

Poverty, child labour and education: The apparent link

MA BARI

At this stage of culmination of scientific development and technological advancement in all spheres of life it is paradoxical that 215 million children of the world have to work, sometimes in hazardous situations, to earn their bread, when they are supposed to go to school. However, it is a positive sign that international anxiety about child is mounting and the fact that there is a linkage between child labour and education is being apparent.

Anyone under the age of 14 years is considered a child in most of the countries in this part of the world and completion of his/her compulsory education while in employment has become a legal norm now. The most widely ratified treaty is the convention on the rights of the child adopted in 1989 which was initiated by Poland in 1979. The final texts of the convention were unanimously adopted by the General Assembly of UNO by resolution 44/25 and it gained extraordinary momentum. The Article 32 of the convention says "the children be protected not only from work that is hazardous or harmful in terms of child health or physical development, but also which is likely to interfere with the child's education or to be harmful to the child's mental, spiritual, moral or social development." The ILO Convention 138 also obliges member states to ensure that no child below the age of compulsory schooling is employed.

About 140 million children between the age of 6 and 11 in the developing countries do not go to school and perform visible and/or invisible work. In the middle income countries the child labour situation is casting an unobligated shadow on the fringe of the society. Child labour in the industrialised countries also depict a poignant picture, for example about 5.5 million children between the age of 12 and 17 work violating the child labour laws in the United States.

Childhood is a critical stage of life which deserves nurturing and stimulating environment that fosters growth and development in all areas of their lives. Quality basic education plays an important role in developing worthy life and learning skill that paves the way to attaining the other rights to health, nutrition, pre-adulthood demands and helps the children in becoming self-reliant and self-sufficient assets of the society and country as a whole.

The ideas about childhood in the developed industrial societies and the developing countries are not the

same. In the rich societies they consider their children as precious source of pride in family. They send their coddled children to school to become a productive adult. But the children in many less developed countries have no school to go and poverty forces them to work for food.

In the world the name Bangladesh is associated with poverty and natural calamities that shatter the economy and hope of the country with tragic repetition. Demographically the country is under pressure of population density with an agrarian culture. Income is among the lowest in the world. No industrial development except garment sector can be worth mentioning. Children here work for several reasons ranging from poverty and illiteracy to lack of pedagogical opportunities. Many children are work to help their families to earn the daily bread. They lack access to healthcare, nutrition, education, safe water and sanitation. According to a recent survey (2000), 6.6 million children work for 301 types of jobs, 49 of which deemed hazardous for children. In rural areas main occupations of children are house work, farming, weaving, fishing, climbing trees for fruit harvesting, mud and clay making in potters, earth filling, in the construction sites and in rural industries. In urban areas the works are of different types: domestic aid, shop and restaurant labour, transport helper, rag-picking, brick-breaking and unskilled works in the formal and informal industries.

In response to the child labour deterrence Bill (Harkin Bill) 1993 a memorandum of understanding (MOU) was signed in Dhaka in 1995 among Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA), UNICEF Bangladesh, ILO Bangladesh to move children from garments floor in a phased manner to school providing stipend and other incentives. But lack of monitoring of the MOU is only leading the children to the floor of factories to seek job.

Thousands of children outside the garment sector have something to say about their persisting odd jobs and labour, about want of schooling, about their future and their daunting position in the world. They have an undeniable right to be established and their cry to be heard.

Reduction of poverty has an important role to play in elimination of child labour, because the curse forces children to earn their living at a very young age and forgo the opportunity of education. It does not mean that poverty is to be eliminated before child labour does. It is to be advocated that proper attention is given in a

thoughtful and meaningful way to the education of children to pave way for elimination of poverty. Education is a fundamental right even where work is inevitable. It is the parents who are obliged to help accomplish the rights of their children. They should be both convinced and made able to do it.

Following the Jomtien, Thailand (5-9 March 1990) world declaration on education for all and the framework for action to meet basic learning needs, the leaders of nine high-population developing nations of the world Bangladesh, Brazil, China, Egypt, India, Indonesia, Mexico, Nigeria and Pakistan, which together contain more than half of the world's population met at "Education for all summit" in Delhi on 16 December 1993 to reaffirm their commitment to pursue with the goal set for the year 2000. From 26 to 28 April 2000 over 1500 participants from 181 countries met in Dakar, Senegal for a threeweek follow up of Jomtien conference and Delhi declaration and a new global commitment to basic education ensuring that universal access to quality basic education is achieved by 2015 was adopted.

The government of Bangladesh took commendable steps by introducing legislation to make primary education compulsory in 1990, by separating Primary and Mass Education Division from the Ministry of Education and putting it under the direct charge of Prime Minister of the country. The enrolment rate has been increased but drop out rate could not be controlled as expected due to some reasons, viz little improvement in (1) class room environment for teaching and learning, (2) school quality (except some private ones), (3) social mobilization and communication, (4) teachers motivation, (5) curriculum, (6) method of teaching.

For such improvements Bangladesh is spending only 2.17 per cent of her national income and is placed at 137th position among 149 countries and at the bottom amongst the SAARC countries. Sri Lanka spends 3.4 per cent and India 3.2, Japan and Germany 7 per cent and Canada 7.1 per cent of their GDP. Senegal is at the top to spend 33.3 per cent of her budget for education whereas Bangladesh spends only 12.1 per cent on education from the budget allocation and is placed at 97th position among 132 countries.

Survey reveals the reasons why in urban areas children do not attend school. These are: (1) Children are not interested 15%, (2) parents are not interested 5%, (3) need time to work 24%, (4) poverty 51%, (5) other reasons 5%. Here poverty stands in forefront on

the way of child education as hindrance. Alleviation of poverty by introducing substitution of income in the family can play a vital role in elimination of child labour. It is to be remembered that poverty does not mean adults are entitled to mortgage their children's future. Parents have the first responsibility in safeguarding their children's present and future lives. However, then poor parents need support from other sources, viability of which should be looked into.

Gradually eliminating all work that is harmful to children requires short-, medium- and long-term policies. Implementation of socio-economic policies with the aim of eradicating poverty and improving legal wages are urgently needed to rescue families from poverty. Poor children must have better access to preschool and primary education. For poor children subsidies in cash or kinds may be provided to dissuade them from abandoning school. Ministry of Education and Ministry of Finance have to become more involved to raise quality and number of schools and extend material support. School age children who are not in school have to be targeted for the same purpose. Children themselves and their parents also need to become more active participants in education process. As education is the core of struggle against child work, school must become a magnet for children. As an interim measure, a combination of work and school is better than no school at all. About 90 per cent of the learners cannot maintain their literacy after two years, so post literacy time is to be considered for repetition programme to retain their literacy.

The international day on elimination of child labour passed off on 30 April quietly in Bangladesh. UNICEF of Bangladesh came out with a campaign "Say Yes For Children" with ten imperative action programmes for children. Would it be ridiculous if we "say yes for children" while 215 million children of the world go to work places instead of schools just because they are in the midst of the process i.e. disparity in wealth distribution in the society? The adults should be ashamed of seeing the childhood of such a colossus number being robbed of in the vicinity of their vision!

Prof MA Bari is president, Dhaka City Committee of Bangladesh College-University Teachers Association.

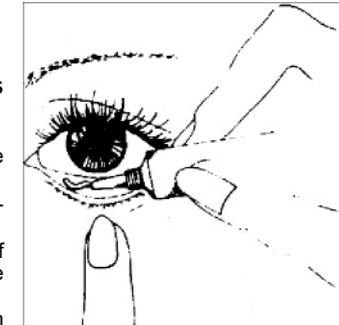


All health information to keep you up to date

Self-help

How to use eye ointments properly

1. Wash hands thoroughly before applying ointment.
2. Sit with your head tilted backward.
3. With a finger, pull the lower lid of our eye down and look towards the eye.
4. Squeeze the ointment from the tube along the inside margin of the lower eyelid. Do not touch the eye or eyelid with the tip of the ointment tube.
5. Blink several times. Close the eye (do not rub the eye) and wipe off any excess ointment from the lashes.



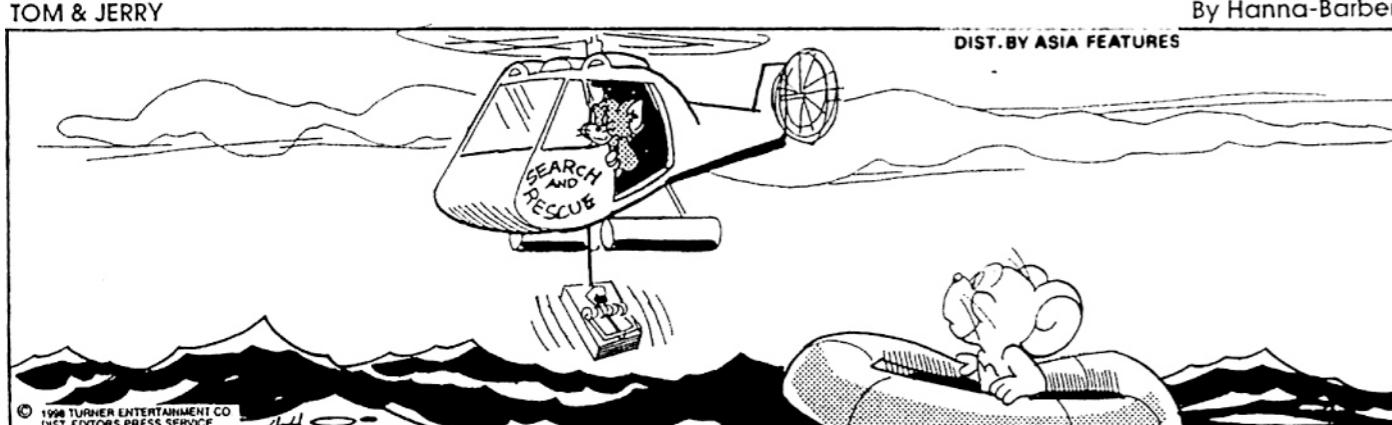
Beware!

Big talkers of medicine

Some people are really good talkers and can easily influence people around them. They are very fond of giving expert opinions about various diseases and medicines. Some people have their own imaginary concepts about diseases and medicines. Such people can be dangerous if they happen to prescribe some toxic medicine. There are others some of whom claim that they have many doctors in their family. They take it as a privilege to prescribe medicines with a great deal of authority and confidence just because they are related to doctors. It is very common that once we hear something about a particular medicine or disease we keep passing on that information whenever given a chance to talk about. One tells another, so on and so forth, just for the heck of it, without any real knowledge or scientific background. Neither should one follow the instructions of people who are not experts in medicine.

Next: Around the world

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TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE

EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR

The spirit of co-existence

The nation feels proud that the bold and prompt action of the BDR enabled it to repulse the BSF troops across the Assam-Bangladesh border at Boraili village. We also congratulate BDR for re-capturing Padua. The entire picture would perhaps be clearer if our government had published statements by the two BSF jawans captured during the 'undeclared mini-war' within our sovereign territory.

Might is not always right. In this connection, I would like to quote the words of Indira Gandhi. In 1976 she asked me "Was it a friendly act to take Farakka issue to the United Nation?" My response was, "Is unilateral withdrawal of Ganges water a friendly act?"

This time again as reported in the press, BSF in violation of a friendly act has entered our sovereign territory. The evidence left behind leaves no room for doubt. The propaganda machinery of India has maligned our people without assessing the facts. They must stop vilification and fabrication of misconstrued stories. It is to the interest of both the countries that the truth be faced and the facts be established for peaceful co-existence.

Rear Admiral MH Khan
Former Chief of The Naval Staff
Bangladesh Navy

While addressing the present border situation it may be emphasised that we have not been and shall not be the aggressor but let it be known to all that the people of Bangladesh have the courage and self pride to deny others to come and plunder us.

One hopes that the Indian government, in the spirit of cooperation, would be gracious to give compensation for uprooting our people and setting fire to the huts. Our prime minister has already regretted the loss of life on the Indian side whereas, we have yet to see in any press report from the other side regretting the loss of life on our side.

The people of Bangladesh rightfully expect an apology from the Indian government for the BSF intrusion. It is regrettable to see a statement of the Indian Home Secretary to create a rift between the Bangladesh government with one of its agencies, as reported in the press. Such a statement from a responsible officer is out of place and devoid of all international protocol.

We hope India, in the spirit of SAARC, refrains from taking such unilateral action in future and avoids any untoward loss of life consequently uprooting people from their homestead.

Rear Admiral MH Khan
Former Chief of The Naval Staff
Bangladesh Navy

Accusing Bangladesh



BDP troops guarding our border
"Is it right to legitimate people's self-defence a war crime?" April 29, Law and Our Rights) in detail about the border clashes between India and Bangladesh. I believe that this comprehensive information, coming from someone credible, is very essential for us. I want to express my full understanding and consolidation with the peaceful people of Bangladesh who have face the armed Indian BSF.

Unfortunately for a long period of time, India has been conducting an aggressive policy towards its neighbour-



Marat

Baku, Azerbaijan

Guarding the border

I must thank the brave soldiers of the BDR for guarding our border. They have fulfilled their duty and should do so in future. Whoever tries to intrude into our country should be repulsed. We pray for the departed souls of those BDR soldiers who died in this clash. We feel deeply sorry for their families. But at the same time, are proud of those valiant soldiers who sacrificed their lives to guard their motherland.

Razu Ahmed Nurul Hudda
North Ryde, Australia

The Indian argument

Bangladesh is ungrateful: This argument doesn't cut much ice because: (a) the Indian assistance in 1971 (altruistic or otherwise) does not give India an eternal claim to Bangladesh's gratitude, irrespective of the ground reality today and (b) there is still an influential section of Bangladeshi society which is thankful for India's role in 1971.

Today, there is growing resentment at India's role in the region, especially among young people. For them, the 1971 war is a blur in the memory or stuff the older generation speaks of. They are not as emotional about the Liberation War as the older generation. They are citizens of a sovereign country and expect to be treated that way. The 'you are ungrateful' argument will only strengthen the India haters among the Bangladeshi youth.

We should teach them a lesson: This is only a manifestation of the 'big brother' attitude, of which India is accused. I am not saying that India should take atrocities against it lying down or let forces that are detrimental to India's interests, go unchecked. But merely making barefaced statements like 'give them a fitting response', 'annihilate them' will get India nowhere.

Many in India referred to the recent apology from President Bush over the Chinese warplane incident and asked that if China could 'bring the US to its knees' why the same could not be done to Bangladesh. The fact, as reported by the Indian media is that the BSF was in the wrong. Sure, the treatment of the BSF soldiers was inhuman. However tough it may be, India needs to check its emotions, address the crux of this tension and devise a long-term solution.

The Bangladeshi response: The refrain here is that the Indian media is biased and has suddenly realised the existence of Bangladesh. Fact is, there is very little interest in Bangladesh by the common man in India, leave alone the Indian media. It is not really surprising since the same applies to say, coverage of South Asia/South Asians in the western media. Even in the UK, where South Asians are part of the mainstream now, their representation in news/media is poor.

There are many people in India, educated and urban, who would be hard pressed to locate Bangladesh on a world map. The reason may lie in India's size, pressures of modern life, plethora of 'distractions' (local TV, cinema), attitude of not looking beyond one's nose etc. In contrast, the obsession among Bangladeshis is trading insults on Bangladesh. The Bangladeshis are either on some kind of superiority trip or spewing venom on India. (The common refrain from Bangladeshis is an indicator for superiority seems to be the foreign cars in Bangladesh.)

versus the rickety Ambassador in India. Please!

The situation can easily go out of hand and will be detrimental for both sides in the long run, if unchecked. What is required is some level headed thinking on both sides.

This may sound all too simplistic, but India/Indians should:

Implement the Indira-Mujib accord.

Respect the sovereignty of Bangladesh.

Take steps to correct the trade imbalance.

Take steps to stop the illegal immigration into India.

Address the big-brother perception.

Check forces that are inimical to India's interests in the neighbouring countries.

Bangladesh/Bangladeshis should:

Stop being obsessed with India.

Look inward to address many of the country'sills.

Stop playing the India bogey as an election ploy/influence on the masses.

Take steps to stop the illegal migrants into India.

A Proud Indian
India

True 'True Indian'

This is from an Indian, a rather true one, regarding the so-called border clash between Bangladesh and India and the unprecedented reaction it has generated on both sides of the border.



On the Indian side, BSF continues its vigil

What's wrong with us! Nobody has got a single kind word to say about the other side. Did we really have this kind of hatred for each other or as usual are proving ourselves incapable of handling issues regarding national pride and self-respect?

The 'True Indian' whose letter opened the floodgates must be smiling in his hideout, since he did not care to expose himself after writing that shattering letter, because his purpose is served.

Babar Anwar
Dallas, Texas

Being an Indian myself, I know these kind of people very well, the kind of people who breathe hatred, eat hatred and just cannot live without hatred. È

My request to the Bangladeshi intelligentsia will be not to fall in their trap. A couple of 'True Indians' should not make an entire nation of one billion a villain in the eyes of our beloved neighbours. I believe the Indira-Mujib accord can still provide the starting point and I hope this madness will end as soon as possible.

We will handle the border that we share with equal grace and understanding with which we share our Rabeendra-Nazrul-Lalon.