

Feature

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 little ambitious 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 Nonformal Education. Unfortunately, despite of 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 Sri Lanka 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 govern-

businesses, religious organisations etc. "In particular", he says, "we must decentralize 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 rhetoric 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

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 benefitted, 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.

VIPP 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 he 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.

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.

VIPP 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.

"VIPP 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 digress 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 VIPP. 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

lessy. "In Bangladesh group events are very formal affairs, a participant is required to listen to a large number of speeches from a dias set rigidly before rows of chairs or a boardroom-style table. Speakers come with fixed positions on various subjects and try to pass on important information in long lectures, relying on their wit and charms to keep the audience receptive. Very often the content of the discussion is not considered important. The emphasis is on the formality of acknowledging hierarchical relationships. When the discussion takes place finally it is often off the topic, not at all relevant to the subject supposed to be talked about.

To bring about a change from such superficial, monotonous yet important discussions, "Visualization in Participating Programmes" VIPP is being introduced. Neil McKee, chief, Communication and Information Section of UNICEF Dhaka, is the first one to introduce VIPP in Bangladesh. "VIPP is an orderly, creative participation of participants.

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. VIPP, he added has been implemented even in programmes in the upazilla, thana level, in district offices in Rajshahi, Khulna and Chittagong.

VIPP 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, VIPP combines techniques of visualization with methods for interactive learning. VIPP 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 VIPP 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, VIPP is also now being used in Bhutan, Egypt and East Africa. A manual is being developed, also in participatory manner, with guidelines for VIPP facilitators.

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

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 flagging.

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.

Sri Lanka	91
India	53
Regional average	50
Bangladesh	47
Pakistan	37
Afghanistan	25
Bhutan	12
Nepal	NO DATA

WORLD AVERAGE



% 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'

MANY Indian men, women and children for whom books and letters were strange and undecipherable before, are now able to read and write thanks to a multi-million-ruppee national literacy drive in India's remote areas.

Hundreds of literacy workers have spread out from the tea gardens of Assam to the mountains of Himachal Pradesh, from the desert lands of Rajasthan to the farming villages of Bengal and Bihar, and to the tribal communities of Madhya Pradesh, to introduce the people to the fascinating world of literacy and numeracy.

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 Vikyan 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 cobweb 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.

Some experts say the high illiteracy rates in the cobweb 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 Saksharatha 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.

Experts consider the continuing high illiteracy rates in many states 'shameful'. Bihar, for instance, has the lowest literacy rate in the country — 38.5 per cent. It is closely followed by Rajasthan with a 38.8 per cent literacy rate, Uttar Pradesh 41.7 per cent and Madhya Pradesh 43.4 per cent.

Statistics compiled by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) show that, as of 1985, the overall illiteracy rate in India among people aged 15 and higher was 56.5 per cent.

In absolute terms, there were about 263,609,000 illiterate people in India in 1985 of which 61 per cent were women.

A significant aspect of India's literacy campaign is that the states where the drive has registered success were those which have already achieved a great deal in the formal education of its people.

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 from 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.

Kerala, where the campaign registered a 100 per cent success, has already a 90.5 per cent literacy rate. The state of Karnataka has a 56 per cent literacy rate.

P K Tripathi, India's director for adult education, noted that a major factor in the success of the literacy programme in Kerala's Muslim-dominated Mallapuram district was the keen desire of women to read letters from and to send letters to their husbands who are now working in the Middle East.

NLM officials are more encouraged by their success than discouraged by their shortfalls and they remain optimistic. One planner said, "We are confident that total literacy can be achieved even under the most difficult conditions. We would like the local population to respond to our efforts."

The NLM reported that some 140 literacy campaigns are being conducted in 182 districts. About five million volunteer instructors, most of them teenagers, are participating in the campaign. One official, in trying to explain the enthusiasm for the campaign, said, "It is a passion for learning. For some people, it is recreating a lost childhood."

NLM officials say a district is chosen for the literacy programme if volunteers are available and the area has already a good literacy rate. The campaigners also look for a rich folk culture which can be used as a vehicle for spreading literacy awareness.

Mr Tripathi said millions of people are currently attending literacy classes in Tamil Nadu, Maharashtra, Orissa, Haryana, Himachal Pradesh and Punjab. A major supporter of these literacy efforts in India and similar ones in other countries which are also burdened by huge illiterate populations is UNESCO.

As a lead agency in the global goal of education for all (EFA) programme, UNESCO has been supporting India's efforts to bring the benefits of basic literacy and numeracy skills to the whole population. The UN agency's major EFA programme is designed to help ensure that no one in any country is left illiterate and uneducated.

— Depthnews Asia

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 Elton 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 Eltons 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 — NijeraShikhi

there is a general distrust for any sort of leadership as it is associated with authoritarian control. The egalitarianists also believe that to impart leadership-education to a microscopic few, the macro-community is being deprived of its basic rights of Three R's. In all spheres of our nation we need men and women of highest ability. To give these faculties to a few will be too narrow a view. In a democracy we require citizens having these qualities of

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.



Courtesy — Unicef