

The Status of Education in Bangladesh: A True Perspective

by Gopal Sen Gupta

ABOUT 25 year ago when I was a primary school student I came across the following skit. It was in the midst of the Indo-Pak War. A boy asked his private tutor the English equivalent of the word 'chunkam'. The tutor after consulting a dictionary said, "You see, 'chun' means 'line' and 'kam' means 'work'. So both together it is 'linework'." The boy's English educated father was passing by and overheard the conversation. He interrupted, "How come? Isn't it whitewash, Sir?" The tutor replied, "Well Sir, you pay me 10 rupees tuition fee per month. In today's wartime market you don't get whitewash for 10 rupees, you get only linework."

schools is currently 56.44. Nevertheless, only 22 per cent of adult women are literate compared to 43 per cent of men. The lack of educational attainment of women has serious implications for the welfare of the family since it restricts their opportunities for work and reduces their effectiveness as mothers. It leads to poor health, nutrition and sanitation practices and limited social and economic pro-

people who are too prone to look for quick gains by short term means. In consequence they find their lives ending up in the short term at all levels. A nationwide school lunch system should be introduced at the compulsory school level. This also involves huge expenditures and efficient management. But the expenditures should be divided between the parents and the government, which will lessen the financial

guage English was all important and the native language Bengali was neglected. Now the situation seems to be that the foreign language English is being zealously discarded at an incredibly fast rate. On the other hand, although the national language Bengali has been upgraded in sentimental and abstract terms, it has been horribly degraded in terms of quality. But we essentially need both. We have to be both

to learn basic literacy and numeracy.
b) To cultivate discipline, fortitude, and tolerance in all adults.
c) To enable them to acquire skills in trades, to earn their livelihood.
d) To give them the opportunity to qualify for a leadership role in the community; and
e) To enable them to participate in the disaster relief and management of their country when necessary.

In short, the main objective of this draft system for adult education is to turn unproductive adults into productive human resources. Here again we have the question of expenditure. But I believe these adults can earn their own ways by engaging in production activities in a planned program. With the power of imagination, resourcefulness, dedication, a sense of responsibility for the brains of our country, and through concerted efforts, a way can be found to solve our problems. We must remember that this education is to train adults to win their life's struggle. If they can acquire this ability, then and only then can they be called human resources.

More qualified teachers should be appointed to the primary and secondary schools. It is ironically said, "Je pae-na onnyo chakri, she i kore master", that is, "He who cannot get any other job becomes a school master". And in many cases, such teachers are in charge of primary and secondary education. Nobody can say what the exact situation is today as there is so much debate on the subject.

tion at school, we need good teachers. And to have good teachers we must give them the necessary economic security, freedom of work, authority of educational management, and social status. In short, we must give them a good life so that they may feel responsible to themselves, to their pupils, and to the society. Otherwise, talented people will not be attracted to the teaching profession, as is the case today.

An Independent Educational Service for all levels of public education, not only for the colleges, will be needed to attract talented people to teaching. Our top-notch university students, after completing education, compete for the most coveted Civil Service jobs because they give them the aspired-after security, authority, power and status. And many of them make the educational institutions their springboard for a leap to the royal road of Civil Service, or for other rewarding jobs. If they get similar benefits at schools, I believe, they will stay on. Like the hierarchy of the civil service, there should be a hierarchy of the Educational Service with all teachers recruited through competitive examinations for all levels primary, secondary and higher.

A leader of our country is said to have once joked: "Our First Division students enter the Civil Service, the Second Divisions go into Trade and Commerce, and the Third Division take up Politics" I am afraid, more often than not the dropouts or those who are not smart enough for netting other jobs become teachers, especially at the lower levels, so more often than not we get "lime work" rather than "whitewash".

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How Much Should Students Pay?

by Dr Amrik Singh

AS one regards different countries of the world, two patterns of state support to students at the higher level emerge. In certain countries, the state supports the education of young men and women generously. In others, students are required to pay a substantial part of the cost.

In other words there is no clear pattern. No one can say that one pattern is right and the other is wrong. It all depends upon the traditions, as they have evolved in a particular country, and the state of the economy — to what extent it is developed or otherwise. Also to what extent is the state pro-poor or anti-poor. In the US, for example, students pay a substantial proportion of what is spent on them. In the UK however, a large number of students are helped liberally.

When it comes to our country, we have to make up our minds about what kind of pattern is to evolve.

Two factors have to be taken into account as far as our country is concerned. One is the tradition which goes back to the pre-1947 period, when those who could not afford to pay were helped with respect to higher education.

The second factor in the situation is that, for more than half a century, fees have not been revised upwards, except marginally.

At the same time, some kind of a consensus must be arrived at without much loss of time. In this regard, all political parties must adopt a common approach.

My proposal to the Tenth Finance Commission was that fees at the undergraduate level should be assessed in the same manner as increases in railway fares. It should be something like a formula as in the case of revised dearness allowance. What the railways charge affects everybody. In the case of college fees only a small category of the population would be affected. But whether large or small, the principle should be the same. What is acceptable elsewhere should also be acceptable in undergraduate education — especially in arts, and sciences.

Other faculties should adopt a different line of approach, however. The study of medicine and engineering for example is expensive. Those who undergo professional training generally get remunerative employment. That is why when, from a few hundred rupees, courses in business management (in the IIMs) are being raised to Rs. 30-35,000 per year, there is no resistance.

It is the central government which is to blame most of all in this regard. Education in the IITs is ridiculously cheap. Though the fee has been raised from Rs. 200 to Rs. 1000, ac-

ording to the Director of IIT, Kanpur, fees go to meet only 5 per cent of the cost. This is an absurd situation.

The kind of education imparted in the IIT is comparable with the best anywhere in the world. What is more, it is the cream of Indian talent which opts for the IIT system. In other words, everything about it is lavish and indeed generous. The only thing which is mean and miserable about the IITs is the fee charged.

There is no reason why, at the minimum, an IIT student should not be required to pay 50 per cent of what is spent on him. In plain words, it is mainly students of the upper middle class who have been getting admission to the IITs. To subsidise their training is to rob the poor in order to help the rich. This is outrageous.

In fact, it needs to be noted that, by overspending on higher and professional education, it is the lower levels of education — primary and secondary — which get neglected. This has been happening for half a century. To persist with this unbalanced system of funding is to perpetrate social injustice.

Another subsidiary point may also be made. Why should post-graduate education be linked in respect of fees with undergraduate education? At this level, only those who show promise join the university. They have done well at the undergraduate level and that is what equips them for post-graduate studies. In plain words those who pursue post-graduate courses belong to a select category and can be seen to add to their earning capacity.

This picture would remain incomplete unless a simultaneous system of loans and grants is instituted. Every one has been talking about it for decades. But nothing has been done. This only goes to show that we are not prepared to break with tradition. Nor are we willing to experiment and innovate.

The whole operation should be so facilitated that anybody who needs any kind of help should be able to get it. This also implies that the system of recovery would have to be streamlined, professionalised and made fool-proof. Though it must be added, in all fairness, that a certain proportion loaned out would never be recovered. But that is part of the risk.

In any case, no one should forget that those who belong to the weaker categories are even now receiving help from the state. This system would and should continue. — Mandira

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For these children, and others like them, primary education in Bangladesh is free, but not actually compulsory. — Photo UNICEF

pects, which, in turn, have a negative effect on infant and maternal mortality. The government is committed to Education for All and has introduced compulsory primary education and free education for rural girls until class VIII. Sixty per cent of all teacher positions have been targeted for women. Free text books are now being supplied to students, which may contribute to increased enrolment. A revised curriculum was introduced in 1992, which puts more emphasis on the application of learning, continuous assessment rather than tests, and school-based education rather than homework. A Women in Development unit has been set up at the National Committee for Text Books to monitor curricula and text books for gender bias.

Primary education in Bangladesh is free, but not actually compulsory. The reason is said to be lack of resources. Compulsory education would surely be a huge expenditure. But an expenditure on education is an investment. This investment may not produce instant or short-term profits. But the human resources it will produce will surpass all short term gains. It is our forefathers who gave us the old adage: "Lekhaporu Kore Je Garighora Chore She", which in essence means, "He who receives education can have a better life. But it is also said that there are

burden on each side. I think the real problem is more one of efficient organisation and management than one of financial burden. Because of our inexperience there will be all kinds of mismanagement and chaos at the start, but through such experiences we shall be able to learn. Our children need nutrition and nourishment so that they can withstand the physical rigours they face.

Music, physical education and drawing should be given equal importance with other subjects in the compulsory education curriculum. I want to put special emphasis on the teaching of these subjects. It is true that they are included in the curriculum, but they are not actually taught in most cases. At school and in society, they are not given importance, even though they are essential for the development of children's physical strength and mental faculties, for giving rhythm and rhythm to their educational life, especially at the early stage, for enabling them to see things clearly and precisely, and for giving them an opportunity to learn discipline. And to teach these subjects we need teachers properly trained in them.

It must be pointed out that practical English language education should be made compulsory for all grades of pre-university schooling. Once upon a time the royal lan-

Bengali nationalists and internationalists. For our national as well as individual well-being, and also for international understanding, we need to learn English. And by this I mean practical English.

And for teaching this practical English we need practical English teachers.

There are many concepts and methods for the diffusion of adult education. Some attempts have been made in our country. One such attempt has been the introduction of a credit requirement for University graduation, under which a prospective university graduate is required to teach an unlettered person. It is a good but partial attempt. The whole nation has to be mobilized for national development, that is, the people's own development. Such a mobilization has to be carried out through a draft system for adult education. It will be a kind of compulsory education for all adults: literacy for the unlettered and discipline for all. One may call it National Human Resources Mobilization Education. The adults will be divided into various categories, according to age-group and literacy and educational levels, and the curricula will be structured accordingly for one to several years. The curricula should also include disaster preparedness training. The objectives include:
a) To enable illiterate adults

Save Education

As our regular readers will be aware, Save Education is one of the three Daily Star Campaign issues for 1995. Education is the key to empowerment for the people of our country, and the means of realising the wealth of our nation in terms of human resources.

While some progress is being made in a few areas, the overall state of education in Bangladesh has unquestionably deteriorated in the last decade, which is why we have decided on education as a campaign issue. The disparate efforts of the government and various NGOs can only be seen as palliative measures.

The Daily Star hopes, by taking a pro-active role, to contribute towards the necessary mobilisation of the whole nation in order to challenge the status quo. We urge the media and other newspapers to join our efforts.

We wish to make this page a vehicle for our campaign on mass education, in the coming year, and thereby to consolidate public opinion in this matter. Above all, we would like to emphasise that this is your page. We invite all organisations involved in the education of our country, policy-makers, professionals and the public to use it, and participate in furthering the cause of education in Bangladesh. — RA

New Learning Approach Draws Kids to School

by Patricia Roberts

THERE are too many students and not enough teachers. Laments the headmistress of Changangkha Primary School as she surveys the crowded room.

Some 48 children, average age six years old, are busily and happily drawing pictures on child-sized tables in a classroom in this capital city of the Himalayan Kingdom of Bhutan.

But it would be difficult not to hear the undertone of pride in the headmistress' voice. Not so many years ago, primary schools were not very popular in Bhutan. Though the government provided free education, most people didn't see why they should send their children. After all, the classes were taught entirely in English, a language very few young children understood. Nor did the textbooks, published in India, seem relevant to life in Bhutan.

How to make public education relevant was, indeed, a challenge to educators since the introduction of Bhutan's first primary school system in the early 1960s. Most residents of this sparsely populated country are illiterate subsistence farmers, who speak Dzongkha. The indigenous literature and history is written in the Chhoki script, a Tibetan-based script derived from Sanskrit and unfamiliar even to scholars.

The Changangkha Primary School is part of Bhutan's new education programme which aims to provide a different kind of school, customised to fit Bhutan's unique needs. It began as an experimental pilot project in the mid-1980s called New Approach to

Primary Education (NAPE) and has been adopted nationwide in Bhutan's school system. It is an application of advanced educational techniques in one of South Asia's least developed countries, where the adult illiteracy rate averages 80 per cent and adult female illiteracy is as high as 95 per cent.

Bhutan, a country the size of Switzerland, is wedged between two very different cultures: that of the Tibet Autonomous Region of China to

Bhutan's children were discouraged from going to school not only by rough terrain but also by a curriculum far removed from their experience

the north, and of India to the south.

From the eighth century, Buddhist monasteries reigned, like the feudal lords of Europe, over the craggy landscape of Bhutan. Young monks (male only) learned ancient Buddhist culture and rituals, written in Chhoki. Monasteries also taught a wide range of subjects designed to perpetuate Buddhism, among them Tibetan Buddhist healing, agriculture, art, astronomy, numerology and practical accounting.

Bhutan's first primary education system came from India, but it was outdated and inflexible. Its stifled curricu-

lum was taught in English from textbooks designed for use in India and patterned on the archaic British system of the early 1900s.

By the mid-1980s, educators began to search for a Bhutanese-based curriculum. Textbooks were written with help from the British Overseas Development Agency, the World University Service of Canada and the British Voluntary Service Overseas, with support from the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF). The Department of Education formulated a new national education plan in 1984 and two years later, a NAPE pilot programme was introduced into 12 schools.

Most pre-primary students enter NAPE schools speaking no English. In the early grades, most instruction is oral, using both Dzongkha and English. The first 100 English words are taught through pictures.

That children study in English — with Dzongkha as a required subject of study — might seem an anomaly in a country with a policy of preserving the national identity. The country restricts tourism, architecture and satellite television.

But teaching English, says Peter Chen, former UNICEF Project Officer for Education, is "not a contradiction, it's a wise move for Bhutan to step into the 20th century."

English is now a reality of life in Bhutan, from shop signs to government documents, rental videos and textbooks for higher education. Most students still go outside Bhutan for university-level education, usually to Indian universities,



Until recently, primary education was not very popular in Bhutan. The NAPE method has changed that by providing education to fit Bhutan's unique needs. — Photo UNICEF

which teach in English. Besides, the national Dzongkha Development Commission is still developing written Dzongkha, and very few Dzongkha language books exist. In every way possible, the

curriculum incorporates and reflects the Bhutanese perspective. Students learn to count Bhutanese money and measure with Bhutanese instruments. They study local tools, animals, food and geog-

raphy. Assuming that primary schooling is all that most Bhutanese children will get, the NAPE approach teaches basic skills and problem-solving capabilities. The goal is to

enrich the lives of all, no matter what level of education they complete.

A 1988 evaluation of NAPE methods was so positive that NAPE was rapidly implemented system-wide. By 1990,

NAPE schools were nationwide, and today the method is used in the lower grades of all of Bhutan's 235 primary schools and some junior high schools.

One measure of NAPE's success is continually increasing primary school enrolment. Now, 56,773 students attend school — 56 per cent of Bhutan's school-aged children. The proportion of girls, now 43 per cent of enrolment, is rising.

Bhutan's most formidable obstacle to primary education, and to other social programmes, is its topography. The country is 45,000 square kilometres of rugged terrain, where 600,000 residents live in remote villages wedged into narrow valleys. Roads and trails are often blocked by snow in winter or landslides in summer.

But even in the remotest areas, communities have begun to band together to build their own schools. A development largely attributed to enthusiasm for the NAPE system. In areas with 30 or more students within one hour's walking distance, the Department of Education provides educational materials and trained teachers for community-constructed schools. UNICEF provides building assistance, as well as a programme to train teachers how to teach in multi-grade classrooms.

Today, more than 8,000 students are studying in 92 such community schools in Bhutan. All things considered, Bhutan is well on the way to the goal of universal education by the year 2000. — Deepthrees Asia