

Primary Education: Promises and Perils Key to Creating Wealth for Many

by Nuruddin Mahmud Kamal

Good quality education demands skilled and dedicated teachers, quality curricula and above all a congenial classroom atmosphere. To provide these, the government, parents and the society must make decisions in unison that educating a child is worth sacrificing other priorities. Primary education cannot be sold short. If the will can be found, so can the funds.

I must admit, the anxieties that arose in my mind earlier turned into comfort when I learned that at least one reader outside my family found my essay on education consistent with the thinking of a reasonable man in our society. This has encouraged me to continue my writings on the same topic: Primary Education — Promises and Perils (ref: the author's article on 12 October 1999 in The Daily Star). But before I start to do so, let me tell you a story: I sing horribly badly. I never dare to sing when I'm with others, but I like to hum when I'm alone. One evening after Magreb prayers, I was walking down a street in Dhanmondi, Dhaka, recently, humming when I noticed a man who was walking towards me. When he got to within almost five yards of me, he suddenly turned away and started to cross the road. But then, seeming to recognise me, he came over and said, 'Aren't you so and so?' I said, 'Yes, why did you move away?' 'Well,' he replied, 'I heard you singing so I thought you are either mad or in serious problem and I couldn't recognise you. When I complete this writing, and you happen to read it, I would really expect that you do not consider me the hummin man.'

Today, I would like to share with you a brief account on introduction of formal primary education and also some subsequent developments that has influenced the system to attain a not-so-good situation as we all are witnessing now. Indeed, the history and development of education in this country dates back to the ancient period. The traditional and non-conventional exchange of knowledge from *gurukrishi* to *pashashala*, *tol* to *maktab* and *madrasa* led to the present day primary education system. However, primary education was not made 'compulsory' nor was there any effort to make it 'universal' or even 'formal' during those periods. The British rulers in India introduced English education about 145 years back from now. In fact, the formal primary education has its legacy with the 'Woods Despatch' in 1854. Then came the graded school system and the office of the Director of Public Instruction (DPI).

The office of the DPI has now transformed into a top-heavy organisation called the Directorate of Primary Education headed, manned and managed by college teachers, while the experienced professionals from the primary education frame act as support personnel. It would be interesting to note that compulsory primary education bill was first

introduced in the year 1912 in the Imperial Legislative Council of the British government, but the proposal was not accepted. Almost 78 years later, Bangladesh Parliament passed the Compulsory Primary Education Act in 1990.

Worldwide, the current decade is witnessing a remarkable progress made for the education of children. A rare demonstration of new vision and commitment of the world leaders in the early 90's enthused many developing country leaders to make wiser decisions and help improve their own education system. Those courageous leaders were convinced that a good quality education was prescriptive to the process of peace, democracy and development. Bangladesh also enthusiastically participated and endorsed the World Declaration of Education for All and the Framework for Action World Conference in the high profile World Conference on Education for All (WCEFA) attended by 1500 participants from 155 countries and 125 NGOs. The whole point of WCEFA was to forge greater alliances, new partnerships and view the attainment of education goals as social mission of the governments, NGOs and the communities.

If we go deep down, we will find something is hindering the progress of primary education. Let's try to find out the reasons. The investigation may start with this story. An American lady living in Bangladesh once called a carpenter to fix a window frame. She gave the carpenter a sketch but he followed the sketch too literally and botched the job. When she remonstrated, saying, 'Why didn't you just use your common sense?' he drew himself up with great dignity and said, 'But common sense, Madam, is a gift of Allah; I have technical knowledge only.' Technical knowledge only seemed a good epitaph for civilization which had not yet learned that engineering economics cannot be the sole basis of a humane public policy, nor, indeed, is an important criterion as social and moral values. Social and moral values are closely linked with the primary education system. If we miss them, we will miss the main aspect of quality education.

As new technologies make it possible to move more information faster than before we are at times dazzled by the millions of gigabytes that move across the world in nanoseconds. But do we ever ask ourselves: what is that we are communicating? Will it make the world a better place to live? And does all these information add up to knowledge? The challenge is to get information to where it is needed through the most effective method possible. Only when information helps people to communicate and participate and allows them and the government to make informed choices that information becomes knowledge. I am sure we all want to turn information into knowledge, and give this country a chance to move towards prosperity, the knowledge gap needs to be bridged. A good quality primary education can be a basis for our future development in Bangladesh. Here, I do not intend to talk about the top of the line computers in each classroom. I only want to talk about a teacher who is adequately trained and motivated to teach, a classroom that has a roof, school children have enough to eat so that their brains are not strained by low calorie intake.

Unfortunate though, the actual situation does not provide a good signal about our basic education scenario. For instance, in a recent discussion meeting organised by the Federation of Bangladesh Teachers' Association (FBUTA), Professor Iqbal Mahmud (ex-VC, BUET) observed that a new curriculum and textbooks would be needed to the students facing uncommon challenges in the coming years. Addressing the discussion as the chief guest, the current Vice-Chancellor of BUET, Dr Nooruddin Ahmed went further to say that the standard of classroom education has deteriorated to an alarming level and that even kindergarten students take help of the private tutors to solve easy problems which gradually hinder the growth of their thinking abilities. If this is the state of affairs in the elementary level education in Bangladesh at the fag end of 20th century, how are we going to seize the opportunities of 21st century?

The call of literacy, as we all know, has a scriptural basis: the first revealed word in the holy Quran is 'read'. Today, the government say 'read', the NGOs say 'read', the informed communities say 'read', but even the most optimistic view would not claim in public that the adult literacy (15+ age) rate has crossed the boundary line of 45 per cent mark. In the primary education domain, almost 23 per cent boys and girls (about 4.4 million) do not attend school out of the total 19 million eligible children. Yet, as a result of inefficiencies and wastages of resources on the one hand, and overemphasis on the achievements in literacy and primary education by the authorities on the other, a new wave of controversy appears to have been created in the education parleys. Unfortunately, both the parties only zealously guard their own viewpoints creating an adversarial relationship, which threatens the system.

As far as investment in primary education is concerned, I for one very strongly support much higher allocation rather than overspending on military hardware at this stage of the country's development. It always rings a bell in my ears whenever I recall what the President of Ecuador spoke in 1990. He said, 'The cost of a nuclear submarine would finance the annual budget of 23 developing countries' primary education sector and meet the needs of 160 million primary school age children.' Presumably, the underlying assumption was that effort must be made on optimising use of resources available for promoting basic education.

But the mode and manner and also the priorities given on various projects and programmes under the primary education sector in Bangladesh appear to be in conflicting positions, perhaps because the pif (fund) is too small. It is known to us that free and compulsory education has been guaranteed in the Article 17 of the country's Constitution, which reads, 'The state shall adopt effective measures for the purpose of — (a) establishing a uniform, mass oriented and universal system of education and extending free and compulsory education to

all children to such stage as may be determined by law' and the (c) reads, 'removing illiteracy within such a time as may be determined by law.' In 1990, a five-year compulsory primary education law was enacted, but the disuniformity of primary school system operated by some NGOs has also created the confusion. The investments made and the high expenditures incurred over the years for the development of primary education by some NGOs did not go along the provision of the Constitution. There is however one consistency in running the affairs of the country by various players. Like the electric (power) or gas systems, primary education system also has a high degree of system loss, particularly when we consider drop-out competency, repeater and achievement rates.

In my opinion, good quality primary education demands a greater commitment than any other development activity, because it cannot be compared to, for instance, oral saline programme. Among others, good quality education demands skilled and dedicated teachers, quality curricula and above all a congenial classroom atmosphere. To provide these, the government, parents and the society must make decisions in unison that educating a child is worth sacrificing other priorities. Primary education cannot be sold short. If the will can be found, so can the funds.

Over the decade, while Bangladesh rushed to enhance the number of schools and teachers, quality and relevance took a back seat. The classroom situation has not been monitored properly. If we did, we would be horrified. I must conclude. But before I do so, I wish to share about my childhood days in Armenitola Government School located (now) in the old part of Dhaka city. This educational institution was reputed to be one of the best in the country in the 50s. My eyes aglow with pride and respect whenever I try and recall the classroom situation in particular and our school atmosphere in general. Our revered headmaster Shamsuddin sir, teacher Kazi Ambar Ali sir, Basit sir, Bazlur Rashid sir and dearest Khan Mohammed Salek sir, to name a few, will always remain in the heart of our hearts. The memory of their class-room teaching style rekindles our emotions. Shamsuddin sir used to say — education is the key to creating wealth, not just for few, but the many.

The Author is a retired Additional Secretary and ex-Chairman, PDB.

Over the decade, while Bangladesh rushed to enhance the number of schools and teachers, quality and relevance took a back seat. The classroom situation has not been monitored properly. If we did, we would be horrified. I must conclude. But before I do so, I wish to share about my childhood days in Armenitola Government School located (now) in the old part of Dhaka city. This educational institution was reputed to be one of the best in the country in the 50s. My eyes aglow with pride and respect whenever I try and recall the classroom situation in particular and our school atmosphere in general. Our revered headmaster Shamsuddin sir, teacher Kazi Ambar Ali sir, Basit sir, Bazlur Rashid sir and dearest Khan Mohammed Salek sir, to name a few, will always remain in the heart of our hearts. The memory of their class-room teaching style rekindles our emotions. Shamsuddin sir used to say — education is the key to creating wealth, not just for few, but the many.

The Author is a retired Additional Secretary and ex-Chairman, PDB.

Of Standards and Quality Control

by A Husnain

To speak bluntly, the standards culture, beginning with the standard of the human resources who supervise the activities in the society, has to be cultivated (and practised) from the very top level, that is by the political leadership followed by the civil service, who implement the public standards in all the sectors. The improvement of any standard is proportional to the upper limit set by the senior supervisors themselves.

It is nice to read the full page supplements in the news media, initiated by the BSTI (Bangladesh Standards and Testing Institution) on the occasion of the 30th World Standards Day. Outside this page there are no critical articles surveying the field of activities in Bangladesh, and no analytical review issued by the BSTI on the shortcoming of this standards procedure in developing countries such as Bangladesh.

Some manufacturers are advertising ISO 9000 series certification for their products and services. This new awareness is welcome, but it should not become a gimmick to dupe the customers and consumers. How many readers are aware of these mystical 9000-symbols?

Why so many BSTI labelled products are not upto standard? The certificates are issued, and then the products are neither sampled regularly, nor regulatory steps taken to maintain the standards. Why such government agencies can only test, and not prosecute? No statistics are published in the media. The legal loopholes have to be plugged for fast legal action against the defaulters (the majority of the certificate holders).

The question may be asked how many Bangla publications in the form of booklets are freely available at the time of registration of the small cottage-industry level companies? How many training and orientation programmes are available, sponsored by the government? The NGOs can be helpful here, but it appears that there is a blind approach to the potentialities of the NGOs, in that these agencies are told to focus mainly on poverty alleviation. Where are the NGOs to help the small business persons?

It is time that official reorientation is initiated at the policy level to diversify the activities of the thousands of NGOs, to penetrate the small business sectors, in contrast to the fact that at present the vast majority of the NGOs are focussed on poverty-level activities. Help the poor but also the small business companies. Only lately some agencies like the JOBS are coming forward with training courses, and several are engaged in enhancing the handicraft sector which has gained tremendous impetus in improved designs and better quality (we are exporting handicrafts now).

The present activities and enhanced roles of agencies like the BSTI, BSCIC, BITAC, the handloom board, silk agencies and others may be reviewed by the government, including encouragement for active cooperation and participation of the private sector, after fruitful exchange of views with an umbrella body like the FBCCI.

Bangladesh is richly endowed with a thriving SME (small and medium enterprises) sector, and the entrepreneurship spirit is very much evident in the country. We have a large working population who have to be innovative to earn their living by the sweat of their brow, and not through quick fixes.

There is a serious need for an awareness campaign by the government agencies and NGOs concerned. This information network needs resources to develop. Then the enforcement cannot be too strict initially as the entrepreneurs are handicapped with innumerable local problems in maintaining standards and quality. Quality control cannot come without knowing about the standards.

The days of file-oriented, pen-holding administration are gone. The officers have to get up from their chairs and move about, inside and outside their offices, and have to be field-oriented, and have to have face to face confrontations with the clients, instead of leaving this important interfacing task to the lower cadres of the field staff, who are inadequately trained to motivate the clients who need public service incentives. (In Malaysia, the government counters are manned by the officers, not the clerical staff).

The whole structure of the government field offices have to be recast, if the civil service re-oriented to be is cooperative and come out in the open, and the political will can concentrate on internal problems of state management exercises — political exposure is much more than facing the public from behind the microphone.

But the problem is that the elected representatives are all the time busy with too much politics, and leave the routine jobs to the routine people who are content to pass the day in a routine manner! Development is not a routine activity, but full of initiative and innovation day in and day out; and it is no use blaming the past regimes for deeds and misdeeds. Someone has to show the way. We are approaching the millennium with the log-of-wood mentality!

To speak bluntly, the standards culture, beginning with the standard of the human resources who supervise the activities in the society, has to be cultivated (and practised) from the very top level, that is by the political leadership followed by the civil service, who implement the public standards in all the sectors. The improvement of any standard is proportional to the upper limit set by the senior supervisors themselves.

The present activities and enhanced roles of agencies like the BSTI, BSCIC, BITAC, the handloom board, silk agencies and others may be reviewed by the government, including encouragement for active cooperation and participation of the private sector, after fruitful exchange of views with an umbrella body like the FBCCI.

At present the interaction between the public and the private sector are not seamless, and many invisible walls exist, together with considerable areas of communication gap. The initiative has to come from the government, as the small com-

panies are too busy with own day to day worries. The bureaucracy must become technical-minded and make themselves approachable at the field and local office level (that is why we are going to have the local government set up through the future local elections).

The days of file-oriented, pen-holding administration are gone. The officers have to get up from their chairs and move about, inside and outside their offices, and have to be field-oriented, and have to have face to face confrontations with the clients, instead of leaving this important interfacing task to the lower cadres of the field staff, who are inadequately trained to motivate the clients who need public service incentives. (In Malaysia, the government counters are manned by the officers, not the clerical staff).

The whole structure of the government field offices have to be recast, if the civil service re-oriented to be cooperative and come out in the open, and the political will can concentrate on internal problems of state management exercises — political exposure is much more than facing the public from behind the microphone.

But the problem is that the elected representatives are all the time busy with too much politics, and leave the routine jobs to the routine people who are content to pass the day in a routine manner! Development is not a routine activity, but full of initiative and innovation day in and day out; and it is no use blaming the past regimes for deeds and misdeeds. Someone has to show the way. We are approaching the millennium with the log-of-wood mentality!

To speak bluntly, the standards culture, beginning with the standard of the human resources who supervise the activities in the society, has to be cultivated (and practised) from the very top level, that is by the political leadership followed by the civil service, who implement the public standards in all the sectors. The improvement of any standard is proportional to the upper limit set by the senior supervisors themselves.

The present activities and enhanced roles of agencies like the BSTI, BSCIC, BITAC, the handloom board, silk agencies and others may be reviewed by the government, including encouragement for active cooperation and participation of the private sector, after fruitful exchange of views with an umbrella body like the FBCCI.

At present the interaction between the public and the private sector are not seamless, and many invisible walls exist, together with considerable areas of communication gap. The initiative has to come from the government, as the small com-

skilled agricultural workers and protect them from exploitation; enact and enforce rural labour legislation relating to conditions of work, including minimum wage standards. Fix the work time of agricultural labour and re-fix their wages.

Establish a single parcel basis system of land registration, which needs modification of existing laws and introduction of new legislation. Create an efficient and responsive surveying documentation, recording and taxation system, which would provide an efficient and transparent land administration of the government for the public. Redesign existing register books, indexes and khatians and create a stand alone 'Land Register' showing existing land ownership and new transaction. Develop a redesigned Khatian (certificate of land rights) to record all interests, liens, encumbrances and changes in each individual plot. Develop forms for transacting in land, which would be registered and retained on public record. Develop a systematic procedure of cross check to reduce multiplicity. Modernize and computerize the land deed writing system.

Land Revenue Department of Bangladesh Government has many experienced, educated and trained staff. Government is not using them in and during survey works. Rather they are alleged to be indulged in corruption and mismanagement. According to existing rule, the Land Revenue Officer should be present in the survey field during the survey and mapping time. But in fact, it is not happening, leading obviously, to corruption and mismanagement. Besides, during the survey time, no magistrate remains present in the survey field. As such people are compelled to register their complaints in the court and cases drag on there for months and years.

It is found that the National Land Revenue Board has not been doing the proper mutation works in due time. Consequently, dual ownership is often created. Besides, the Board never properly identified khas land, khas water bodies, khas ponds, enemy property, abandoned property as well as unused land under different government office. Consequently, land grabbers have occupied these lands. Existing land ceiling has not been properly imposed.

Present agricultural system is too traditional. Government has never identified experienced agricultural workers. There is no fixed time and appropriate wage for agricultural labour in Bangladesh.

The sharecropping law has never been used. The present land distribution committee is dependable on bureaucrats.

This land reform has never been a success due to lack of political will and vested interest groups within and outside government.

Conduct parallel reforms at all levels at a time. Land acquisition needs of the government should be determined strictly in accordance with an overall national land use policy to ensure optimum utilization of land resources.

Government should take steps for such pro-poor administrative reforms, as would reduce conflicts over land as well as bureaucratic corruption and increase small holder security. Enhancing poor people's right to land as is by the political leadership followed by the civil service, who implement the public standards in all the sectors. The improvement of any standard is proportional to the upper limit set by the senior supervisors themselves.

Government should identify the

BANGLADESH is an agrarian country with most of its population socially, economically and politically dependent on agriculture. Agriculture remains the major source of employment, but that is yet very traditional and Bangladesh remains one of the poorest countries, despite having the most fertile soil, in the world. Poverty is endemic with nearly 47 per cent of the population living in conditions of absolute poverty. Among them 56 per cent are landless and more than 80 per cent are still living in villages. They are out and out related to land but possess no land and no production implements. A few landlords control the major portion of cultivable land where most of the peasants work either as labour or as sharecroppers.

Thousands and thousands of acres are virtually government owned khas land. According to the existing government rules and regulations, landless people have right to own these lands. However, due to their unawareness and lack of information in this regard as well as they having no unity among themselves to loudly voice their claim to be heard, they could not establish access to these lands. Most of the khas lands are unauthorisedly occupied by so-called landlords. According to an unofficial figure there are 21,37,905 acres of khas land in our country. But due to the land grabbing process still going strong by the powerful rural poor who are not able to carry out the court cases for a long time are becoming landless and day by day losing all their other belongings. Consequently, they are taking shelter on the high roads and embankments constructing 'Gram Basti' (village slums) and waiting to migrate to urban centres, specially Dhaka city, for survival.

The total land area of Bangladesh is approximately 35 million acres. Of this, 64 per cent is under cultivation. No other country in the world has such a high percentage of its land area under cultivation. The remaining 36 per cent is covered by waterways, settlements, roads and forests. Fallow land, as proportion of total land area is less than 3 per cent. Over the last twenty-five years, population has increased from 70 million to 133 million. Per capita land availability today is 18 acres. Land scarcity and landlessness are integrally linked. The 1997 Agriculture Census reveals that 10 per cent of households own no land whatsoever whether homestead or

rest of the khas lands gone; how

much in river erosion, and how much gained through accretion?

Present Problems

The system of land administration of Bangladesh is complex, couched in archaic terms and conditions and there is general lack of landholder's confidence in the records, witnessed by the unduly high proportion of matters that are litigated in the courts.

Current structure of land administration is built around three core functions: 1) Record Keeping; 2) Registration; 3) Settlement.

Each of these functions is handled by a different category of offices. At the lowest tier, the function of record keeping is the jurisdiction of the Tahsil office while that of registration is of the sub-registrar's office, and there is an altogether different office which handles the function of settlement. The major problem here is that ownership rights are being recorded in two different offices each of which is located in completely different executive jurisdiction process. Tahsil office has a chain of command descending from the Ministry of Law. Similar is the case with settlement.

The problem arises when there is a conflict around land claims. Say,

there is a long dispute in a village. Now, to have a satisfactory resolution of this dispute, the most important requirement is the proof of ownership. Now, if one party brings a proof from Tahsil office, and yet another from the