

A History of Literacy Efforts for Women

It is a tragic reality that as we approach the twenty first century, we are aware that the basic issues of poverty illiteracy, gender inequality still remain unresolved.

Bangladesh ranks 115th out of 131 countries in its literacy status where only one third of the population over 15 are able to read or write. Of rural women 85 per cent are illiterate but in a functional sense most rural female literates are also illiterates.

The global situation of women's illiteracy also commands a matter of grave concern. The majority of global illiterates (about three fourths) belong to women. Between 1970 and '85, statistics have shown that various interventions in many countries have reduced male illiteracy from 24.7 million to 23.3 million, but in contrast, the number of adult female illiterates has risen from 390 million to 418 million.

It is unfortunate that despite two centuries' of educational efforts and investment in our past, the entire population still stands to be only marginally literate (overall 24.6 per cent, men 30.2 per cent and women 19.2 per cent ... BSS 1991, P 185).

It is also noteworthy that in Bangladesh (previously Bengal) female literacy was only 1 per cent in the 1911 census, and has always been halfway behind male literacy. With a male:female ratio of 109:100, for every 250 male literates there are only 100 female literates aged 5 and above.

A historical analysis on literacy may be seen to reveal the nature and extent of gender biased, rural-urban gaps in literacy. Although, lack of consistent, reliable and accurate data, with incomparable parameters or preconceived notions have been major impediments for a correct situational assessment of literacy, the generation of materials and institutional agencies for collecting these has been a more recent development.

The inter censal comparison of literacy reveals some historical trends and depicts

the facts that despite efforts, illiteracy among females in Bangladesh has been appallingly high. It shows that it took females about 70 years (upto 1974) to catch up with the male literacy rate in 1911.

Recent Developments in Girls Primary School Education

Data available shows that despite efforts, rural-urban imbalance persists and overall drop-out rate in various grades is still appallingly high. The impressive improvement in girls' enrollment as high as 75 per cent or more as claimed by some, has no scope for optimism. High rate of drop out and attrition certainly claims a thorough enquiry and reconsideration. It has also to be understood that UPE cannot occur in a quantum jump. If female drop out and attrition rate can not be arrested, "Education for all" is a far cry.

Most analysts view the major impediment towards girls' education as abject poverty, but in fact it is patriarchy, its ideology predominating all decisions to prioritize boys over girls in familial, social and even the national sector. This attitude is perceivable and cuts across all economic strata.



Adult Illiteracy and Non-Formal Education

Adult illiteracy has been found to be both a cause and effect of high ratio of drop out and out of school population, specially the girl children, if the mother is illiterate.

Therefore adult literacy programmes must be properly evaluated and linkage promoted to arrest the problem successfully. The huge number of out-of-school population, neo-literates (the literates who in the absence of a follow-up programme soon relapse into illiteracy) can be addressed through such programmes where the existing bureaucratic education system fails to do so.

Illiteracy, specially adult illiteracy can be addressed and arrested through non-formal education. It is not really a new concept. It is neither formal education following the formal system of schooling, nor is it that informal not to have any systematic education curricula. Non-formal education projects have successfully absorbed many out of school children and also their mothers through various imaginative methods. As explained it is not a part of the three tier formal educa-

tion system leading to degrees. Though not really structured it follows a systematic, organized but less rigid, more flexible curricula and learning time. As formal schooling has proved to be a mismatch for the rural, population, such a system of non-formal education is more related to practices like apprenticeship, on the job training, extension services, health, sanitation, vocational training, leadership training and social education.

The increasing importance of universal literacy and education leads to the increasing importance of non-formal education. It is assigned this importance and stems through the search for a better option and alternative for those who drop out of the formal system.

Conclusion

Considering women as a vital force, it is to appropriate consider women's literacy and education vis-a-vis the total development matrix, the entire dynamics of development. The linkages between women's basic education and literacy must be established. The past non-performance for alleviation and eradication of adult illiteracy, the out of school population and the social cost of excluding women from the developmental matrices must be calculated. Its negative impact need to be quantified.

How women's illiteracy impedes development, threatens survival through demographic distortions and wastage of valuable national resources must be understood. Without women's participation, "Education for all", "Health for All", EPI, becomes meaningless rhetoric. We should understand that half of civilization is at stake when women are overlooked, bypassed and exploited.

Like most sectors in Bangladesh, education suffers from lack of insight and future guidelines. Firm conviction, political commitment and judiciousness is necessary from top administration and policy makers, down to the imple-

mentors. Vision should evolve into a revolution, participated by people, the Government.

NGOs, national and international networking.

We have already lost time, effort and resources. Further delay would be of tremendously cost, which the nation

can hardly bear. We certainly need aid, but it must be matched by our own efforts. Our efforts should be based on national goals, needs and aspirations with set priorities.

Extracts from a paper presented at the national Workshop on Women and Literacy, organised by ADAB and UNESCO Institute for Education, 29-31 March, 1995

Literacy and Primary Education: A Historical Retrospect

HISTORICALLY literacy efforts in the sub-continent can primarily be traced through the history of primary education. Primary or basic education, started in the sub-continent during the pre-colonial period, was affiliated with Makhtabs, Mosques and Temples and had no formal structure for either literacy or education.

The British Period: 1854-1947

Primary education began with the Woods despatch, during the East Indian company in 1854, which recommended formal primary education, and also propagated mass education which emerged as a new concept. However, it remained unimplemented due to lack of adequate funding.

The Indian Education Commission 1882 recommended life oriented primary education with basic subjects (like literacy, numeracy natural, agricultural, physical science and accounts) in vernacular. Elasticity in school timing, suited to the agricultural or cultivation programmes was also considered. But these indigenous schools, due to the lack of official support soon became extinct.

The Primary Education Act 1919 under Lord Curzon and **Bengal Rural Education Act 1930** led to a rapid expansion of primary education.

In 1929 **The Hartog Commission** observed that despite significant expansion in the number of primary schools no commensurate increase took place in literacy. Taking India as a whole only 6.29 per cent enrolled in class I, could complete class V. Ascribing a huge wastage of resources to poverty, illiteracy and conservatism of parents, lack of willingness for financial

sacrifices for education of girls. The Hartog Commission recommended a policy of consolidation of a minimum 4-year primary education and also recommended government's greater involvement.

The Sargent Report 1944 provided a comprehensive national plan to implement universal free compulsory education for all children. But no special mention or provision for education was made for girl children.

The Pakistan Period

The first National Conference on Education, held in 1947, adopted the objective of universal free primary education for 6-11 year-olds, which was also a major declared goal of the First 5 year plan (1955-'60). In the 2nd 5-year plan, as well as the Education Commission recommended the 5-year primary course, and universal compulsory primary education for 8 years, to be implemented within the next 15 years.

The Education Committee 1957 also recommended universal compulsory free primary education. The 3rd 5-year plan of Pakistan laid stress on the achievement of universal primary education within the prospective plan period, and increasing total primary school enrollment from 45 per cent in 1965 to 70 per cent in 1970.

The Commission on Students Welfare in 1966 recommended implementation of universal compulsory primary education within 10 years.

Despite all good efforts and intentions, a close scrutiny exposes the fact that primary education did not enjoy the priority for implementation it deserved in any of the three-5 years plans during Pakistan period.

The Bangladesh Period (post-Liberation period since 1971)

Bangladesh inherited the legacy of non-committal non-implementation. Primary education was still neither compulsory nor free. After liberation in 1971, the new Government nationalized the majority of primary schools and took over their management. Primary education, it was thought was a constitutional obligation. Article 17 proclaims for establishing a uniform, mass oriented universal system of education and extending free compulsory primary education to all children to such a stage as may be determined by law.

In spite of the growing demand for universal primary education, necessary steps for providing it was lacking.

Bangladesh Sikkhya Commission, appointed in 1972 for evolving a "new educational policy", recommended universal primary education and education up to class VIII - the existing five year primary schooling to be made compulsory by 1980, and eight years free compulsory schooling to be implemented by 1983. It also recommended appointment of sufficient female teachers in primary schools and also setting up separate girls' school to attract more girls. The Commission also recommended work oriented syllabi and emphasized a practical educational system.

The First 5-year plan of Bangladesh (1978), for the first time, exhaustively identified issues related to primary education; and an increased trend in enrollment was perceptible although there was high drop out ratios specially at the primary level.

Although it had a pragmatic outlook, it seemed over ambi-

tious and could not be implemented.

1978: Under the sponsorship of the Planning Commission the erstwhile Foundation for Research and Human Resource Development undertook a nationwide survey of the situation of primary education and technical education and their capacity utilization. It revealed the gross under utilization of the existing physical and teacher capacity. It also revealed that about 80 per cent of the primary school children dropped out before they reached final year.

1979: A landmark with the appointment of a National Education Advisory Council and the declaration of an Interim Education Policy which resolved to make primary education universal, free and compulsory by 1983.

Between the mid '70s-'80s a number of studies and conferences pointed to the utter neglect of primary education and dysfunctionality of education at all levels. Primary education received only 20 per cent of total education allocations, 20 per cent of which was actually utilized.

1980-82: Launching of UPE
The Second 5-year plan set guidelines to launch UPE and set legal and institutional measures to introduce and attain UPE by 1990 and also subscribed non-formal education and recommended a separate directorate for primary education. For the first time 45 per cent of the educational allocations were earmarked for primary education.

The 4th 5-year plan (1990-95) made primary education compulsory by law. For the first time it recommended affirmative intervention for encouraging poor households to send their girls to school and made education for girls of rural areas free up to class VIII.

Community Participation in Primary Education:

The Case of Patiya, Chittagong

by Md Abdul Quddus
and Masuda A Chowdhury

more physical facilities, supplying educational equipment and organising co-curricular activities.

A brief discussion on Shashanka Mala government primary school is presented here as a model case.

Background Shashanka Mala primary school was established in 1935 as a private school. At that time it was a hut of mud-walls with a tin roof.

School, students, teachers
The original school building was demolished and shifted a few yards north because a girls high school was started in the same compound. During the year 1964-65, local people collected taka ten thousand from donations given by the community. They further extended the floor space by adding a moderately larger room. In 1973 with other primary schools of the country, the government nationalised this school too, and for the first time in 1984 a government grant of Tk 200,000 was received. The school building was further extended. Later, Upazila Parishad also helped the school in reconstructing a room with pucca roof. Presently, the school sits in 6 big rooms. The rooms are divided into 15 different sections by arranging hard board walls.

The school sits in two shifts. About 1400 students attend the school. There are 17 teachers, of whom 11 are female. According to the 1993 survey the total number of children aged between 5 and 10 were 365 in the cluster area of the school. Out of 365 only 35 children did not attend the school and they belong to floating group of population who live within Patiya municipality. The rest of the students came from outside the cluster area.

Academic Performance and Co-curricular Activities

According to the thana education officer Mr. Enamul Hoque, Shashanka Mala is one of the two best performing schools of Patiya. The other one is Mohsenia Govt. Primary School, situated within one mile of Shashanka Mala. The schools maintain honour boards with the names of students who were awarded primary scholarships since 1965.

The record shows that both schools received primary scholarships every year from 1965 to 1993 without any break.

Side by side, with the high academic records, (Shashanka Mala) also scored very high in the performance of co-curricular activities. The school maintains one Cub-Scout Troop for boys and one Yellow Bird Troop for girls. The school is also well equipped to run music drawing, sewing, art and craft classes as well as various indoor and outdoor games. Two girls students qualified for national and divisional level drawing and musical competitions.

The school hardly has enough space for a garden. Even so within the limited space available, the garden they have created is commendable. The tubewell and latrine facilities are also seen to be in good condition. Officials from thana health complex and Public Health Engineering Department regularly attend sessions on health education.

Management Situation

The former Head Master of the school appears to be very efficient and an able administrator, as well as mobiliser. During his tenure most of the present management systems were developed, and he was instrumental in mobilising resources. The thana officials regularly visit the school which motivates the school to improve the situation.

The SMC, PTA and Student Brigades were seen to be active. The guardians are concerned about every aspect of the school.

The school installed a telephone set and connected every classroom with electricity. There are fans in three of the rooms for which school pays Taka 7,000 every year as bills. The committee appointed one orderly-peon and a night guard and paid about Taka 10,000 for their combined salaries in the last year. Last year committee also supplied 40 sets of benches, and spent Taka 22,000 for developing the premises from their own funds. In 1993 alone the school spent a total amount of about Taka 93,000 in 14 different activities and the whole of the amount was collected locally.

The Chairman of the SMC

Mr. Jalaluddin Ahmed is a journalist and the Chairman of the PTA is a practicing lawyer in the local court. They are keen on developing the school to the best of their ability. Shajada Amiree, the former head teacher is a central leader of the Primary School Teachers' Association. The prestige and influence of many of the local leaders is very much connected with the prestige of this school. As a result, the local elites need the school more than the school needs them.

As it has been said earlier, two schools (Shashanka Mala and Mohsenia) compete with one another in all the aspects. It has become the convention that the teachers, SMC and PTA of both the schools compete for their best performances.

The SMC of the Shashanka Mala is preparing a plan to celebrate the 60 years of the establishment of the school in 1995. While celebrating the occasion they have a plan to raise funds for constructing a multi-storied building for the school.

The location of the school, and its continuous improvements in facilities and performance, attract students as well as local elites to associate themselves with activities of the school. The attachment with an educational institution in Patiya adds to the prestige of the local rich.

Thana education officer reported that there are 20 more schools in Patiya where local people took the initiatives for constructing new rooms, supply of furniture, connection of electricity, and he also reported that SMCs of at least fifty per cent of the primary schools of Patiya thana are very active in the management of the schools.

In conclusion, it may be said that in a semi-urban setting, Shashanka Mala is an extremely good school in many respects. This school has been able to create its own tradition which in turn has become its own guiding force. Innovation may not be very widespread but, as a success story, it may help others to build their own tradition of community involvement in primary schooling.

The authors are respectively Director and Deputy Director of BARD, Comilla. The study was sponsored by UNICEF, Chittagong Division.

China's experimental classes nurture students with great potential in the sciences

WHILE Chinese athletes astonish the world with their superb performances in sports events, China's teenagers have also been making sweeping victories - albeit much more quietly - in other forms of competition.

Young Chinese talents have won several medals in scholarly competitions, specifically mathematics, physics, chemistry and informatics. From China's first participation in international scholastic olympics in 1985 up to 1992, its middle school students have won a total of 61 golds, 30 silvers and 20 bronzes.

The main contributors to China's participants in scholastic olympiads, especially in mathematics, are the experimental classes in some top middle schools in Beijing, and nationwide local olympic schools, says Professor Wang Yuan, a research fellow with the Chinese Academy of Sciences.

Established in 1988, experimental classes aim to nurture students with great potential in sciences, and to train them for international scholastic olympics.

Students from all over the country must take two examinations, which are sponsored by the State Education Commission and the Chinese Association of Science and Technology, to be admitted into the four experimental classes for one-and-a-half year's study. On finishing their 18-month studies, all will be admitted to universities without taking college entrance examinations, says Gu Shouyuan, head teacher of class 1991.

"Most of the students are not natives of Beijing, and left home for the first time in their lives," Gu says. "They often felt homesick at the beginning, and generally they were incompetent in handling their daily lives, so we taught them things such as how to make beds and wash clothes. We also had to make sure they washed themselves regularly. But they soon got accustomed to boarding-school life."

by Xu Xiaoting & Zhou Meiyue

The special classes curricula differ little from others except that they have eight to nine class hours in mathematics a week, one to two more than ordinary students. Also all their class hours are in the morning, while the afternoon is devoted to tutorials, exercises and lectures given by college professors and experts on math competitions.

Infinitesimal calculus, polynomial theory, vector and geometry, probability, and elementary number theory - subjects usually taught in uni-

versities - make up the mathematics courses here.

Most of the students and participants in scholastic olympiads are boys. Among the 24 students who have represented China in the chemistry olympiad, only two are girls, says Prof Cheng Tiejing of Beijing Medical Sciences University. Associate Prof Shu Yousheng says there have been no girl students in the physics teams.

He lists two reasons: first, there is the difference between man's and woman's in-born inclinations. Women are

problems exist for the experimental classes. The classes are mainly financed by the government. The State Education Commission appropriated 30,000 yuan (US\$5,660) to one class, while the school had to provide more than 10,000 yuan (US \$1,886.8).

One concern is that students pay too much attention to contest skills while neglecting basic theories. Deputy principal Zhang Jinzhai points out that majority of students graduating from the Experimental Middle School's math class give mediocre performances in college. But Prof Shu Yousheng denies this problem exists in the physics class. "We take pains to make sure our students command a solid knowledge of basic theories. Therefore most of them excel in college."

Changes are being considered to further improve the experimental classes. Some suggest classes be extended to three years to give students a more systematic education in science as well as in other subjects.

In the local olympic schools, students receive one-and-a-half hours extra instructions in sciences every Sunday. Every October, a national contest selects 80 to 100 students from all the schools concerned for the mathematics winter camp. About 20 are then selected to comprise the training team. Finally, the top six students are chosen to represent China in the International Mathematics Olympiad. Candidates for the physics, chemistry and informatics teams are selected likewise.

"We do not set marks alone in the selection," says Prof Cheng Tiejing. The qualities looked for include creativity, experimental skills and temperament.

Despite the accomplishments of China's students in international scholastic competitions, many believe the country's education as a whole leave much room for improvement.

State Education Commission figures show that in 1991 2.084 million, or 2.1 per cent, of school age children did not enrol in primary schools, while 4.1 million, or 22.3 per cent, of primary school graduates did not enter middle schools. Also 1.94 million, or 1.6 per cent of primary school pupils dropped out of school in the same year.

