


# Alternatives

In collaboration with  centre for alternatives

## A Wake-up Call

From the *Alternatives* desk

Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge? Where is the knowledge we have lost in information? — T.S. Eliot

"Lekha para kare je gari ghora chare shae" — the materialistic application of this widely used proverb continues to depict the basic motivation of our middle and upper middle classes behind educating their children. As the proverb implies, education is essentially a means of attaining social recognition about one's social status and that status is again conditional upon having certain types of job opportunities. Such pattern of education obviously involves large-scale commercialization of the whole process and thereby possibly distances the students from creative ventures and social awareness, which no doubt should have been the ultimate goal of education. Unfortunately, the latter perspective is often ignored as utopian and old fashioned.

Today a student has ceased to enjoy studies. Beginning from the process of admission of a student in a school to his/her results in each and every level, there is a tremendous pressure of competition and tension. A common subject of newspaper photographs these days is the anxious and often nervous faces of the parents standing outside the school gates, eagerly waiting for the admission test or other exam results of their children. In fact the competition is no longer confined to the students alone. The parents are simply going crazy to find a seat for their kids in a good school and afterwards for securing better results for the kid. This trend definitely indicates the preponderance of Social Darwinism in our educational system and in our society as a whole. Needless to say that the consequences of this pressure is indeed negative. Some of them are trying to be the 'fittest' by disposing their humane values and are prepared to use their education for realizing any narrow selfish ends. While others simply loose their confidence and end up being 'unfit'. The parents are remain frustrated. The consequent psychological pressure upon the student makes him or her more vulnerable and prone to various anti-social activities like drug addiction or 'mastani'. Questions can be raised whether, the education system should be reconstructed in terms of going beyond the Social Darwinism based value structure and attempts be made to establish 'humane space' to ease down the pressure upon the students. It may be noted that in Japan, the affect of fierce competition in the educational institutes has led to the increase in the rate of suicide among the students. The overwhelming pressure upon the students to perform in front of their parents, teachers and in fact in front of the whole society is also reducing their capability to think and be creative in their approach. Thus, we are ending up producing a future generation, a section of which, may be capable of securing well-paid jobs but not providing any creative inputs in terms of development of the society and emancipation of its people.

Another critical fallout of such bitter competition has been the overwhelming commercialization of the education sector. During the last one-decade or so, the growth of private coaching centres and private teaching have been phenomenal. This perhaps is the single most critical factor for the deterioration in our standard of education. Though much criticized, any substantial effort is yet to be taken to come out of this vicious circle. In fact over the years, the number of private tutors employed for a student has turned into a status symbol for many families. The culture of private coaching has in essence turned our education system into a 'note system' wherein the students are becoming totally dependent on 'notes and suggestions' provided by the teachers. It also forces the students to give up all their leisure time as this is spent to commute from the house of one tutor to another. The consequence is obviously stifled initiatives and creativity.

Secondly, questions may be raised about the relevance of the topics taught in different schools and colleges. The curricula is indeed quite out of tune with the realities of life. Unfortunately, except for the effort by Tagore to develop an alternative approach, we have been reproducing the same kind of education for generations. Little attention has been given to the need of developing a life centric curricula. There is hardly any school where social norms like abiding the traffic rules or consciousness raising programmes are undertaken as part of the academic curricula. The West, whose model we essentially follow to become 'modern' in fact duly acknowledges such issues in the education curricula and thus side by side with career centric education is also trying to develop a sense of social responsibilities and awareness about basic social norms among the students. It indeed would not take much efforts on the part of our planners to make the curricula more effective. Community and voluntary work during vacations should be made a compulsory part of the curricula. This indeed would sensitize the students to their surroundings and would imbibe in them the values of dignity of labour — a value — I must say we are loosing fast.

**It is time we wake up and liberate our minds from the shackles of convention. Let us think, let us innovate and let us all dream together. It is time we attack the enemy within us.**



Waiting for wards — typical of urban preparatory schools.

— Star photo

## School Curriculum Tutoring for Life or Exams?

by Lailufar Yasmin

*How do you prepare your daily studies? The common answer was, "our house tutor, of course". It has become a must to have at least one house tutor for the students to help in their studies. Among the twelve students, only one did not have any tutor, as her mother is a teacher of a school in the city.*

**H**UMAN interest to search for knowledge and truth has led to the institutionalisation of accumulated facts, understandings and beliefs. The primary purpose of education is to search for truth and enable people to think. The present reality of our time however, has transformed the original objective of education and more or less has turned it as a means to pass in exams and ensure employment.

This write up is based on a review of the curriculum of the government schools and detailed conversation with twelve students studying at the eighth

and ninth grade. The purpose was to explore their thoughts and understandings about education and social issues. I went to the students with the following set of questions:

### Why Do You Study?

The first question asked to the students was "why do you study" and "what is the purpose of education". The question seemed very amazing to some of the students. Six students simply answered that this is the system that one has to comply with, this is what our parents and the society has imposed on us from the time when we had no consciousness of our own.

Having received this answer, the next question was—do you really enjoy or just have taken studies as a part of life and therefore continuing with it? Two of them this time answered more seriously and mentioned that they want to be "something" in life, though they could not explain what this "something" is but identified it as the reason behind continuing their studies.

One of the interviewees studying in ninth grade stated in a light mood, "I used to study out of the pressure from my parents but these days I find real interest in studies, therefore I study". Two of the students however regretted their present state of dependency for financial purposes upon their parents. Therefore, they see education as a means towards attaining economic independence.

### Understanding the Social Issue

What are the significant social issues, which need to be tackled immediately? In their mind, the issues that came in, in orders of preference are the

law and order situation of the country, traffic jam and air pollution. Most of the girl students specially mentioned the "Shazneen murder" incident and subsequently expressed their deep concern over the issue. One of the girl students in this regard stated that women should start "Adam teasing" and let the boys feel the same way as women usually feel in this situation. She also maintained that to restrict and ultimately do away violence on women, they should start agitating the male members of the society so that they by themselves stop doing so on women. Another girl student maintained that it is high time to include gender education in the school curricula. They maintained that reading the life of Begum Rokeya does not help them much; rather the interaction between a woman and man in practical life, the attitude towards a girl child, life saving skills etc are more important and therefore should be introduced in the syllabus. Regarding environmental pollution, some of the students pointed out that some of these issues have already been used in the curricula but what is more important is to create public awareness.

### Setting Priority in Life

In this section, the query was to probe into the thinking of the students about their future plans. They well understood that life these days is not very easy and success must be achieved through systematic and conscious steps. Therefore, their first priority for next few years is to concentrate on studies. At the same time, they also admitted that as they have not reached a sufficient level of maturity, so after passing the higher secondary examination, they would finalise their ultimate goal. But this type of methodical thinking was found only within three out of the twelve interviewed students who are maintaining a good academic record so far. The others hold out that they are still too young to think about future plans. Let the time come and they will sort out something suitable for themselves.

### Helping-hand in Preparing Studies

How do you prepare your daily studies? The common answer was, "our house tutor, of course". It has become a must to have at least one house tutor for the students to help in their studies. Among the twelve students, only one did not have any tutor, as her mother is a teacher of a school in the city. All the other students maintained that they need assistance from their house tutors as school teachers do not explain the problems very clearly. In the absence of the house tutors, they find it difficult to prepare their studies. Consequently, it is extremely difficult for them to be innovative, creative and answer unprepared questions during the examinations.

### Choosing a Definite Course of Study

When they were asked about their opinions on choosing science, humanities or commerce at this stage, most of the students expressed their deep dissatisfaction of the existing system. Some students pointed out that this is too early a stage to select a certain course of study. They maintained that this system of specialised study could be introduced after the completion of school. Some maintained that they aspired for the science group but as they did not perform well in the eighth grade, specially mathematics,

so they were not allowed to take it. They also complained that under the present academic system a student of humanities group is usually looked down upon as less intelligent than that of a science group.

Some of them on the other hand maintained that they did not consciously made the choice, rather their parents or some close relatives took the decision for them in this regard. On the other hand, some thought that parents' choice was better at this stage as they thought that the parents due to their wide experiences and maturity would certainly figure out the best for them.

### Views about Politics

Most of the students do not think that there is any healthy politics at all in Bangladesh. According to them, both the term politics and politicians at present carry negative connotation and the blame solely rests on the so called politicians of the country. Most of the students maintained that they dislike the present form of politics and the constant and overuse of hartal. But at the same time they also felt that it would be a daunting task to abolish hartals from national politics. They believed that rather people from all walks of life should create public opinion to restrict the use of hartal.

### Suggestions from the Alternatives Team

The purpose of study is just not to increase the number of "passed" students. The meaning of education is bigger than the word itself. It intends to create and explore a human being. To serve this purpose, the Alternatives team has the following suggestions.

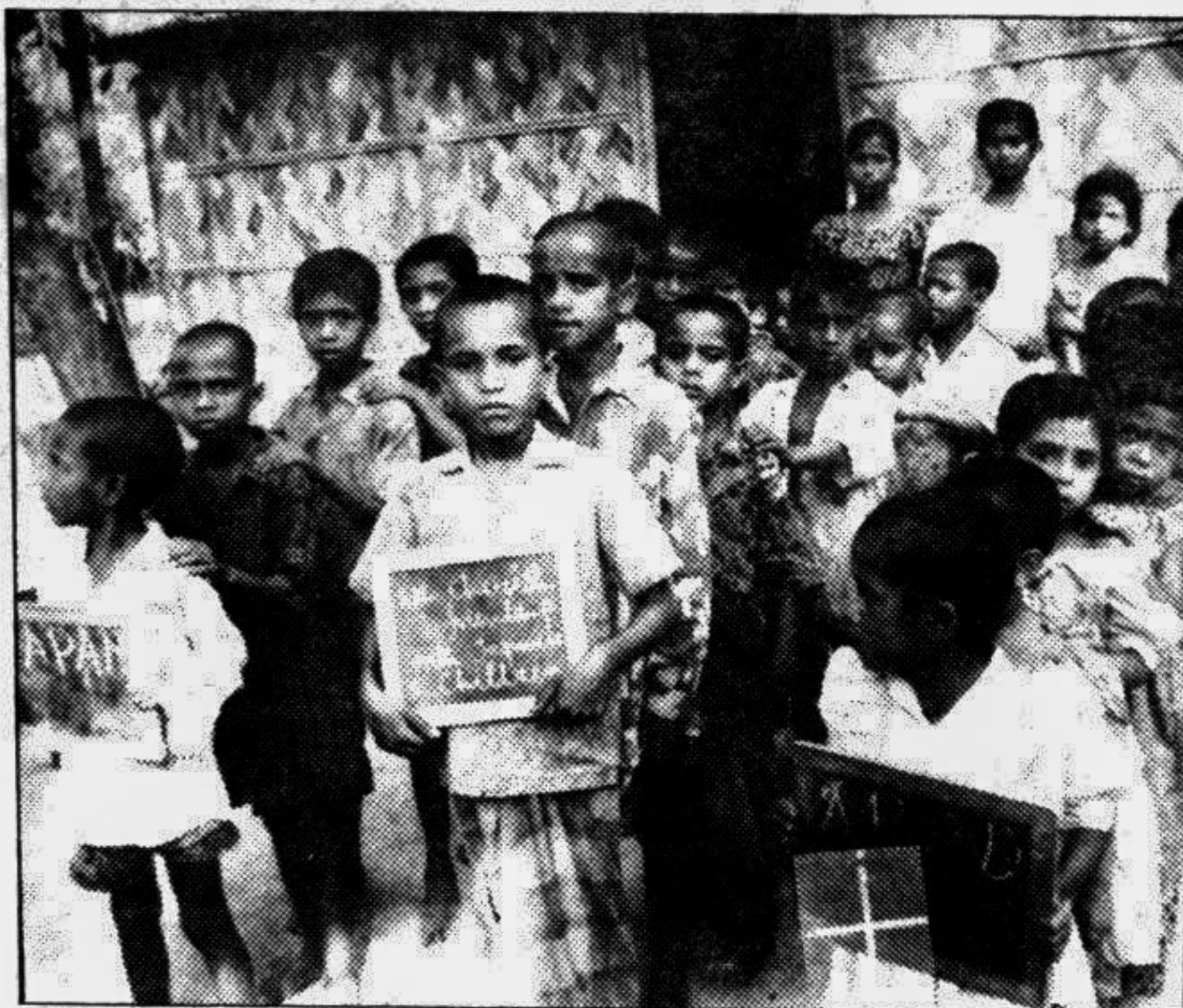
**To Sensitize the Students with National Issues:** The students are the future of the country so in an early stage they should be made aware of the socio-economic, political and environmental issues. Being a disaster prone country, the curriculum should include the factors behind the disasters, the policies of disaster management and the like in this regard. The objective however is not only to grow their awareness but also to enable them to respond to the issues.

**Creating Awareness on International Issues:** The understanding of international issues is equally important. It is important not only to enhance their knowledge but also to make them understand the national issues in the light of the international.

**Linking the Theoretical and Practical:** The purpose of study should not just be to theoretically acquaint the students to the existing social, political and other issues. There should be a method to make them practically involved with the issues. In this regard, a course on contemporary national and international issues in which weekly one test without any prior notice of the date or in other words "surprise test" can be introduced as a method of assessing the immediate response of the students. Education tours can be introduced as part of the curricula to increase their practical experience and knowledge.

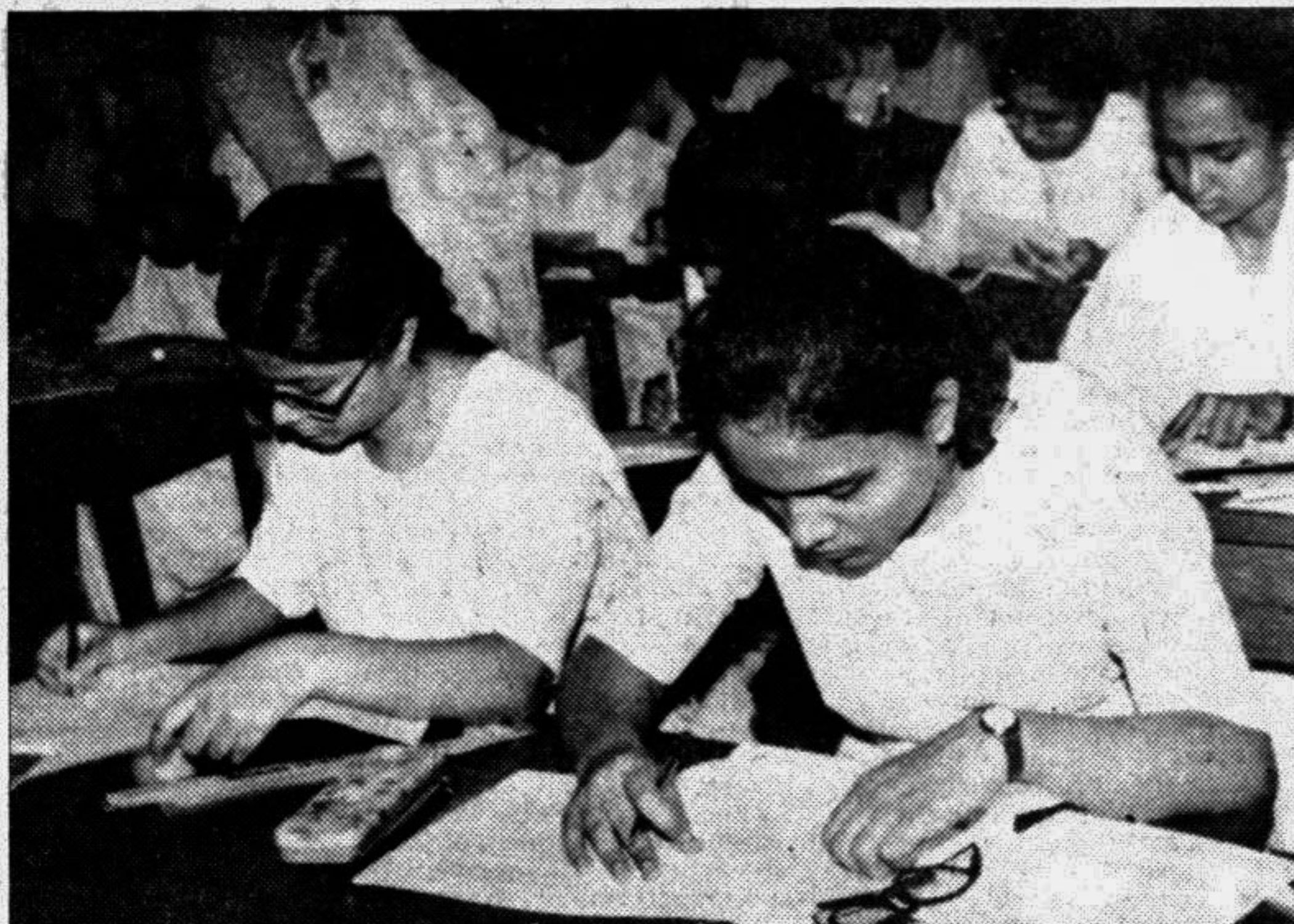
The curricula followed in the schools should be oriented more towards making the students aware and capable of tackling the day to day issues. Only vague theoretical knowledge can never be ultimately successful in bringing them up as responsible citizens of the country.

The author is Fellow, Centre For Alternatives



Cherishing friendship! How deep the feeling goes?

— Star photo



The traditional exam system: How long to continue with the old order?

— Star photo

## An Alternative School Curriculum on Water

## What Our Children Need to Know

by Sharmeen Murshid

*Can we not think of an alternative to both teaching approach and to existing content on water for children? Can we not think of a shift from a national to a transnational curriculum, from a western focus to a greater regional focus on water for secondary school students? What would such a curriculum look like and what would its objectives be?*

**B**EFORE this outline was developed a review of the government school curriculum on water was made, particularly covering the syllabus of classes 7 and 8. The first thing that strikes one is the lack of a Bangladesh and South Asian focus. Although some may argue that rivers of Bangladesh is well taken care of in the syllabus of classes 9 and 10, this argument does not justify the total absence of our own reality. Children must be acquainted with their environment, geography and culture from a very early age. Only once they have understood their own context are they in a better position to appreciate others.

### A comment on the books of classes 7 and 8

In the books of classes 7 and 8, water as a subject is covered mainly under geography and health science. There is some information on water pollution but very little regarding water resources of the region or community role in water management (a critical element in the preservation of environment and water in Bangladesh). Findings show that there is little to no information on the rivers of the region and its history. More is taught on European geography than on Bangladesh and its surrounding region.

Water has become a critical issue in contemporary 'growing' societies like Bangladesh that are badly hit by 'urbanizing and modernizing' unscrupulously. In this context the growing use and misuse of water and its sources, the importance of regional collaboration in water management in Bangladesh makes the

present syllabus hopelessly inadequate.

Needless to add, the present course and its teaching approach, as in conventional schooling systems, both in the public and private sector, are uninteresting and dull with little to inspire or motivate the students with values that will lead to a better understanding in general and of water in particular. The curriculum has to change to accommodate creative and participatory learning methods with experiential and hands-on approaches.

### The objectives of an alternative curriculum on water

Can we not think of an alternative to both teaching approach and to existing content on water for children? Can we not think of a shift from a national to a transnational curriculum, from a western focus to a greater regional focus on water for secondary school students? What would such a curriculum look like and what would its objectives be? Let us look at a possibility.

The objective of a new water curriculum for Bangladesh will be to incorporate a content that is regional, people centered and gender sensitive having a

holistic environment sensitive approach. On the other hand, it would incorporate alternative (as opposed to western) cultural re-enforcement of indigenous and relevant practice utilizing participatory, experiential and exploratory learning approaches.

### The expected outcome of such a curriculum

Such a curriculum would expect to achieve the following: The students will have developed a 'South Asian mind' and they will be able to identify and appreciate the importance of a South Asian, people centered environment sensitive and indigenous approach to understanding water. This will improve the possibility of long term and sustained solutions of the problems related to it in the region in general and in Bangladesh in particular.

Through such a course the students will know:

About the regional history of the rivers of Bangladesh and understand the regional context of water in Bangladesh.

- That clean water is a basic human right that transcends international borders and all nations of the region must uphold this right.

- About the local and re-

gional politics of water sharing and power and appreciate the importance of equity, decentralization and 'denationalization' of water.

- That water management is at one level a matter of regional cooperation and at another level, a community and family activity.

- And learn about the gender division of labor in water chores and the historical role of women in water management and conservation.

- About the innovative water projects which are being carried out by NGOs and voluntary organizations to strengthen the understanding of people's participation and management.

- They will be able to identify some of the traditional but effective indigenous methods of water preservation and conservation such as rain-water collection.

Know about rivers as a source of life and a cause of great sorrow and about the saga of human suffering in Bangladesh.

- They will understand the basic theories of global warming affecting water and eco-systems and our link to the global environment.

- And they will learn how to live with floods; be able to iden-

tify the various causes of floods and cyclones in the region and the importance of a regional strategy for survival.

- Learn about the cultural, social and literary context of water as a regional issue.

- And they will be able to say why participatory and experiential learning methods lead to better internalization of learning.

### Content and what our children should know about water

What has been so far described may be considered too ambitious for a two year course. The idea is not to stick to classes and 7 and 8 but, in principle to accept the need for such a content. Once that is agreed upon, the syllabus maybe spread over several years.

The following subjects maybe considered and should be divided into several smaller courses spread over from primary to secondary classes (say from classes 5 to 8).

### Water and environment

A.1 Different sources of water (in the region and in Bangladesh)

A.2 History of the major rivers: where do they begin and where do they end; the inter-de-

pendence of nations for their water resource; link to the global environment.

A.3 Behavior pattern of rivers and their causes

This will provide a holistic, global and regional basis in understanding water in Bangladesh.

### Part A: Visualized lecture using existing material.

Material and method: Apart from usual available information extracts from literature, novels will be used to enrich the learning on the history of rivers: examples of material that may be used:

Extracts from Charjyapad will tell us of the history of the rivers of this region. In addition sections from Vishnu Padabonika, Rabindronath and Jibonanda Das maybe used to make learning more meaningful and culturally re-enforcing and relevant.

### B. Access to clean water: A basic human right

B.1. National boundaries and artificial division of rivers and sharing

B.2 The right of every citizen across borders to clean, safe water

B.3 The politics of water sharing: who controls it? (regionally, nationally and at community level)/The rich man's right is the poor man's obligation (for the rich nation's right is the poor nation's obligation)

B.4 People's reality across borders

Part B: This part will be both theoretical and practical with participatory learning through field visits and community group discussions. Field

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