

Feature

Education

A New Approach to Primary Education

by Aasha Mehreen Amin

In the 1990 world Conference on Education for All (WCEFA) held in Thailand, over a hundred developing nations including Bangladesh pledged their own EFA (Education for All) by the year 2000 goals. With the burden of an ever growing population, invasive poverty and mass illiteracy, such a goal may be a trifling ambition for this country. Yet conscious efforts are being made by the government and non-governmental organisations to educate Bangladesh. The critical question is: are there efforts working? On the government side a compulsory primary education legislation has been passed in 1990 and implemented in 68 sub-districts of Bangladesh in 1992. Other government initiatives include a National Committee on Basic Education for All, a five-year General Education Project and a government-run programme for Integrated Non-formal Education. Unfortunately, despite these well intended efforts, the results have not been as impressive. Only about 60 per cent of the eligible age group (in six year olds) are enrolled into the present primary education system, half of this percentage attend school regularly and only about 20 per cent of those enrolled actually complete the full five year period of primary education.

In this context, NGOs have had a little more success. BRAC (Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee) in particular, has developed and implemented a new education delivery system that actually works. This is the Non-formal Primary Education or NFPE programme which represents a somewhat unconventional approach to primary education to meet the needs of children, especially the most disadvantaged. Monzoor Ahmed, long time educationist and Associate Director of Education in the UNICEF New York headquarters, who was part of a team that assessed BRAC's NFPE programme shares his views on: the change in status of primary education in Bangladesh and regionally since 1990, why NFPE works in Bangladesh and what needs to be done to ensure a sustainable system of primary education that is both

practical and implementable.

From an international perspective two regions are far behind in education especially at the primary level, says Ahmed. These are sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia with only Bangladesh as an exception. In Bangladesh mentions Ahmed, over the last 2-3 years there has been a show of greater commitment and interest from the side of both the government

businesses, religious organisations etc. "In particular", he says, "we must decentralise local planning and management of education programmes by giving the ownership of primary education back to villages". At present he adds, education is seen as a bureaucracy with more rhetorics and less action.

The real obstacle to success of the existing system lies in

education, through the government and NGOs but the results have not been commensurate with this investment because we have stuck to the traditional, conventional way, the real energy and creativity of people have not been harnessed to achieve the results we want. "We, therefore, need to change the way we do things", he adds.

Other obstacles to successful implementation of primary education in Bangladesh include lack of skilled, competent and motivated teachers, scarcity of textbooks, teaching and learning guides.

The most serious problem, says Ahmed, is that the present school system does not adjust to the situation of the child but expects the child to adjust to the system irrespective of his or her circumstances. For a landless rural family sending a child to school is a big cost and a burden that prevents him or her from working or doing household chores.

The social distance between teachers and the underprivileged children explains Ahmed, and instances of abuse by the teachers — all act as disincentives for the children that prompts them to drop out of a school system that has no flexibility and is insensitive to their needs.

In this respect BRAC's NFPE schools have proved to be more successful gaining significantly lower drop-out rates. Before, out of every 100 children, 70 left school without completing the five year primary school cycle. Now with the NFPE programmes, the drop out rate has been reduced to only 5 per cent.

So what is the secret behind NFPE programme's success? Ahmed explains it is the responsiveness of these schools to the children's needs. One of the main strategies of the NFPE system that makes it so effective he says, is involving the parents by giving them the responsibility of bringing their children to school. Each school has a manageable number of 30 students from very poor families most of them girls, who live near the school and so do not have to walk great distances. Teachers, who are hired on a temporary part time basis, are

ment and NGOs. But in order to achieve any of the goals declared at the World Conference on Education for All (WCEFA) for the year 2000, he adds, an intensified and determined effort is needed.

This means doing things differently. One way, says Ahmed is to stimulate greater involvement of the rural population and commitment from the NGOs, the private sector,

the entire attitude towards primary education Ahmed points out. Whether it is the government or the whole political system, there is tremendous resistance to change and a reluctance to accept real decentralization.

"Over the last decade", comments Ahmed, "we have received about 500 million dollars of international assistance for primary and basic

from the same neighbourhood and so know all the children and maintain a good rapport with them. The teachers go through a two week training session followed by one or two day refresher training sessions. The curriculum consists of basic subjects — Bangla, Science, Mathematics etc all simplified into easy to read books for both teachers and children and with which they can relate to. The books and stationary being provided by the schools, all the children have to worry about is to be on time for class. The timings for the lessons are selected by the parents so that the child can perform his usual chores at home and still go to school.

Surprisingly, the NFPE system has been implemented with very low costs. This, Ahmed explains is because the school's are either one-room houses or store rooms rented for only three hours a day. Thus the problem of buying expensive buildings is avoided. Instead, the money is used for buying more books or stationary etc.

The greatest accomplishment of the NFPE system, says Ahmed, is that over 95 per cent of the children who complete three years of school go on to join the regular primary school. This certainly contradicts the notion that parents who are illiterate themselves will be reluctant to send their children to school. "Even illiterate parents, when they see that their children are being benefited, are ready to make sacrifices.

The NFPE system, admits, Ahmed may not be the only solution but it does show how schools can be responsive to children's needs. The non-formal education system should be part of the total education programme of the country, the basic approach of reaching out to the most left out and disadvantaged groups should be adopted", he said.

Ahmed believes that with goodwill and greater community involvement in the control and operation of the schools the goal of universal primary education can become a reality. "Everyone wants their child to be educated, that is the real resource — the enthusiasm of parents to do the best for their children," he remarks.

VIIPP for Greater Communication

by Raffat Binte Rashid

We are in an age of greater communication, information and advanced technology. So much so, that at times it all seems too much to take, a sort of overload of information. When information is not properly imparted to people, when very little is understood or when nothing substantial is brought out in a discussion, the information becomes ineffectual and irrelevant.

It becomes something like a life imprisonment sentence. A three hour conference is enough to scare the participant let alone a day long seminar. The only reason that can persuade participants to attend is perhaps the food; the moment it is served 75 per cent of the participants depart and the rest stay, out of mere courtesy.

VIIPP is essential for participants to plan together.

It is a method to bring voices together and allow everyone to agree and voice, where a consensus can be made possible in a team approval," he said describing his initiative here in Bangladesh.

VIIPP is a creative combination of different approaches to planning training, and other group events. It is derived from two main lines of thought. One comes from Latin America while the other results from experiences in Germany. In 1991, Neil McKee, having learned the techniques from Dr Hermann Tillmann and Maruja Salas, from the University of Hohenheim in Germany and then introduced them here in Bangladesh.

VIIPP is essential for participants to plan together.

the participants express their main ideas in large enough letters or diagrams to be seen by the whole group. Private note taking is not necessary.

By this method, everyone takes part in the process of arriving at a consensus. Less talkative participants find a means of expression and those who might normally dominate a group and distract a lot, are forced to let others have their say. By visualizing the group's main proceedings, repetitions and circumlocutive arguments are reduced.

Facilitation is a key concept in VIIPP. Implicit in this term is the belief that each individual possesses experiences and knowledge that can be released in group processes to contribute to collective



Courtesy — Unicef

UNICEF with the government, NGOs and donors have introduced it in many UNICEF supported programmes. We started from the peak and its coming down now. It is a social mobilization, mobilizing for social programme. In our breast feeding, child rights programmes the government secretaries and other top officials took active part in it. The feedback is very positive and the process is in demand in all our programmes," McKee explained. VIIPP, he added has been implemented even in programmes in the upazilla, thana level, in district offices in Rajshahi, Khulna and Chittagong.

VIIPP is a pragmatic process that enlivens the otherwise dull discussions. With a people-centered approach based on the philosophy of trusting in the capacities and creativity of human beings, VIIPP combines techniques of visualization with methods for interactive learning. VIIPP methods democratize the interaction between people. It uses large number of multi-coloured paper cards of different shapes and sizes on which

knowledge that is useful for development action. There are about 50 trained people in the facilitation process.

Facilitators actually keep the process going. An integral part of VIIPP is the facilitator, who ensures that the process keeps flowing from problem to solution to action through the use of cards, without directing content or conclusions. He is a part-time counsellor or a 'know-nothing' guru who asks questions about the issues and identifies strategies.

From Bangladesh where it began, VIIPP is also now being used in Bhutan, Egypt and East Africa. A manual is being developed, also in a participatory manner, with guidelines for VIIPP facilitators.

Everybody is considered to be a resource person for analyzing problems and for contributing to solutions through development actions. In VIIPP programmes everybody, rich or poor, is respected and can freely express his or her opinions. With its practical, no-nonsense approach VIIPP may well be the latest breakthrough in the communication process.

Education in Democracy

by Prof Roushan Ara Hoque

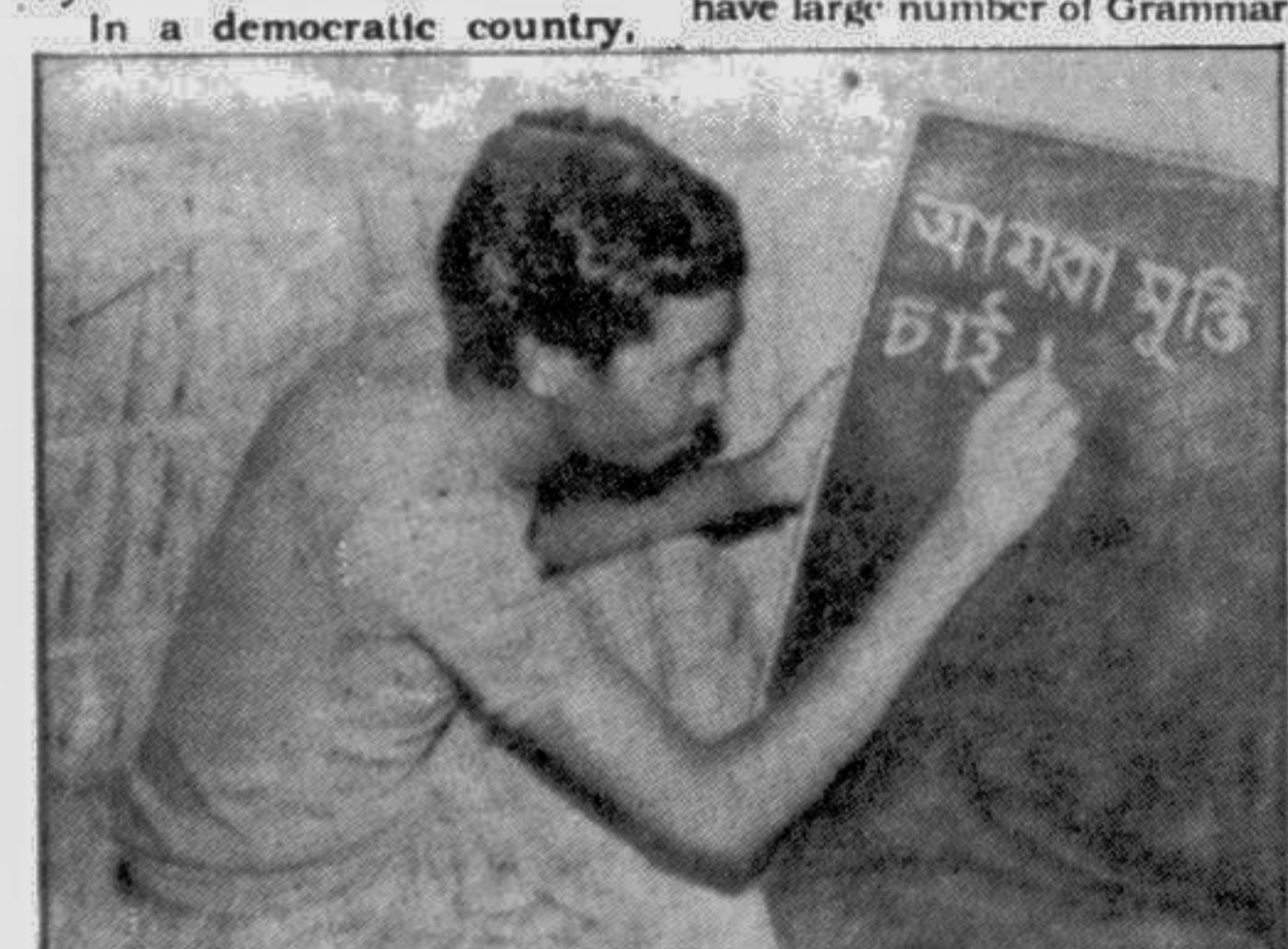
In a democratic country equal educational opportunity should be open to all according to age, ability and aptitude. It implies that equally talented children should be treated equally by the government. The talented children should be selected after their primary stage by a uniform type of academic and aptitude test. The concept of education for leadership appears repugnant to the ideals of democracy of our country. Here leaders cannot be selected in advance or specially trained from early life; rather they come out to the forefront by the demand of the situation by their own talent, sense of responsibility and courage.

The exponents of the concept of education for leadership claim that "... the Cadet Colleges in Bangladesh are the mainstay of the country's academics and discipline ... and that they are the nurseries of potential leaders ... and the Fauzderhat Cadet College is as the Eton of the East! Three questions naturally arise in the minds of the readers, such as, Were all of our present and past national leaders nursed and educated in any such Eton in their early life? How many of the scholars of those colleges are serving or have served the country? How many of them have migrated to and been settled abroad for their own better living? In the answers of these questions lie the justification of running costly institutions, in our poor country squeezing out the major portion of educational budget.

The concept of education for leadership was implicit in the ancient Spartan disciplined education and in the Nazism of

pre-war Germany. The idea of education for leadership was inculcated in the education of the Renaissance and in the English Public and Independent Schools. These schools were and are run by the fees of the pupils and not by the national exchequer. That concept of education for leadership has been transmitted to some of our leaders who have established some such schools in our country.

In a democratic country,



Courtesy — NijerShikhi

and Comprehensive type of schools with better staff and equipments which can accommodate all the talented students selected by a national and uniform test. In those schools leadership of every kind would find expression with facilities to develop further. There should be no artificial isolation of students to be trained as leaders, that is, an elite made conscious of its superiority, whether his or is not, destined to rule the country.

Help Them Reach Grade 5

After decades of rapid progress, primary education is in crisis.

Spending has been cut back. Policy and strategy are in the doldrums. Progress towards universal primary education is faltering.

Enrollment remains high almost everywhere. The problem is not getting children into schools, it is keeping them there. Almost half leave before completing four years.

Brave new approaches are being tried out. But whatever solutions are found, they must eventually become the responsibility of governments if they are to be put into action on the same scale as the problems.

Over 90% of the developing world's children start school. But in many countries, half drop out in the first few years.

As a result, there are now an estimated 1000 million children aged 6 to 11 not in school. Two thirds of them are girls.

Grade 5 enrollment indicates the percentage of children who are completing at least four years of primary school — the minimum required if a child is to receive even a basic education.



% of children reaching grade 5

Literacy Classes write New Future for 55 M Indians

by Prakash Chandra

The literacy drive has nearly drawn 55 million people. But the continuing high illiteracy rates in many states are 'shameful'

Some experts say the high illiteracy rates in the cowbelt districts are due to superstition, ignorance and sheer poverty. Unless there is a concerted campaign to modernise these areas of darkness, people are going to stay as they are.

Prabir Purkayasta of the Delhi Sakshartha Samity added that a voluntary agency with a strong grassroot-level organisation is essential for this kind of campaign.

In the states where the literacy rate is very low the population growth is higher. Some analysts cite this as an indication of the direct link between literacy and population growth.

Officials claim that some 2.8 million people have already acquired basic reading and writing skills as a result of the National Literacy Mission (NLM), a campaign to bring 100 per cent literacy to target populations in 65 districts of the country since 1990.

Already, the South Indian states of Kerala and Pondicherry, Gandhinagar in Gujarat, Burdwan district in West Bengal, and the southern regional districts of Dakshin Kannada and Sindhudurg have been declared fully literate.

And even as the literacy workers taught, there have also been some valuable lessons for them to learn. A senior official said, If we involve people at the grassroots level, we can achieve what was considered impossible earlier.

An activist of the Bharat Vigyan Samity, a resource group for adult education, said that to a large extent the literacy drive has been successful. It has drawn nearly 55 million people to the literacy classes. We have made a dent where earlier programmes failed.

But so much remains to be done in spite of these impressive successes. Areas of darkness remain particularly in the so-called cowbelt states of Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Bihar and Rajasthan. Only 14 districts have been taken up by NLM campaigners in these states.

Officials say the far-from-satisfactory accomplishment of NLM in several areas, particularly Hindi-speaking states, is due to a shortage of volunteers to conduct the campaign.

Tagore-award

Aruna Asaf Ali and V S Mathur have been awarded the Tagore and Nehru Literacy Awards for 1993, reports PTI. The awards, instituted by the Indian Adult Education Association (IAEA), are announced every year on the eve of the International Literacy Day to help the cause of eradication of illiteracy in the country. An IAEA release said September 7.

Aruna Asaf Ali has been awarded the Tagore Literacy Award for her pioneering role in promoting adult and continuing education among women.



Courtesy — Unicef