

Teachers, primary education and the budget

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We have witnessed recently the disgraceful spectacle of demonstrating teachers of non-govt. primary schools being clubbed and injured by police, and teachers on hunger strike lying on the street. Primary school teachers, far away from their classrooms, agitating and demonstrating for better salaries and working conditions have become a regular sight. They now promise to continue to press their demands through various means of protest, staying away from their students, because the new 2004-5 budget, in their view, has not made provisions to meet their demands.

That low remuneration of primary school teachers is a problem is well-recognised. A teacher's salary even in the government primary school is less than of a driver in a government office. It is even lower in the registered non-government primary schools, where also the government is the paymaster. The teachers in these schools are technically not government employees, but they are paid by the government through a mechanism of enlisting them in what is called the monthly pay order (MPO). The present and periodic agitation of the non-government primary school teachers is on the issue of bringing up the MPO payment to the level of the regular government teachers.

About a third of over 300 thousand primary school teachers in the country teach roughly a quarter of the 17 million primary school children in the registered non-government schools. For almost two decades the number of government primary schools has remained the same at around 38,000. The de facto government policy is not to increase the number of government schools, but to meet increased demands for primary education through schools established by communities, and assisted by the government (with salary subvention, grants for building, and supervision). The argument in favour of this policy is that it is essential to have community involvement in the management and maintenance of quality in the primary school, which does not happen in a government school staffed by government employees. The village school should be an institution of the community, answerable to the parents and the local people, rather than an entity managed by a remote bureaucracy, it has been argued. Supplementing public resources with community contribution in cash and kind for primary education is also an important consideration.

Populism and politicisation by all major political parties have clouded the issue of teachers' remuneration. The main political parties have seen the primary school teachers -- who are organised through their unions, spread all over the country, and are opinion-leaders as educated persons in rural communities -- as useful political allies. The political parties, especially when they are in the opposition, have been very liberal in making promises to raise teachers' salaries, "nationalise" all primary schools and make all primary teachers government

employees. How or if these measures improve children's education have not been the concern. Nor the teachers, in pressing their demands, have shown any sign of worry about quality of education in their schools.

There are evidences galore about the very poor value for money from primary schools. One-third of children after five years of primary schooling remain illiterate, according to Education Watch, an independent research group. At least a third of the students who enrol in primary schools drop out before completing the level of education. One out of five children do not even enrol. There is no substantial difference in respect of

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these outcomes between government primary schools and the registered non-government ones.

Clearly, raising the salary of "MPO" teachers to the level of the government teachers, enlisting more teachers into the MPO, or "nationalising" all primary schools per se will make little difference for children's education. This is not an argument against higher remuneration for primary school teachers. All who are concerned about the quality of education support better rewards and recognition for teachers. All, perhaps even the Finance Minister, would agree that the government should spend more money on teachers' salary as well as other essential inputs for quality improvement in education. The question is how increased salaries and other expenditures can be linked to better learning results. The original arguments for community-established and government-assisted schools remain valid, if only because the "nationalised" schools have not done much better in spite of the higher salaries and other costs in these schools.

Populism and expedient promises by political parties are not helpful. Some increase in subvention and allowances for the non-government teachers may mollify them for now. They will come back with demands to become full government staff, but that will not necessarily serve children's interest. The policy makers in the government need to find a rational approach to satisfying teacher's legitimate demands and serve children's educational needs at the

same time.

The new six-year mega project for primary education development (PEDP II), about to be launched soon, proposes a reconsideration of and increase in teachers' remuneration. It is essential that a way is found to link salary increase with performance and accountability of teachers and schools. A rational approach in this regard should include the following elements:

A system of assessing and certifying primary school teachers by an independent authority established for this purpose should be introduced. This is the practice in most developed countries and is under consideration for the secondary schools in Bangladesh. Teachers who qualify should become eligible for a national salary scale, even if they teach in a registered non-government school.

Additional tiers for teaching positions, such as senior teacher and master teacher, can be introduced in primary school in order to reward better performance. Promotion to these positions should be based on performance criteria and tests conducted by the assessing and certifying authority. Positions of headmaster (and assistant headmaster in larger schools) should be created to recognise and reward the leadership function in the primary school.

Schools should receive per student grants, based on average student attendance, for books, learning materials, maintenance and similar essential operating expenses.

Schools should be awarded bonuses based on a few well-defined performance criteria (such as, class five tests conducted externally, scholarship examination results, reduction in dropout and absenteeism of students, etc.). A part of the bonus can be distributed among teachers and the rest used for school's improvement as determined by the managing committee.

Clearly, total budgets for education including primary education, one of the lowest even among developing countries as a share of GNP and the government budget, should be increased in a major way. At the same time, use of present fund allocations should be examined critically. The funds allocated at present for stipends for primary school students, two thirds of all government development expenditure for primary education, can pay for the measures suggested above. Many experts have argued that this would be a better use of the stipend expenditure and would do more to attract students to school and keep them there.

How much attention can a primary school child hope to receive from his or her teacher? Very little. It has been revealed that in primary schools, there are about

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Primary schooling in disarray



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50 children enrolled for each teacher. This implies that even if all teachers are always present and actively teaching during school hours, the total amount of teacher-time per child is, on an average, just around one hour a month. In one finding it has been revealed that children who have managed to study up to class five learned almost nothing. Most of them are unable to read or write even after several years of schooling. Other than that, their handwriting is abysmal. The reason is that paper is costly and children do not get or their parents cannot provide them with enough paper or copy book to practice handwriting.

Besides, very little teaching goes on in most of the schools. Often teachers are not there. Even if some teachers are there, teaching activi-

about national identity and culture, its educational structure is crumbling down. Turning outside Dhaka city one will find to his utter dismay that most of the country side is portrait of human misery because of our failure to invest in our children's future. But there is also display of wealth: new cars are being imported, businessmen and politicians of all hues are crowding here.

But, artificial or actual, no boom can be sustained if certain problems are not solved, specifically, educating the masses, and providing them such basic necessities as sufficient food, vaccines for the young, and water that does not make people sick. The report card on these vital issues is still quite dismal. The recent report sponsored by the United Nations Develop-

This is a soul searching question for the whole nation and our visionary leaders must now ponder as to what it means by investing in education above all other projects. Situation in the educational sector in the country is now messy and chaotic. Most institutions have been pushed to the ropes by a severe resource crunch, dearth of qualified and competent teachers and lack of supervisory control in the teaching modules.

ity is minimal. Teaching aids are seldom available, let alone used. Teachers, for their part, feel that their working conditions are not conducive to better teaching methods. In most schools, teachers have to deal with more than one level of student at the same time. Some teachers in such situations concentrate their efforts on the higher grades, leaving the younger children to their own devices. No wonder that the younger children make slow progress.

The situation in the secondary schools and colleges is also equally appalling. English is hardly taught even at the secondary stage and there is a dearth of competent English teachers. As it appears, education from primary to college level is a low priority subject. In this background it is easier to understand why so many children drop out, despite the high level of parental interest in their education.

On the other hand, teachers' quality and teaching ability are also abysmal. Because many of them are roped their way to the teaching profession, most often not to their likings and interest. No wonder the teaching job that demands high commitment from the teachers is distinctly missing. The dismal performance of the students in the SSC and HSC examinations year after year calls for an in-depth analysis of the state of education in the country. While the country is agog with lofty schemes of building infrastructure for development and leaders are making great fuss

opment Programme concludes that this part of Asia has become the poorest, most illiterate, and malnourished region in the world. Despite so much of hue and cry, Bangladesh has still about 46 per cent illiterate population and literacy still means just to be able to read "Sona Monider Para" or write one's name.

Bangladesh today faces gigantic problems on many fronts. Not so long ago, this country was thought to be among the areas with the greatest potential for progress in the Third World. But now the spurt of chaotic violence, divisive politics, and hatred on party lines consume the whole country. Some of our leaders may have visionary moves, but these moves still fail to focus on the basic needs of the masses, long overlooked. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the realm of education. Arresting unfair means or expelling students resorting to unfair means is no solution of the problem the nation is now facing on the education front.

Severely incensed at such exploitation of collecting fees much in excess of the expenditure incurred and non-compliance with their statutory obligation of fulfilling 25 percent of seats with children from the weaker sections and granting scholarships to them, the Delhi parents associations filed a suit in the Delhi High Court. The court in a landmark judgment on April 27 directed the school authorities to slash the school fees by about 60 percent, thus fulfilling the aspirations of middle class and lower middle class parents of educating their wards.

Small wonder, the case came up

before the Supreme Court as appeals by several private schools in Delhi against a High Court judgment. The Supreme Court authorised the Director of Education in Delhi to regulate the fees and other charges to prevent commercialisation of education. It permitted the managements of such private schools to charge development fees not exceeding 15 percent of the total annual tuition fee.

The administration in our country can't remain totally oblivious about the hardship the middle class and lower middle class people are undergoing in educating their children. Measures should be taken to see that these private schools are registered under the

Directorate of Education and their fiscal budget, tuition and development fee collection process come under close scrutiny and is regulated by a strict code set by the Ministry of Education. In any case, it is never desirable that education should be commercialised in such a blatant way.

That pinpoints the responsibility of the government that must provide in public education what parents are now obliged to buy privately. This has far-reaching consequences that the administration may not be able to realise immediately. This apart, sensible citizens are dismayed by the loss of bright young boys to education overseas. At least hundreds of thousands of young learners in the secondary and higher secondary stages are migrating to the US, India and European countries for their schooling and in search of a life that is apparently absent in this country. Few countries can take satisfaction from such departure of their best and brightest.

What has happened in the country in the education sector is mostly an irrational approach. Education programmes were based on targets hurled from above. Some new schools with political consideration were built and quite a substantial amount of funds distributed. Government attempted to get a certain percentage of population into schools but did little else. One would rather be shocked to see that mothers have made beelines on school day during school hours for collecting "incentive stipend money" while no students were seen in and around the primary school compound in a village Bayardanga 14 km away from Kalaroa upazila in the Sathkhira district. The process only helped to turn some "record keepers" in the Directorate of Education office into millionaires because of unbridled corruption creeping in the system in absence of proper checks and balances, surveillance and monitoring of projects by the elected representatives.

This is a soul searching question for the whole nation and our visionary leaders must now ponder as to what it means by investing in education above all other projects. Situation in the educational sector in the country is now messy and chaotic. Most institutions have been pushed to the ropes by a severe resource crunch, dearth of qualified and competent teachers and lack of supervisory control in the teaching modules. To meet all such challenges, all these impoverished schools and colleges need efficient and qualified teachers with motivation, commitment and dedication. At the same time, government must take effective steps in putting curb on private tuition by teachers that goes at the expense of class-room teaching. This will promote egalitarianism among students and restore an atmosphere of fair education system.

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Producing rice in sustainable way

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T has been reported (Far Eastern Agriculture January/February, 2004) that the United Nations has launched a major international drive to increase the production of rice. Dr Jacques Diouf, Director General of UN Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), while launching the International Year of Rice 2004 from UN headquarters, expressed his view that rice was the staple food for over half of world's population but warned that its production was facing serious constraints. Dr Diouf pointed out that world population was continuously growing, but land and water resources for rice production were diminishing day by day. He urged the global community to work together to increase rice production in a sustainable way that would benefit farmers, women, children and specially the poor. Dr Diouf also felt that the year of rice would act as a catalyst for country-driven programmes throughout the world. This is a timely announcement made by the Director General of FAO and Bangladesh should utilize and take proper advantage from this major international drive to boost her production of rice.

Cereal crops play an important role in Bangladesh as in other countries of the world. Cereals occupy about 82 percent of the total cropped area of which rice alone covers about 96 percent. Over 90 percent of all rice is produced and consumed in Asian countries. The total land of Bangladesh is 35.55 million acres of which only 62 percent i.e. 23.46 million acres are cultivable. On the other hand the total population of the country is about 120 million or more. The growth of population is very alarming with no expansion of land in foreseeable future. Bangladesh produces only 2377 kg of rice per hectare annually (FAO, 1987) on average. But it is now imperative that the production of rice should be doubled to mitigate the sufferings of the poor.

It is a matter of great satisfaction that the government has taken various programmes to alleviate poverty. Therefore, in order to achieve success in the production of rice, necessary sustainable ways must be found out to implement the initiatives taken by FAO. Many member countries have already formed national committees for the international year of rice and they will serve as the dynamic link between international vision and practical realities in the local people's lives. It is particularly important to augment rice production in a region like Bangladesh, because

rice is its principal food crop when the cultivable area is fixed vis-à-vis its high growth of population. It is now urgently felt that the government should immediately form a National Committee for the international year of rice with the inclusion of agricultural scientists, teachers of universities engaged in research, and technologists to link with other global countries globally.

The aims and objectives of the committee will be to sort out the problems of management of soil and water and give recommendations

that the presence of heavy metals like arsenic, cadmium, chromium in soil is very much detrimental to crop yield. So, there is every possibility that their content is likely to decline with the addition of organic matter in soils.

Next to soil is the need for rational use of water and its sustainability. It is imperative to ensure proper use of water resources and its management. There seems to be scarcity of water during drought while excessive rainwater often becomes very harmful. Proper drainage system be adopted to avoid the problem of

harmful and enhancing the beneficial environmental effects to ensure sustainable use of resources in agriculture, while maintaining an economically efficient agriculture sector should be the important policy objectives of our government.

Bangladesh should follow the timely directives offered by OECD (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development) in order to sustain agricultural productivity. The general policy approaches and specific measures should be adopted by us like OECD countries to address five environmental issues related to sustainability: soil conservation, conservation of nature, nutrient imbalances, heavy metal pollution and pesticide pollution.

for their remedial measures to ensure food security. Earlier Prime Minister Begum Khledza Zia spoke on qualitative changes to be brought in crop production management and motivational programmes to induce the farmers to go for modern cultivation. While inaugurating the world food day programme at Osmani Memorial Auditorium in Dhaka on October 16, 2002, she also stressed the need for educating the farmers on soil and water management. It has been brought into light that the population in Bangladesh would increase to 170 million in 2005 raising the demand for food to 30 million metric tons reflecting a challenge to produce more food to feed the increasing number of mouths.

Maintenance of soil and water which are two components of crop productivity especially rice, be brought into consideration and due attention given by the scientists and researchers to accomplish the desired goal. Farmers of our country are acquainted with the knowledge of management of soil and water to go for modern cultivation by adopting scientific methods required for the purpose. They should be made aware of the fact that excessive use of chemical fertilizers deteriorates the quality of soil and consequently the crop yield. They should be apprised of the blessings of use of huge amount of organic matter to compensate the loss of plant nutrients due to excessive use of agrochemicals which refer to fertilizers and pesticides. It may be mentioned here

stagnancy. Excessive use of ground water be avoided; over dependence on ground water has been proved to have long term negative impact on environment. This dependency should be reduced ensuring best utilisation of surface water for the purpose of irrigation in the agricultural field. Preservation of surface water is a prime need and it may be done through making some reservoirs and evolving other means suitable for this purpose. The protection of ground water as both an environmental and public policy issue, its ecological and agricultural significance and its vulnerability to contamination should be stressed. Soil function, water quality, water in soil and watershed hydrology as well as management of soil and water for crop production, the reduction of yield of rice due to fungal diseases should also be brought under discussion and control measures adopted.

Blast, one of the most important fungal diseases of rice caused by Pyricularia oryzae causes severe damage to rice plant especially low land rice. This disease can reduce yield upto 50 percent. Fungicides may be applied to control this disease but these are harmful to human health and costly as well. A new concept of using micronutrients as fertilizer to reduce this disease on rice can be tried. It has been reported that rice grown in soils deficient in silicon, boron and manganese have high incidence of blast. But sufficient information and exhaustive number of studies have not yet been carried out in this regard. Reducing the