

State of Education

Imagination is more important than knowledge

—Albert Einstein

Enabling the Disabled

Observations on the Curriculum for the Mentally Handicapped

by Syed Imtiaz Ahmed

Question may arise as to how far a curriculum for teaching a 'disabled' person can actually contribute towards changing the social position of the person and whether the modern rationality based outlook of the society can really accept such a person as an active part of the society. These questions are important since the answers may indicate the ultimate measure of success for any curriculum in this regard.

THE mentally disabled people are now widely recognized world wide as being 'differently able'. Such a definition on the one hand, recognizes their ability and on the other, denotes their difference from the 'normal' human beings as well. The development of curriculum for teaching and training of the mentally disabled people is to a large extent based on this understanding of disability.

In Bangladesh, the training and teaching method for physically handicapped (blind, deaf or dumb people) and the mentally retarded ones is specified as Special Teaching. However, there is no officially recognized curriculum pattern for the mentally disabled persons in our country, while for those who are blind, deaf or dumb special methods like the Braille System or Sign Language are used to teach them according to the conventional education curriculum.

For the mentally disabled people, several non-governmental level initiatives have been taken for their education and training. The curriculum structures differ significantly from the usual ones. However, the curriculum follows the normal basic learning process and rests upon the ultimate target of accommodating such persons within the current social setting. And this social setting definitely endorses reason and rationality as the basic premise of the social as well as community level behaviour and interaction between the human beings. Indeed, it is this social structure based on the rational behaviour of the modern man that depicts the specific characteristics of the mentally retarded persons and differentiates them from the normal persons. Question may arise as to how far a curriculum for teaching a 'disabled' person can actually contribute towards changing the social position of the person and whether the modern rationality based outlook of the society can really accept such a person as an active part of the society. These questions are important since the answers may indicate the ultimate measure of success for any curriculum in this regard.

In order to learn about the existing curriculum structures for the mentally handicapped people, I went to the Society for Care and Education of the Mentally Retarded, Bangladesh (SCEMRB). Moytri Chowdhury and Halima Banu Shelly, both coordinators of the Special Education and Training Section, SCEMRB, provided detailed information about the curriculum that they follow in their teaching section. From their information and personal assessment some interesting aspects of the curriculum structure came out.

Curriculum for the Mentally Disabled- A Case Study

The curriculum that the SCEMRB follows is essentially a functional one directed towards addressing the present and future requirements of the students. It follows the international definition of a mentally disabled person provided by the American Association on Mental Deficiency and modified by the World Health Organization.

What Our Children Need to Know

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visits will be at two levels.

Material and method: Cross-border field work and community group discussions.

Level one: Within Bangladesh to identify who 'owns' water in a given area/village.

Level two: Cross-country study tours to visit border areas to see for themselves how the rivers are divided. Visits should include Nepal, India and Bangladesh (upper and lower riparian). Students will share their findings with their counterparts in the region in workshop during visits.

At both levels students must hold discussions with community members and analyze the information following a guide-line provided.

C. Water management and equity

C.1 How is water organized, managed and preserved; who does it?

C.2 Water and community management: people's participation

C.3 Women as water managers in the family: gender division of water chores, men's role

C.4 Innovative approaches in water management and preservation: experience from the region.

P. This section will introduce the students to NGOs and innovative local organizations working with new ideas in community water management, women's participation and people centered development.

M. Material and method: This will include visits to national and regional NGOs in the sector where various methods of water preservation and management are being tried out, specially in Nepal, India and Bangladesh. Women's participation in water management and maintenance can also be seen and experienced.

ization. Assessing the ability and tendency of a student and designing the possible special treatments required accordingly is a fundamental element of the curriculum pattern. Also, the state of family resources of a student and the outlook and expectations of the family is also keenly assessed. These assessments however, mark a significant departure of such curriculum from the usual ones. As Moytri Chowdhury pointed out, the curriculum is more focused on the individual student rather than generalizing, though the basic learning methods for the students remain more or less the same. To be more explicit, the retarded students learn the educational fundamentals through different techniques, which are essentially based on their individual type of disability.

However, the curriculum structure not only concerns conventional education but also incorporates special vocational training and shelter workshop, which are mainly for the rehabilitation of the students in the social setting. Broadly, the levels of education are divided as a) Pre-Preparatory, b) Preparatory, c) Vocational Training and d) Shelter Workshop. In the pre-preparatory level retarded children belonging to the age group of 0-5 are admitted. One significant aspect of this level is that it draws in the parents, specially, the mother of the retarded child in the education scheme and attempts to train them up about the special care and treatment the child requires. In the preparatory level, a major focus is on normal academic training of students. Usually, the age group for this level is 5-10, though admission or promotion mainly depends on the ability of a particular student. Another important aspect of this level is the stress on the development of social communication and self-help skills. Endeavor to develop such skills among the handicapped students continue in the other higher levels as well. In the next level the questions of the students' ability and the condition of the families turn out to be much important considerations. These considerations actually frame the type of training that a student is to receive. Shelter Workshop is mainly concerned with the rehabilitation of these students by providing them work opportunities which, practically is related with different projects of the organization.

The methodology of the curriculum makes its characteristics more explicit. This methodology mainly concerns three inter-related components: a) Task analysis.

b) Graduated Guidance Teaching Strategy (GGTS).

c) Integrated Teaching Method.

The major objective of such method is to introduce a student to a variety of skills and ideas while teaching only one subject matter. For example, while teaching a disabled student how to wear shirts, relevant ideas like why wearing shirts is necessary can also be taught. The method explores how many ideas can be related to one subject matter and graduated guidance is provided in its implementation.

Moreover the implementation of the curriculum also involves short term and long term evaluation. The performance and response of each student is evaluated in every 7-10 days and after every six months an overall evaluation report is prepared. The reports determine the future course of educating the students and the par-

ents are given advice regarding the requirements of their children.

b) Graduated Guidance Teaching Strategy

To actively assist the students in their learning, the teachers provide their guidance in a graduated manner that involves various stages of assistance. Actually this graduated guidance is provided at all levels and phases of educating the disabled persons. Different stages of graduated guidance involve:

- a) Full Physical Help;
- b) Partial Physical Help;
- c) Shadowing Help; and
- d) No Help.

These stages clearly indicate that, the guidance of teachers in case of the mentally retarded students essentially contains the provision of gradually phasing out the requirement of help, specifically physical help for them. In fact, the stage of shadow help is fundamentally directed towards boosting up the confidence of an individual student about his/her abilities. The entire scheme of guidance thus helps realizing the objective of developing self-help capabilities of the student.

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Side by side with teaching, training and rehabilitation schemes the SCEMRB also provide speech therapy, physiotherapy and clinical therapy for its students.

Home Based Programme: Involving the Community

To successfully implement the ultimate objective of social

rehabilitation of the disabled persons the SCEMRB has also undertaken a programme for raising consciousness among the communities about the necessity of sympathy and humane behaviour toward them.

One of the ideas is to integrate the disabled persons in the main stream society by facilitating their participation in the normal social, cultural and political activities. In one sense, this programme may be viewed as a part of the curriculum since

it involves a great deal of learning and understanding on part of the communities.

sustain cut-throat competition are looked upon as ultimate qualifications for having access to employment opportunities, the future of the taught and trained disabled persons with little or no family assistance is indeed turning bleak and thus questioning the merit of the curriculum.

The Rational Premise and the Dehumanization of the Mentally Disabled Persons

SCEMRB and other organizations of the like are indeed performing a very important task by taking up the responsibility of teaching, training and rehabilitating the disabled students. The curriculum I discussed perhaps indicates the different components and ideas such a curriculum includes. But to measure the ultimate success of the curriculum based learning, one has to consider how far the trained persons can actually integrate with the main stream society. Moytri Chowdhury pointed out, after being taught and trained most of their students are provided employment in different projects of SCEMRB or other organizations of the like. Also many of them get involved with their family business or profession. They rarely have access to dignified and remunerative open market jobs. The prevailing attitude in the society is that these persons are at best capable of performing some marginal vocational jobs. In fact, the curriculum I studied also put major emphasis on vocational training of the students. But according to Moytri Chowdhury, the people labeled as 'disabled' possess certain qualities that are becoming rare among the 'ables' of the society. First of all, almost all of them are fully honest as they lack the required 'ingenuity' for being dishonest. A disqualification indeed! More over they are very precise and attentive in the tasks they perform, since when they learn one subject matter their attention is never divided or diverted though, they may take more time than usual to grasp it properly. But in the societal structure where die-hard professionalism and ability to



The disabled need appropriate education.

— Star photo

Remaking Education in South Asia

Making a South Asian University

by Imtiaz Ahmed

The idea is to create a South Asian mind, which would look into the businesses of organizing cooperation in diverse fields within South Asia, and that again, not from the standpoint of nation and national states but from the standpoint of people. The students and researchers here will be people of South Asia, their field of research free from the limitations imposed by the structures of modern nation-states.

ever, does not end there. The very reproduction of colonized institutions and minds had set the education policy of post-colonial South Asia on a course of irrelevance, having very little to do with the requirements of the state, particularly the kind of development the people would like to have. In organizing and reproducing such a state in education, the curriculum plays a far more critical role than it is commonly acknowledged.

Curriculum and the Developmentality of the State

The curricula of the South Asian schools, colleges and universities are thoroughly informed by Western visions and experiences. Such a replication has led to several unpleasant developments in South Asia. To begin with, there is an intrinsic relationship between the organization of the curriculum, a relationship that is precisely identified by the term, **national curriculum**. The latter, while reproducing the model of development suited to the hegemonic forces, tends to make the citizens 'nationalist' with its implied biasness towards the majority community. Such a development has critical implications in the organization and reproduction of both intra-state and inter-state animosities.

For instance, the governments of both India and Bangladesh are involved not merely in the development of the public school system but also in organizing the **content of knowledge**. Such governments

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able so long as they are directed against **alien** cultures, communities or countries. As stated earlier, much of the problem, apart from literacy, lies with the kind of education that we have been providing to our children in schools, colleges and universities. In fact, the children of South Asia are literally brought up as 'nationalist' or 'communalist', **tutored** to fall in love with the nation that they have come to share more as a result of parental blessing.

Making the people literate is, of course, the first step. But literacy alone will not guarantee the production of 'cooperative minds'. Modern but 'fragmented' Sri Lanka, with high literacy rate, is a good example. What is required is a thorough and an innovative remaking of our education. This must take place at both national and regional levels. Nationally, the organization and reproduction of 'national curriculum' must be abandoned and in its place a **curriculum of the people** must be so designed as to perform the newer task of cooperation. This is a tedious job and requires attention even to the minutest of the details. Let me give you an example. I will limit my case to

Bangladesh's education, particularly relating to the study of history. History text-books in Bangladesh today glorify only the heroes and heroines of the Hill people. The heroes and heroines of the Hill people have no place in this history. This creates a sense of alienation among the Hill people for they can not identify themselves with the history of the state of which they are members. This necessarily leads them to search for their 'own history'. In this context, a reevaluation of the etymology of history is required. Indeed, the text-books, if they are to be used, must narrate the history of all the people, where all the members will find their worth as human beings, and not be evaluated simply by the (Western) abstraction of nation and nationalities. Such a task of innovatively rewriting history is paramountly important for all the South Asian states, given the fact that the experience of the latter with nation and nationalities is no less tragic than that of Bangladesh. But this is only one aspect of the

matter.

At the regional level, efforts must be undertaken to reproduce 'cooperative minds' as well. A word or two on SAARC is pertinent here. In a decade or so, SAARC seemed to have managed well, with unsteady but firm growth. The firmness must be credited to the genuine efforts on the part of the South Asian leadership, albeit a section of it, in building peace and stability in the region. Some achievements are already in line, like SAPTA, the meeting of South Asian opposition leaders, South Asian judges, South Asian Media people, South Asian parliamentarians, and so on. While these activities are commendable, I am afraid they will not take South Asia very far. This is because we are yet to develop policies or 'knowledge houses' which would effectively contribute to the task of freeing our minds from the **colonized** structures and lead us instead towards the business of reproducing 'cooperative minds' across borders and national states.

I must stress here that I find the national universities, particularly their curricula, far from contributing to such an endeavour, a serious hindrance to the cause of SAARC and regional prosperity. Indeed, while the curricula of all the national universities are highly modernist, some of the more important universities like that of Calcutta, Lahore, Dhaka, Colombo, and still others, are historically connected with the politics of nurturing modernity and the very development of nation-states in South Asia. Put differently, to materialize the vision of SAARC and cooperation amongst the South Asians in general, knowledge houses must be made relevant, that is, they must correspond to the hopes and aspirations so imaginatively laid down by

history.

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SAARC and whatever is now flowing from it.

Indeed, towards meeting this end, and in the hope of remaking education in the region, a **South Asian University**, with issue-based faculties spread throughout the region, is being proposed here. The idea is to create a **South Asian mind**, which would look into the businesses of organizing cooperation in diverse fields within South Asia, and that again, not from the standpoint of nation and national states but from the standpoint of people. The students and researchers here will be people of South Asia, their field of research free from the limitations imposed by the structures of modern nation-states. Let me at this stage dwell upon the process as to how we are otherwise, a colossal task.

At the preliminary stage, the task will be to create 'resource-persons' or faculty members. At a later stage, preferably in two years time, the latter will provide courses and training to the prospective students and researchers attending the University. Such 'resource-persons' will also be involved in the task of organizing the curriculum, one which would be relevant to the people and places of South Asia. The University will have a collegiate structure, that is, faculties will be spread throughout the region; for example, one in Nepal, two in Bangladesh, one in Sri Lanka, two in India, and so on. As indicated above, such faculties will be spread based on the needs of the region. The plan is to begin with one or two faculties, where scholars and researchers from seven South Asian countries, and of diverse disciplines, will work together on a common course of action. The task is, no doubt, immense. Needless to say, only time will tell if our dreams and efforts will be realized.

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The topic of our Next issue is: "Political Protest Search for Alternatives" to be published on 7 January 1999. Creative suggestions are invited from our esteemed readers. Please send your materials to: Imtiaz Ahmed, Executive Director, Centre For Alternatives, Room No. 431, Lecture Theatre, Arts Building, Dhaka University, Dhaka-1000. Tel: 9661900-19, Ext. 4550; Fax: (8802) 836769; E-mail: imtiaz@bangla.net