-year programme combining crash courses at district cen-

tres through distance education, particularly radio programmes and visiting teachers and specialists.

Teachers and specialists

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will be trained in non-formal education curricula while appropriate post-literacy materials and teachers' guides will be developed and distributed.

Among the immediate objectives of the project is ensuring that by the end of the year's course, the participants

will have basic knowledge in: — management and accountancy to help them take up new opportunities arising from the transition to an open market economy; — improved cattle rearing techniques; — family education, including family planning, health, nutrition and hygiene; and — upgrading literacy and survival skills.

The project will initially be implemented in five provinces constituting the Gobi desert, where the nomadic families lead a particularly difficult life because of bad climatic conditions and poor infrastructure.

More than 20 per cent of the families are headed by single women who have the sole responsibility for the children and the family's cattle, which are the main source of income. Some women have up to six children.

# Mothers Tested as Teachers

IN Chile, as elsewhere in the Third World, failure at school is common among the poorest sectors of society and becomes a vicious circle that traps children in poverty and illiteracy.

Trying to remedy this situation, the Centro de Estudios y Atencion del Nio y la Mujer (CEANIM), a Chilean non-governmental organization (NGO), launched a project in 1981 enabling children from poor areas of Santiago to adapt to formal education with some chance of success.

This experiment has now been operating for 10 years and involves a preschool education system that encourages mothers to be participants in their children's education.

The process is derived from alternative theories to preschool education developed in the 1960s and was begun by CEANIM during the darkest days of the military government that ruled Chile in the 1970s and 1980s — a time when the impact of repression and the economic crisis on the poorest classes was particularly severe.

CEANIM is an NGO founded in 1979. Its mission is to provide an impetus to preschool education using low-cost methods and drawing on the community's own financial and human resources. Community preschool care centres, known as Centros Comunitarios de Atencion Preescolar (CCAP), were created with facilities provided by the Catholic Church and funding from international organizations.

The centres are based on the theory developed by the founders, CEANIM's team of specialists led by psychologist Dr Maria Angelica Kotliarenco, that each educational success centre is directly dependent on the work of the mothers involved in its management, operation, and administration.

The educational results of the preschool centres are im-

pressive," Dr Kotliarenco says. "It is an urgent task to try and bridge the gulf between formal and non-formal schooling. I believe that this is one way in which we can lower the failure and dropout-rates in elementary schools."

The centres' methodology involves volunteer work by the mothers in their children's educational process. They train for this by attending personal

**A programme developed in poor areas of Santiago, Chile, integrating mothers into kindergarten classes as education facilitators, has proved to be an efficient alternative in preparing children to meet the demands of formal schooling.**

development workshops where they learn about socialization, health, hygiene, and diet.

The system also requires that the mothers themselves operate their centres. During a centre's first year of operation it is run by CEANIM experts; in its second year, responsibility is shared by the mothers and the experts; and, for the third and subsequent years, it

is headed by mother-educators who have distinguished themselves by their work, judgement, and leadership. Ten years into the project, there are now 15 centres in operation under the direction of mothers, designated as "education facilitators."

CEANIM's team of experts is responsible only for training and ongoing supervision. Dr Kotliarenco says the

development workshops for children from extremely poor backgrounds achieves more favourable results when mothers are involved in the classroom. Studies carried out with IDRC funding show that these children are able to enter formal education under conditions that are more favourable to the teaching-learning and adjustment processes so fundamental to suc-

cess at school.

"Our research has demonstrated that children whose mothers play a role in the kindergarten achieve markedly better result," Dr Kotliarenco says. "Measurement comparing a group of children from traditional kindergartens with a group from one of our preschool centres, using children with similar potential for intellectual development, show

that our children scored much higher in terms of preparation for the schools system.

Mothers in the preschool centres also seemed to find many advantages in this alternative to the traditional education system.

Many said they had difficulty in obtaining access to institutional kindergartens in Santiago, for which demand exceeds supply. The fact that

the CEANIM centres are located within their communities and in the immediate vicinity of their homes makes them all the more convenient and accessible.

They also pointed out the low cost factor: in addition to their obligatory period of duty once a week in the kindergarten, each mother had to bring cleaning supplies only once a month.

Other advantages they mentioned included the opportunity to participate in the care of their children. Mothers found this infinitely preferable to the formal system where, they said in effect, "you don't know what they teach or how they treat your child."

"In addition to being here with the children, we also learn to educate ourselves along with them," says Lorena Pacheco Caceres, a young mother in the Cardena Caro CCAP, located in one of metropolitan Santiago's poorest and most deprived slums.

Most mothers said that this type of system provides them with a great sense of personal fulfillment and development. They acquired new knowledge about children and have sustained higher levels of communication with their children at home.

"We learn in another way and grow along with them," adds Mrs Caceres. "We discover many things that we were not aware of before, in terms of caring for and educating our children. We also learn about health, education, and proper diet as well as how to get along with the other mothers and we develop greater self-confidence."

CEANIM, for its part, has branched out in other directions, introducing the CCAP experiment to the other sectors of society with varying degrees of success.

— IDRC Reports



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