

Feature Education

State of Literacy and Education in Rural Areas

Obstacles and Strategies

RURAL people, even the marginal farmers, work dawn-to-dusk for survival. In this situation they prioritize work over education for their children. Understandably 'survival' is their motto. One can't blame them for it either.

Heavy drop-out is a common phenomenon in rural Bangladesh (80 per cent in 1980 and 60 per cent in 1991) for various reasons. But even so, hardly anything has been done to rectify the situation.

The schooling system is such that the course cannot be completed in class alone, it needs additional homework, which is not always acceptable by parents, particularly if they are illiterate people living in rural areas, often without electricity. Moreover the present system does not allow for sports or other extra-curricular activities on a significant scale, thereby inhibiting personality development in the child.

Physical facilities: Though the number of schools has increased after liberation, yet in some remote areas there are hardly any physical facilities for school. So the children have to rely on schooling in other areas, which sometimes becomes impossible, particularly during the rainy season. Once such a gap in schooling occurs it remains a permanent feature.

Social system: The number of female teachers is very low in rural schools which sometimes inhibits girls from coming to school as they do not feel free with male teachers. The parents also do not like to send their daughters to distant schools for reasons of insecurity and prefer religious education for them. In most families because of the prevailing social values, girls are married off at an early age, thus putting an end to their educational ambitions.

Management: The population of Bangladesh was 75 million in 1971 and it is 110 million now. In other words, the population has increased by 50 per cent in the last 23 years and the number of schools according to government estimates have increased much more than that. Presently there are 62,000 villages in Bangladesh and 48,000 primary schools, which means there is a primary school for every 1.3 village. So the number of schools is no longer a big problem. It is time we started to address other issues as well. For instance, managing these huge number of schools centrally is very difficult. There is little coordination among the government, the local institutions and other agencies. Local people are not involved in either policy or decision making. A gap remains between those who generate ideas and those who act. It is reported that 60,000 teaching positions are lying vacant now. Why so, if it is a national priority? Monitoring and impact assessment is not sufficient. All these reveal the lack of commitment on the part of those

concerned. Material: In promoting literacy and reading habit, materials play a vital role. But in most cases materials are not developed on the basis of felt needs, so they do not have relevance to the life, culture and social environment of the rural people. The illustrations do not reflect the rural life style. As a result they fail to attract people to the school. Defective materials also hamper education rather than promoting it. Materials are not developed according to the different levels of the target audience either. Lack of coordination among the agencies producing materials is also another problem.



A matter of survival among rural people, work is prioritized over education for children.

Continuing education: It is very rare in rural areas to have a common place or resource centre where people can practice whatever they have learnt. Because of a lack of adequate newspapers, books or other reading materials, they cannot get a chance to continue their learning.

Strategies: Managing drop-out: Although drop-out has been a much discussed topic for a long time, no steps have been taken, so far. From my observation, it appears much can be done to improve attendance. One could provide food to the children, which the government is already doing on a limited scale under the food-for-education programme. Another possible step could be regular guardian motivation, either through personal contacts or meetings. The government is already giving 75 Taka for girls attending school, this could also be extended to boys, on a reduced scale. If the number of female teachers could be increased it would minimise drop-out of girl students. A two months recess during harvesting time could be initiated, as it is observed that most of the drop-outs occur during harvesting. Other facilities such as toy libraries and sports and recreational facilities will also encourage children. The curriculum should be based on their life style, so that they feel

and guardians representatives should be involved. Management should not be concentrated on a single central body. Rather it should be run by local bodies or the private sector. It is strange that while privatization is the magic formula in the heyday of market economics, the word is anathema in the education sector. The government has already decided to fund NGOs in 12 thanas for education. We can only hope this is properly followed up in future and is not merely a token gesture like so many other good programmes in the past.

Material development: Materials should be developed according to need. Needs could be identified through structured questionnaires, workshops, discussion meetings, personal contacts, etc. Materials should include books, posters, flip charts, audio-visual materials, etc. These materials should have relevance with the social and cultural life style of the rural people. The material producing agencies should coordinate their work properly and avoid duplication. Successful materials from other countries could be reproduced/adopted in our local language too. Materials should be made available in the rural areas through establishing rural community resource centres.

Expansion of physical facilities: Physical facilities should be expanded on the basis of needs, not on the basis of political reasons. There is a big problem here, with school teachers having their explicit preferences, particularly regarding centralized control and against local management. Their priorities reflect the importance of service condition over performance.

Management development: Management should involve persons from all spheres of society. Particularly local people

Community Resource Centre (CRC): To facilitate continuing education in rural areas this strategy could be very effective. The CRC should collect, preserve and disseminate information which would provide community users with techniques to meet their information needs.

A management committee should be formed at the initial stage representing various professionals to run CRC smoothly. Local public representatives, teachers, local government officials, NGO representatives, representatives of political parties, media activists, cultural activists, etc. should be represented in the management committee. The CRC should organize seminars, workshops and discussion meetings every month. Special emphasis should be given on AV services. Video has no literacy barrier. Its technology is simple and can directly and effectively convey messages. Video on different successful projects, like literacy campaign, pisciculture, agriforestry, environmental issues, etc. should be collected and services should be provided to the community people.

Information on local issues such as number of schools, teachers, students, NGOs, topics of interest, ponds, crops, communication systems, hospitals, physical infrastructure, important telephone numbers, etc. could be collected and displayed on board. Photographs and short life sketch could also be displayed of late local personalities. Important news (local, national and global) of the preceding week could be displayed on a board, regularly. Bi-monthly bulletins on development issues and on disasters could be brought and placed in places where people gather. Materials of CRC and other agencies could be exchanged in a coordinated way. Rural people could be familiarized with modern development trends; use of appropriate technology, high yielding varieties of seeds, environment-friendly project, sustainable development, etc. through RCRC. RCRC should have facilities for entertainment, social interaction, continuing education and support services from marketing to providing skills and inputs.

RCRC should have at least two staff, one female and one male. Staff should be provided training regularly to update their knowledge and skills. We believe at the end of the 20th century, we ought to utilise all means of communication to get optimum results. Educational television, radio and/or mobile audio-visual vans could be used to propagate and get people to participate in a mass literacy drive. If countries like Ethiopia, Sri Lanka or Vietnam can achieve up to 90 per cent literacy, why cannot we? Poverty should not be an excuse for our failures on other fronts. The author is Director, Community Development Library (CDL), Dhaka. The above observations and strategies were presented at the Regional Workshop on Formulating Effective Strategies for Promoting Reading in Rural Areas, organised by Asia Pacific Cultural Centre for Unesco (APCCU), Tokyo and National Book Centre, Dhaka held early this year.

and South-east Asia but to the whole world, this is an opportunity for me to use what expertise and experience I have to help Hong Kong's expanding world role. Kao expresses the sentiments of many other returning Asians academics: Asia is going places fast while the West seems stuck.

The pull of their homeland and culture and the desire to use their education and experience to make a difference draws them back. Similar considerations brought 1986 Nobel Prize winner in Chemistry Lee Yuan Tseh, 58, back to his native Taiwan to head the prestigious Academia Sinica, a collection of 21 research institutes, situated in an eastern suburb of Taipei.

Lee in Taiwan and Woo in Hong Kong both say they want to build their universities into world-class institutions. And for the first time, they are being given the funds by their governments to do so. Salaries and benefits for researchers rival those of the very best US universities, and increasingly so do the facilities.

Taiwan has become one of the richest places in the world and the IES has the newest generation facilities," said Kao Honn, who earned his doctorate in geology from the University of Illinois and is now at the Academia Sinica's Institute of Earth Sciences (IES). "It has also upgraded its computer equipment and is hooked up with most international networks," he told Taiwan's Free China Review. "There is no reason not to come back."

Academics are no longer cut off from the latest trends by being in Asia. Technological advances have made it easy to obtain data from all over, and the research environment has lived up as more overseas-trained academics return. Conferences of leading scholars are as likely to be held in Singapore as in Boston.

Kao Honn earned his doctorate in geology from the University of Illinois in the United States but then headed back to the Academia Sinica's Institute of Earth Sciences (IES). King Cheung of the HKUST's publicity department says there are more than 100 members of the university staff who have returned from the West. A significant number are mainland Chinese returning

The Great Brain Gain

by Yojana Sharma

Asia's Western-trained scientists and academics are heading home.

WOO Chia Wei could hardly speak a word of English when, at 17 he left Hong Kong more than three decades ago to study in the United States. He ended up publishing more than 120 papers and books on quantum physics, liquid crystals and low-temperature physics. He also became the first Chinese to head a major US university, San Francisco State.

But in 1988, Woo returned to Hong Kong to become founding vice-chancellor of the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology (HKUST) that saw its first students graduating last year. His aim is to turn HKUST into a centre of cutting-edge technology research.

"Hong Kong people have to realise that it is no longer sufficient just to borrow or buy technology from elsewhere. Hong Kong must take on a more nation-building mentality in the sense of being more creative on its own," said Woo, now in his 50s, in a recent interview.

It is often said Asia's tiger economies grew rich by copying Western technological innovations. But as more West-

ern-trained Asian scholars like Woo head home, it may soon be the West's turn to marvel at the East's technological supremacy.

While the United States is slashing funding on basic research, universities in Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore and South Korea are doing the exact opposite. These days, billions of dollars are being poured into science research in a bid to lure back the best brains who had left their homeland to further their scientific careers elsewhere. Charles Kao Kuen, for instance, has almost 30 patents to his name. The 1966 paper that lists Kao as the main author is the basic publication from which the theory and application of optical fibre technology for communications has developed.

But Kao left the pinnacle of the University of California at Berkeley for Hong Kong's Chinese University, founded in 1949 when academics fled the mainland following the rise of the communists. "It's a thrilling time to be in Hong Kong," says Kao. "Hong Kong is contributing in a very real way as a telecommunications hub not only for China

from the United States. In Hong Kong, they are less isolated from academic developments than they would be in China.

But pure science is not the only area where Asian countries are trying to lure back talent. Lee says his roping in of renowned anthropologist K C Chang from Harvard to become Academia Sinica's vice president is one of his big coups — and part of his plan to turn Sinica into a world recognised centre for South-east Asian studies within a decade.

In the past, local students of South-east Asian studies would often have to pursue their research in the United States where anthropology and linguistic departments had more expertise in these areas than the countries themselves. That is changing. Respected Harvard professor of anthropology David Wu now heads the anthropology department at Hong Kong's Chinese University, where academics say research in the field has suddenly "gone up in quality by several notches."

In the past, Asians came to us to learn about their own

people and cultures. But the tables have turned — we are now learning from them," said Harvard professor of anthropology Rober Levine on a recent visit to find out about research on Chinese societies being conducted here.

Anthropologists say it makes far more sense to be conducting research in their own backyards rather than from the 'remote ivory tower' of a US university. Often, say academics, the US slant may not necessarily be useful to the countries themselves.

This is particularly true in medical research. Cancer research in the United States does not address Taiwan's needs, says Jacqueline Whang Peng who served as section head of the US National Institute of Health's Cytogenetic Oncology section before joining Academia Sinica's Institute of Biomedical Sciences. Liver cancer is the most prevalent in Taiwan and China but much of US research focuses on lung and breast cancer. Says Whang: "We can't wait till US doctors find the most effective therapy for our patients. We have to do it for ourselves."



In the Teachers' College of the city of Pishin, Baluchistan province, women teacher trainees, one in a wheelchair, listen to their instructor. photo UNICEF

Breaking through tradition in Pakistan

by Barbara Weyermann

"It would seem that many myths have been propagated concerning primary education," says Denise Conway, a consultant for the UNICEF education programme in Quetta. "Often the failure of education policies and projects is blamed on the people's conservatism." Major constraints lie in the path of girls' education, however, the most serious being the lack of girls' schools and female teachers. Out of 7,800 primary schools in the province, fewer than 10 per cent are for girls, and only 15 per cent of the teachers are women. Parents are wary of entrusting their daughters to co-educational schools or male teachers in a society that still adheres to various forms of purdah to keep men and women segregated. To address these problems, the Primary Education Directorate, with the help of USAID and UNICEF, devised an innovative teacher training programme. Since 1990, the Mobile Female Teachers Training Units with Community Support has led to the opening of 360 new girls' schools and the re-activation of 150 government schools. The programme is simple. A female instructor provides a

three-month teacher training course to women with at least 10 to 12 years of schooling. Courses are conducted in small towns close to where the future teachers live to minimize their travel and nights away from home. After completing, the training the women open government-affiliated primary schools in their villages. At the Teacher's College in Pishin, an hour's drive north of Quetta, 10 women between the ages of 18 and 50 jot notes as an energetic trainer discusses how to manage students of different levels in one classroom. "Families now want their girls to understand the world," says trainee Najma Prabaz, wheelchair-bound because of polio, to explain the parents' new interest in educating their daughters. But how do the religious leaders, traditionally skeptical of education for women, view this trend? "Now the mullahs do not prohibit educating girls," says Zarmina Khanum, readjusting her chaddar over her greying hair. "And even if they do, it doesn't matter. One person cannot make a difference. People's attitudes towards education have been slowly

changing in the last 10 years." Without any training before the course in Pishin, Zarmina, a mother of nine, helped the teacher in her village to cope with the 90 children who cram into two classrooms in the government school. Economic factors have also pushed the cause of women's education in Pakistan. Most significant was the massive migration of workers to the Gulf states, which reached its peak in the early 1980s. With the men gone for long periods, women were suddenly left to take charge of the family, to deal with money orders and letters. The rising cost of basic commodities was another reason. It led many Pakistani women to give up purdah to take up jobs. "Finally people realized what it meant to be illiterate," says Anita Ghulam Ali, director of the Education Foundation of the provincial government of Sindh. "Indeed, the Government of Pakistan is finding it difficult to provide enough schools and teachers to meet this 'tidal wave' of demand for girls' education. Consequently, schools run by NGOs and private entrepreneurs have mushroomed. In Karachi, one third

of all schools are privately run, according to Anita Ghulam Ali, whose organization channels World Bank funds for private initiatives in primary education. Foreign donors such as UNICEF and the World Bank have long believed more money should go to primary education. They have advocated shifting funds from universities to primary schools on the grounds that only 37 per cent of Pakistani children complete four years of schooling. This compares unfavourably with poorer neighbours India and Bangladesh and is far below the world average of 68 per cent. In the view of these donor agencies, primary education is the foundation on which rests all development. Larry Summers, former chief economist of the World Bank, cites the case of Pakistan to argue that an investment of US \$40,000 to educate 1,000 girls would reduce infant mortality, female fertility and maternal mortality, saving US \$100,000. "Educating girls quite possibly yields a higher rate of return than any other investment available in the developing world," wrote Summers.

The Government of Pakistan seems to be listening. It recently launched the Social Action Programme targeted at improving services in primary education, health and population planning. It has earmarked a budget of US \$6 billion for the next five years, which it plans to secure mainly by reallocating funds from other sectors rather than by raising public expenditures. Foreign donors are slated to add US \$2 billion. Money alone, however, is not enough. For schooling to become sustainable, community participation is essential. That is why Baluchistan's Primary Education Directorate places so much importance on the village forming a Community Education Committee before a school is opened. The committee, made up of elected parents, selects the trainee for the three-month course and is in charge of running the school. Official recognition of the school is given only after close monitoring of the performance of the teacher and students, the support of parents and the quality of the school facility. Barbara Weyermann was formerly Consultant Information Officer for the UNICEF ROSA office in Kathmandu. She recently travelled to Pakistan.