

Campaigning for Quality Education

Rasheda K Choudhury of CAMPE talks to Sabir Mustafa

After four years at the helm of ADAB, Rasheda K Choudhury took over at CAMPE (Campaign for Mass and Primary Education) in early 1997. As the director of CAMPE, which co-ordinates education activities of NGOs, Rasheda has been at the forefront of the campaign to increase resource allocation to primary education in Bangladesh. In an interview given to The Daily Star, Rasheda said unless Bangladesh increased expenditure in education to at least five per cent of GDP, the goal of creating 'good citizens' out of today's children would not be realised. Excerpts from the interview:

THE DAILY STAR (DS): It has been 47 years since people of this country took to the streets to protect the mother-tongue. But what is the reality of language today? Does the literacy situation give any reason for optimism that we have achieved the goals of the language movement?

RASHEDA K CHOUDHURY (RKC): One cannot say that after 1952 there was no progress, although the image it portrays appears to be quite disappointing. Literacy does not indicate that one can sign but one who can read, write and understand a letter in a given language. According to Government statistics the literacy percentage is 51%, but our statistics reveal a lesser figure. There has been a lot of progress but not as much. A long time has passed since our independence. The question remains why even then we have not been able to reach a high level of literacy, as in 80%.

In the five-year plan the government has set this target and this is to be implemented by the year 2002. The government says that it can achieve a 100% literacy rate but we are sceptical about it. Maybe numerically or quantitatively they can do it, but shall we really be able to achieve this in terms of quality? Literacy does not only include the adults involved, but all above the age of five. Even if the adults are taken into account only, we can see that this is not sustainable literacy that they are attaining. In many cases they are relapsing back into illiteracy. We have to note that if figure is being taken into account or not.

Secondly, we have to find out if those who are brought in at the primary level are literate. If all are literate, then the question of pushing them towards literacy does not arise. Then, everybody will be going to school. If we can get all the children into school today, twenty years later, there will be no requirement for adult literacy programmes. What happens today in the government schools is that after completing five years of schooling, in the exam that they take for scholarship the achievement rate is only 20%.

What does that indicate? What happens to the rest 80%? We cannot achieve the desired level. It is the time of new technology, science and communication. Under these surroundings, is mere literacy enough? Primary school completion rate is 60%, while the rest drop out. Among this 60%, 20% are really achieving something really meaningful.

DS: Where does the problem lie? In the teaching method or in the family background?

RKC: The problem is very complex and involves a lot of matters. Earlier it was said the problem lay in poverty. But it has been proved beyond doubt that the poor want their children to go to school and get educated. We have questions relating to the teaching-learning methodology. In the primary schools the teacher student ratio is 1:70. If this is the situation, then it is very difficult for a single teacher to take seventy students to a meaningful level.

Secondly, the teachers do not have enough training for effective teaching. Also the time a



teacher gets to teach is not enough. Thirdly, we are still in the dark ages following the traditional rote-learning system. Most primary level children, excluding the privileged upper and middle class people, are first generation learners. They do not get any back up support from their families. Institution is the only means of education. That institution is not providing him or her with enough scope. When a student just memorises his work he is not learning anything. Maybe at one stage he is learning some arithmetic, but he is learning in such a manner that he will forget it when he goes home. Also, we do not have enough supporting materials at schools.

DS: What role do the NGOs have in education?

RKC: The environment is created through the process of 'gap-filling'. The NGOs started with those who have already been dropped out of the system or those who have never been to school. That is why when they first started it was widely talked about as being non-formal primary education, because they were dealing with children over eight years of age. But soon they found out that there were millions of children over the age of five who were not going to school. Then the NGOs started working for them.

What resulted is a break away from the non-formal primary education system to a formal education system. There are many such NGOs. Many may say that this is the private sector stream. But that would also bring the kindergarten schools in the category. There is a basic difference between us. We make our teaching learning process more innovative although the material and competency are dependent on the nationally set curriculum.

In January 1999, 2.7 million students were enrolled in NGO owned primary schools.

DS: How is the competency level measured in these schools?

RKC: We have not been able to establish that we are achieving too because nationally accepted evaluation process does not exist. But, there are independent evaluation processes undertaken by the individual NGO. An indicator of our success is the number of students who complete these NGO schools, join the mainstream schools and do well. We have reports that say that in their Secondary School Certificate exams, they do better than the students of the mainstream schools. The fact that the donors continue to provide money for such projects can also be seen as an indicator of our success because the NGOs must be showing them something that convince them. The fact that the government ac-

cepts our form of education and incentives is another indication that we are not doing very badly. However, a general evaluation process has not been taken place yet which can accurately measure our success.

DS: Is there any possibility of a co-operative programme with the government?

RKC: There already is an established mechanism. The government has accepted the need for non-formal primary education. The government has already created a directorate of non-formal primary education. They are not directly implementing it, but implementing it through NGOs. They are channelling funds to NGOs and the NGOs are implementing it. It is a direct collaborative mechanism between the government and the NGOs.

The primary and mass education division identified a few hundred non-functional and non-performing schools. These schools were registered and received subsidies from the government, but they have not been in operation. The government is inviting NGOs to take up its management. BRAC and GSS have already accepted. They have conducted surveys and are ready to go ahead with the implementation. This means that the government statistics, combining it with our own findings in order to bring out a comprehensive, analytical report. Our draft will be complete within April. We hope to bring out a yearly issue so as to help the nation progress towards an educated future.

The future looks bright as we find that the school enrolment rate is higher than the population growth rate. The retention rate has increased from 40% to 60% from 1995 to 1998. Also, the enrolment rate and participation rate of female students has increased tremendously over the years. These are all positive signs for us. All we have to do is be able to maintain such progress.

DS: Are there any new ideas that the NGOs can offer the government or have offered the government that they are not accepting or may accept?

RKC: We haven't had the opportunity, I mean officially, to extend our ideas to the government. The government, however, knows that we have developed certain methodology that is quite effective, maybe not at the national level but certainly at the level we have worked at. Our teachers are motivated and, more importantly, we have been able to improve relationship between the teacher and the students, and relationship and ensure their involvement in community-based activities. This is where, we think, the government primary schools have failed. The teachers feel that they have the training and by taking the class they are doing their bit, and they don't interact with the community. We, the NGOs, have been able to ensure parental involvement in community contribution. This is a significant development. We believe this aspect should be included in teacher's training programme; how to involve the parents and the community. Maybe, they are dealing with an illiterate society, but parents have the stakes here and they should have a say in the whole process.

DS: The CAMPE, has conducted a survey on 33,000 households. What was the objective of the survey and what were the findings?

RKC: The NGOs have started working after independence and have made great contributions to the society in not only non-formal and formal education but also in socio-cultural mobilisation. Still, there are areas, we all know, unserved. Neither the government nor the non-government facilities are there. There are many remote villages in Bangladesh where there is not a single school.

When we tried to identify the areas deprived, we found out that we didn't have enough information. Actually there are no maps that would tell us about the number of schools and their locations in different areas of the country.

We have asked the government to take adequate measures in this regard. The Local Government and Rural Development Ministry does have a map of existing infrastructure facilities but theirs is not a comprehensive one. We have faced criticism saying that we only work in areas close by and not the far out places which are inaccessible. We saw that in tackling issues in such far out

places, we had no updated information. To solve this problem in our research and survey, budget allocation has certainly increased. But the question is whether the increase has been in real terms? Still, allocation for education sector is only two per cent or little more of our GDP. Whereas, even in the South Asian countries, it is four to five per cent. We need to double the allocation. Still, we have to see where the investment is going. Primary education gets lion's share of the whole investment, about 50 per cent. Ninety-five per cent of that goes for infrastructure development and teachers' salary. How about quality of education? You see, only five per cent is spent on teachers' training, teaching material development etc. We are getting stuck there.

DS: What do you expect from the finance minister in next year's budget?

RKC: The government is constitutionally obligated to provide education for all, irrespective of caste. Education in the constitution is ensured as a human right. It's the government's responsibility to mobilise resources. There should be enough political commitment to mobilise these resources and spend whatever is needed for improvement in this sector. They have to ensure the environment where every child in the country will be able to go to school. To do that they have to spend whatever is needed. Everyone in the government knows what are the impediments. We expect to see the reflection of the commitment to remove impediments and ensure proper environment for a child to receive education, and for that, we believe, there should be allocation of minimum five per cent of GDP for the education sector. Otherwise you cannot do that.

Besides, drastic measures should be taken in some areas. Although debatable, we need a real evaluation of the madrasah education. We have to assess whether the investment in madrasah education is actually giving us good return — are we really getting good citizens from that mode of education? If we are creating reactionary elements through this education, as suggested in recent newspaper reports following the attack on poet Shamsur Rahman, then we must rethink whether the public money should be invested in madrasah education. I feel we need to modernise the madrasah education.

Moreover, the incentive project for female education has done wonders. To continue with that programme, we need more money in the education sector. It's not only making the child come to school, it's also keeping him at the school. Therefore we need more investment in this sector.

DS: Thank you for your time.

Another thing is that the teachers should be accountable to the local authority and to the parents. Presently, they are only accountable to their higher authority according to the hierarchy in the education board. In this respect, we have been able to make a difference. In our schools, the parent-teacher committee, known as school management committee in some places, monitors the teachers. If the committee reports to the NGOs that the teachers are not delivering then it is very tough for the teachers. The government does not have such a mechanism, at least we have not yet seen anything like that in the national scheme. That is why, our suggestion to the government is to strengthen the local governments and leave the education system at their disposal.

DS: You have talked of accountability in the education system and of local education authorities. If that is to be realised, it requires a major political decision. In recent times there has been an increase in the budget for the primary education sector. Does the current trend, in your views, suggest adequate political commitment?

RKC: According to the findings in our research and survey, budget allocation has certainly increased. But the question is whether the increase has been in real terms? Still, allocation for education sector is only two per cent or little more of our GDP. Whereas, even in the South Asian countries, it is four to five per cent. We need to double the allocation. Still, we have to see where the investment is going. Primary education gets lion's share of the whole investment, about 50 per cent. Ninety-five per cent of that goes for infrastructure development and teachers' salary. How about quality of education? You see, only five per cent is spent on teachers' training, teaching material development etc. We are getting stuck there.

DS: What do you expect from the finance minister in next year's budget?

RKC: The government is constitutionally obligated to provide education for all, irrespective of caste. Education in the constitution is ensured as a human right. It's the government's responsibility to mobilise resources. There should be enough political commitment to mobilise these resources and spend whatever is needed for improvement in this sector. They have to ensure the environment where every child in the country will be able to go to school. To do that they have to spend whatever is needed. Everyone in the government knows what are the impediments. We expect to see the reflection of the commitment to remove impediments and ensure proper environment for a child to receive education, and for that, we believe, there should be allocation of minimum five per cent of GDP for the education sector. Otherwise you cannot do that.

Besides, drastic measures should be taken in some areas. Although debatable, we need a real evaluation of the madrasah education. We have to assess whether the investment in madrasah education is actually giving us good return — are we really getting good citizens from that mode of education? If we are creating reactionary elements through this education, as suggested in recent newspaper reports following the attack on poet Shamsur Rahman, then we must rethink whether the public money should be invested in madrasah education. I feel we need to modernise the madrasah education.

Moreover, the incentive project for female education has done wonders. To continue with that programme, we need more money in the education sector. It's not only making the child come to school, it's also keeping him at the school. Therefore we need more investment in this sector.

DS: Thank you for your time.

FBCCI Tried ...

The US-Bangladesh Business Council on Feb 14 sought the President's intervention in the current political programmes which they apprehend may retard the pace of the country's economic development. Chairman of USBBC made the proposal during a courtesy call on president Shahabuddin Ahmed at Bangabhaban. US Ambassador to Bangladesh John Holzman was present during the meeting.

.... And Failed

The business leaders of the country expressed anguish and frustration as the president postponed their talks till after the Feb 22-25 municipal polls. They had wanted the president to intervene in the political disputes to solve disputes without having the country's economy. With the postponement, their efforts to prevent the hartals fell through.

High Court Acts

The High Court Division on Feb 16 issued a suo moto rule directing the ruling Awami League, opposition BNP and the government to showcase as to why pro-hartal and anti-hartal activities should not be declared as cognizable offence.

In rule, the court asked the concerned bodies to explain why police should not be allowed to take action accordingly. The rule was issued under section 56/A of the code of criminal procedure.

FDI Hates Hartals

A donor agency cautioned that hartal causing 'social unrest' may divert foreign investment from Bangladesh.

Director General of SIDA, Bo Goransson, suggested that a common platform be formed for expressing views rather than using various means such as hartals, to disrupt society and damage the economy.

Environment Costs

At least \$417.89 million would be needed per year for the next 10 years as 'cost of remediation' to overcome the environmental damage incurred, said an ADB study.

Kazi Aref Shot Dead:

Kazi Aref Ahmed, a top leader of Jatiya Samajtantrik Dal (JSD), and five others were shot dead on Feb 14 when gunmen sprayed bullets on the podium of a public meeting he was addressing at a border town near Kushtia.

Kazi Aref, 57, was a valiant freedom fighter and the founder member of the JSD. Till his death, he remained its presidium member. He is survived by his wife and two children.

Motahar Hossain Dead:

Veteran journalist and politician Motahar Hossain Siddiqui died of a heart attack on Feb 16 at his Gopibagh residence. He was 76. He is survived by his wife, three sons, three daughters and two sisters.

Short Shrift to OECF

Bangladesh refused to accept the commercial settlement proposed on Feb 14 by the general contractor of the crisis-ridden Karnaphuli Fertilizer Company (KAFCO) which incurred a loss of US \$120M for frequent breakdown of its plant.

Commerce and Industries Minister Tofail Ahmed expressed disapproval during a detailed discussion with Managing Director of the Overseas Economic Cooperation Fund (OECF) of Japan, Keiich Tango.

Tremor Takes 50

At least 50 people were killed on Feb 12 and 210 injured in a strong earthquake which struck eastern Afghanistan. The Taliban Authorities appealed for help from abroad.

MPs Prefer Jaw-Jaw

Law makers from India and Pakistan on Feb 13 called for bold initiatives to end the 51 years of bitterness and hostility between the world's newest nuclear powers.

The legislators called for bilateral talks on nuclear issues with an eye to reduce tension and controlling a possible nuclear arms race in the subcontinent.

Nine Dead

Nine people were killed and 35 injured in Feb 13 when a bus fell into a canal breaking the railing of a bridge on the Faridpur-Barisal highway.

The bus was carrying devotees from Mathbaria in Pirojpur District to Biswa Zaker Manzil to attend its four-day annual Urs that began that day.

Reaz's Party

Former foreign secretary Reaz Rahman joined BNP on Feb 15 expressing allegiance to the ideals and programmes of the party and the leadership of Khaleda Zia.

The Week in Review

Starr's Not Done Yet

The impeachment may be over, but Ken Starr on Feb 14, said he was not finished. There are presidential friends to be tried, a leaks case to resolve and a momentous decision whether to indict the president.

When all that is done, Starr would tie together in a single report an investigation that covered everything from Vincent Foster's suicide and the Whitewater land deal to the FBI tiles matter and, of course, the Monica Lewinsky saga.



Bail Out for Bill

The US Senate acquitted William Jefferson Clinton of perjury and obstruction of justice on February 12, ending a 13-month drama that catapulted an affair with White House intern, Monica Lewinsky, into the second presidential impeachment trial in history. The vote allows America's 42nd president to finish his term in office.

Dhaka-Moscow Deal

Bangladesh and Russia signed an agreement on February 9 on Military Technical Cooperation.

Russian Deputy Minister of Trade and the Defence Secretary signed the agreement on behalf of their respective governments at the ministry of Defence at Ganobhaban.

The agreement provides for identification, initiation and expansion of possible areas of collaboration between the two countries in the field of technical cooperation.

Taliban Treat for Osama

Afghanistan's Taliban militia on Feb 10 ruled out extradition of Saudi dissident Osama Bin Laden, saying such a request was illegal.

The US had accused Bin Laden of masterminding the bomb attacks on US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania last August that killed 263 people.

It offered a reward of 5M dollars for information leading to his arrest and conviction.

Hartal Takes Six

Six people were killed and more than 500 were injured during the 60-hours