

The Spirit of Liberation, and Education for the Poor

52M Children Risk Life and Limb to Earn a Living

WHEN one speaks of education in Bangladesh, or of literacy, one comes across an index of absence. In other words, one can see how the majority of our people have remained illiterate. The state of being illiterate marks an absence, as poverty itself is nothing but a series of absences coalescing or combining to constitute a form of reality, familiar enough. The relationship predicated upon the dynamics of absences is, what one can see somewhat dialectically: the poor are illiterate, and the illiterate are poor — two absences mutually activate and animate each other endlessly. Needless to mention, Bangladesh is still a land of increasing poverty, and therefore, a land of the lack of education and literacy. This cause-and-effect relationship can also be viewed conversely.



"Bangladesh is still a land of poverty, and therefore a land of the lack of education and literacy." — Photo UNICEF.

But, one of the underlying purposes of the Liberation War fought twenty-four years ago was to eliminate such absences which had long been inflicted upon the Bengalees by colonial rule. In fact, the very ideology of colonialism aims at keeping the colonized other illiterate and uneducated. British colonialism, for its own politico-cultural hegemony, resorted to the process of cultural and economic exploitation by keeping the masses largely uneducated. One may argue at this point that one of the consequences of British colonialism was that the Bengalee middle class came to have an active contact with Western secular education. True. But, then, one should also notice that the scope for such education was, in the first place, quantitatively extremely

limited — primarily confined to the middle class, and even more confined to the indigenous agents of colonialism. In fact, the British colonial rule provided an education policy which not only engendered class-discriminations, but also invoked a system, immensely mass-alienated in nature. In other words, the poor remained illiterate and uneducated as usual. Then, afterwards, the continuum of the ethos of British colonialism amply maintained by a neo-

colonial state like Pakistan further denied the poor of their minimum access to education. On the one hand, the whole Bengalee nation was exploited economically, politically, culturally; on the other, the poor inhabiting the eastern part of Pakistan were the worst victims to all possible absences one can imagine. Naturally access to education was marked by one of such absences. The rate of literacy, let alone comprehensive education, was then, firstly and simply, a digital nightmare kept alive by the anti-people education policy of Pakistan.

One should not forget that the first education convention which was held soon after the partition of India in 1947 was nothing but an attempt to reinforce the British colonial education system itself. The second education convention held in 1951 was no more than a farce in that it did not bring about even a single minor change in the former education policy which, by then, had made a fetish of alienation, from the masses. Later on, the Sharif Commission in 1959, the Justice Hamidur Rahman Commission in 1966, and the Noor Khan Commission in 1969 — all simply failed to add any new dimension to the education policy of Pakistan; they rather strengthened and consolidated the former; colonial-type education policy, and encouraged a cancerous discrimination in education through crystallizing a hitherto-existing divide between madrasa education and general education (the budget for madrasa education was

two-hundred fold higher than the budget for general education). These commissions also emphasized the establishment of inordinately expensive residential schools and cadet colleges, aiming at creating an elite class in Pakistan, and thereby, losing sight of educational resources and facilities for the poor.

True, education for the poor was one of the vital issues amply politicised by the middle-class leaders during those turbulent days of the Liberation Movement. Many of the election manifestoes and pre-election speeches did not fail to zero in on the issue of people-centred education imbued with the spirit and ethos of democracy. Bangladesh achieved independence following a historic struggle of epic-proportions. But, soon, it was realized that education for the poor remained a distant possibility, at best a rhetorical stratagem! The Kudrat Education Commission of 1974, for example, was nothing but a dream-breaking exercise, for it could achieve neither secularization nor decolonization of the national education policy in Bangladesh.

Since 1975, various policies and commissions dictated by the successive military governments — one may be reminded here of the notorious Majid Education Policy in 1983 which encouraged communalization and medievalization of education instead of its modernization and secularization; and also of the Mafez Education Commission in 1987 — only enhanced the process of alienating the poor from the

sphere of education. One just needs to take a look at the level of poverty corresponding to the level of literacy in the country. The emphasis on madrasa education has increased on the one hand, and on the other, education has increasingly turned out to be a prerogative of the upper and middle classes. Also, one cannot but notice that in numerous instances, the curricula, the syllabi, and the system have drawn upon



"There is no option other than waging another war... in favour of a democratic, secular, people-oriented education which dissolves class and social discriminations." — Photo UNICEF.

communal angles through accommodating such reading materials that tend to dehistoricize a student's perspective and sensibility. Today, I would strongly say, not only the poor have been denied of access to education as usual, but, also, numerous children have been suffering from a lack of modern and secular education — from a lack of a sense of history! One only needs to review reading materials taught at many of the kindergartens in our towns and cities, and one can, thus, see how children are being dissociated from their own history. Understandably, kindergartens and English-medium schools are not meant for the poor; they are, in fact, 'madrasas' meant for the rich. On the other hand, 'madrasas' proper only provide inadequate, non-modern, non-scientific education to the poor. Thus, the whole education scenario in the country appears to be more disquieting than otherwise, and is also indicative of an absence — an absence of the spirit of liberation.

Indeed, today, there is no option other than waging yet another war with the aim of decolonizing our education policy and system in favour of a democratic, secular, people-oriented education which dissolves class and social discriminations of all shapes and shades. No doubt, without this kind of education, a country is never likely to develop and release its latent human energies, potentials, capabilities and creative elan so as to achieve development and freedom at all levels.

Child labour has grown to monstrous proportions and is now a major concern of the world community

"IN every child who is born, under no matter what circumstances, and of no matter what parents, the potentiality of human race is born again."

For Pulitzer prize-winning author James Agee, human-kind owes to the children the best it has to give. Children, 12 years old and below, constitute some 1.1 billion, or 20 per cent of the now 5.5 billion world population.

These children should be going to the school, if not playing. But such is not the case in many parts of the world where child labour is practised. Child labour is the employment of children below 15 years of age in industrial undertakings where they are not under direct parental control and supervision and which impairs their schooling.

In recent years, child labour has grown to monstrous proportions.

national jobs such as carpet weaving, wood carving and quarrying. Others are in hazardous industries such as match factories.

"(Child labour) exists because of poverty, environmental degradation, migration, armed conflict, overpopulation and other problems," said Nick Arcilla, spokesman for the London-based Save the Children Foundation.

Child labour is not only common in developing nations but even in industrialized countries. American actress Jodie Foster and Brooke Shields worked when they were still kids to support their mothers.

Even Austrian composer Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart was the breadwinner of the family when he was only six. British labour leader James Keir Hardie was 10 when he worked in the mines. American actor Charles Bronson was

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also working in the mines as a child.

In a document, the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) expressed the view that child labour may never cease entirely because of its links to family businesses. However, it urged governments to eliminate abuses by continuing to increase awareness of them through education campaigns and by enforcing legal proscriptions.

ESCAP pointed out that finding productive employment is a major difficulty for many young people, who increasingly seek wage employment rather than work in a family enterprise.

Governments, the UN agency added, should ensure the availability of (formal and informal) vocational training for youth to maximize their opportunities to enter or re-enter employment.

Rev Seelan reported that around 100 million Indian children are working in tradi-

—Depthnews Asia

Is there a Connection between Women's Education and Breakdown of Families?

THE recent two day national seminar on motherhood emphasized the generally accepted notion that an education mother is the cornerstone of a developed society. That meaningful development cannot take place without education of women is now widely, though not universally, recognized. It seems, unfortunately, that there still exist some dissenting voices who appeal to the preservation of cultural values to express their doubts about the desirability of women's education.

Recently Daily Star and Bangladesh Observer editorials articulated such arguments. They reasoned that educating women may ultimately lead to a break down of traditional family values. Education prepares women to be wage earners which in turn makes them devote less time to being wives and mothers, thus endangering the stability of the family and through it the society.

The Assumptions
Underlying this argument are two premises. First, the only effect of education is to make women wage earners. This makes sense, a priori, because education increases productivity and, as a result, the expected wage, should they choose to enter the labour market, rises. This implies that the opportunity cost of working inside the home is higher. Consequently, we can expect that women with higher education will indeed enter the labour force in greater numbers.

Second, once women start sharing the "bread winner" role, the entire fabric of the traditional society will fall apart. In the United States, most often cited as the country where the family is a decaying institution, this certainly appears to be the case on the surface. Women's participation in the labour market has been paralleled by an increasing number of divorces. Correlation, of course, does not imply the direction of causation. No doubt, there have been other forces at work. Nonetheless, it can be argued that there is a causality between a rise in the wage earning power of women and a greater number of divorces.

Spillover Benefits of Educated Women
As to the first premise, it is certainly not the case that the only, or even the most important, effect of educating women is to enable them to be wage earners. Education of women has spillover benefits independent of the higher wages which could be earned if they choose to work outside the home.

Empirical studies show that education, particularly primary education, actually enables women to be better wives and mothers by teaching principles of hygiene and health care, and enabling them to assist their own children with education. Women perform a broad range of activities which directly and indirectly influence the health of household members. They manage household chores, process foods and prepare meals, feed and care for young

children, and look after the elderly and sick. These will be better served if they know and understand the value of these services and provide them more efficiently.

Failure to educate women will inevitably give us a labour force raised by mothers with a poor sense of health and who are likely to have poor health themselves. The possibility of our labour force being prone to diseases and even exposed to potential early death is very real in this situation. Education of women has a higher social return, from the viewpoint of developing a future labour force than educating men. According to the World Development Report, 1993, data for 13 African countries over the period 1975-85 show that a 10 per cent increase in female literacy rates reduced child mortality by 10 per cent. A similar change in male literacy had very little influence.

Preservation of the Family
There is a fundamental problem with the second premise. It assumes that only women are responsible for the preservation of the family. Historically, this has indeed been the case. But the traditional division of labour which exists in the family is more of a function of women's traditional lack of opportunities outside the home than anything inherent in the male-female relationship itself. Ignoring, for the sake of argument, equity concerns, what is the justification for assuming that this historically given division of labour is economically efficient?

The justification goes something like this. First, one proves that, given the cost of hiring alternative child care and domestic work, the income paid out exceeds the income brought in from outside work for all but the most highly educated women. It is in fact the case then that it is really saying that while it is "economically efficient" for women to stay at home, education makes them choose outside work because it develops in them a taste for nonfinancial satisfaction, such as psychological or intellectual fulfillment, from working outside. We are no longer talking only economics. The issue is, don't women have a right to make such choices?

Also, a woman's interest in raising the family is seen as inseparable from choosing to work at home. If women do not devote themselves full time to home, husband, and child care then they must be completely uninterested in the family. One only has to apply this argument to men to see how absurd it is. Can we say that men are completely uninterested in family life because they choose to work outside, not only the home, but, as many wives of Bangladeshi workers abroad can testify, also the country? Besides, that most working women work a 'double shift' is well docu-

mented in general, outside work does not lead to any major reduction in women's household duties.

Educated Women and Marital Stability
Faced with objections of the sort discussed above, the critics of women's education take a different route to make their point. They argue that the ability to earn gives women a choice about whether or not to remain in an unsatisfactory



marriage. Financially dependent women cannot afford to divorce their husbands even in the case of extreme abuse. If marital success is judged on the basis of divorce rates, there is no doubt that traditional societies have a higher proportion of "successful" marriages than other less traditional societies.

But why should we treat staying married as the only criterion of marital success? Other, admittedly hard to quantify dimensions such as open communication between the partners, the time spent together, and equal participation of both partners in family decision-making processes are no less important for marital success.

What is a Successful Marriage?

Education of women in non-traditional societies has produced a redefinition of the concept of marriage. A marriage between unequal partners is a qualitatively different proposition than a marriage between two independent equals who choose freely and spontaneously to work for a sustainable relationship, believing that the benefits from such a relationship are greater than its costs.

power of marriage itself indicates nothing about its success. A mutually incompatible couple can stay married forever, for such a couple, divorce provides a healthy escape from a relationship that is not working. In traditional societies men have always monopolized this privilege. Financial independence gives women an option men have always had.

Note that it is the ability to be financially independent



often been defined in terms of members' role in performing specific duties. These duties are also classified according to gender. While such classification may simplify the problems of division of labour in complex household operations, defining rigid social rules denies members opportunities of sharing pleasure from duties performed by members of opposite genders. Thus, as women miss out on the pleasure of participating in household financial decisions, men also miss out from becoming a part of their children's growing up and sharing their children's dreams.

Which of these two lifestyles we choose as a society is a matter of value judgments made by individuals. Denying women access to education is equivalent to denying them the right to choose their own lifestyles.

It is indeed sad that while we are preparing to enter the twenty-first century, we are still debating what women deserve or do not deserve. Even when phrasing the question, "Should women be educated?", we are assuming that the decision does not lie with women themselves. This is as if education of women is a process which is being done to them rather than by them.

rate is unquestionably lower. That essentially is a price they choose to pay for a higher probability of qualitative success. Both partners play a variety of roles inside and outside the home. Such flexibility in role allocation is made possible by providing women with the same access to education as men.

A Question of Gender Equality
Traditional society has very



Denying our women equal access to education amounts to throwing away a valuable human resource that could help us take maximum advantage of the economic opportunities opened up by the globalization process. We simply cannot afford it. We need to pull all our resources together to lift our staggering economies on to a higher stage of development. Finally, and most importantly, setting aside economic affordability, is the principle of universal and nongender specific access to basic rights. These rights are upheld by all of our cultural, social, and most of all religious values. Those who attempt to hold back women by appealing to preservation of traditional cultural values not only are misguided in their application of economic principles, but also doing a disservice to our rich cultural, social, and religious heritage.

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National Workshop on Women and Literacy in Bangladesh

The Association of Development Agencies in Bangladesh (ADAB) will be hosting a three-day National Workshop on Women and Literacy in Bangladesh from March 29-31.

The Inaugural Session will be held at the WVA auditorium, beginning at 2.30 pm on Wednesday, with an address of welcome from Ms Rasheda K Choudhury, Director of ADAB. Other participants will include Ms Carol M Anonuevo of the UNESCO Institute for Education (UIE), Hamburg and Md Irshadul Haq, Secretary, Ministry of Education.

The Workshop comprises four working sessions, to be held at a city hotel, which will discuss the History of Literacy Efforts and Policy of Women's Literacy. Development of

Methods Used and Presentation of Instructional Materials/Content of Literacy Programme and Problems Faced and Issues on the Theory and Practice of Women's Literacy in the Country.

Discussions at the Workshop will include representatives from CAMPE (Campaign for Popular Education), Dhaka University, FIVDB (Friends in Village Development, Bangladesh), Women for Women, UNDP, and the Government's Primary and Mass Education Division and Integrated Non-Formal Education Programme.

The final working session will attempt to formulate a Plan of Action, and the Presentation and Adoption of Recommendations will take place at 2.30 pm, Friday, March 31.

The Institute of development and Environmental Studies, at North South University, is now holding a regular bi-monthly seminar series.

The first seminar, on "Housing the Poor in South Africa", was held in the main NSU campus. Dr Junaid K Ahmad, founder-member of NSU Board of Governors and now an economist at the World Bank Headquarters, Washington DC, gave the presentation. The President of NSU, the Head of the Infrastructure Unit, World Bank Resident Mission, members of NSU faculty, invited guests and NSU students attended the seminar.

A four-part series on the Financial sector Reform Project is also currently taking place at IDES, of special importance to students studying finance. The first paper was presented by Mr Forrest E Cookson, Chairperson of the FSRP, who gave an overview. The second speaker, Mr Terry

Bradigan, spoke on nationalised commercial banks. The third presentation will be held today at 3pm where Mr Aminul Choudhury Haque will speak on the origins of the FRSP. The final speaker, Mr James Piskos, will discuss bank supervision, April 6, 3pm.

IDES is also sponsoring a Reader's Club, which encourages the discussion of non-technical economic writings on economic philosophy and history, and a monthly video series - the first film shown was a documentary on various environmental concerns. "In Partnership with the Earth", the second film to be shown, on April 1, is titled "Beyond Business as Usual: Meeting the Challenge of Hazardous Waste", and may be of particular interest to students of Environmental Studies.