

## Keeping children in schools

There are too many drop-outs (more than 52%) among enrolled students, especially in primary school. In order to make the compulsory free primary education program successful, the nation has to solve the problems that stand in the way of enrollment and promote drop-out.

MD. MOSTAQUE HASSAN

**E** DUCATION is the best means of human resource development. Without it a country's socio-economic and cultural development can neither take place nor be sustained. But Bangladesh has lagged behind on this particular issue compared to other developed and developing countries, though primary education is compulsory in Bangladesh.

### Initiatives to promote primary education

Primary education is the foundation for higher education or further specialised education in different sectors. After the independence of Bangladesh the government took the responsibility of compulsory primary education. To fulfill the constitutional obligation the government nationalised 36,165 primary schools and enacted a compulsory primary education law in 1990. Furthermore, the then government created a separate Ministry (Primary and Mass Education Division-PMED) in 1992, introduced Compulsory Primary Education Program in 1992 and extended it throughout the country in 1993.

Bangladesh has one of the biggest primary education administrations in the world. More than 3 lakh 65 thousand teachers teach about 1 crore 64 lakh students in the 81,434 primary schools of 10 categories. Despite all enthusiasm and eagerness of the government, development of primary education poses a

daunting challenge because of inaccessibility and resource constraint.

Bangladesh, with technical and financial assistance from a consortium of 11 donors and led by the Asian Development Bank, launched the Primary Education Development Program (PEDP-II) aimed at improving the quality of student learning, reducing dropping-out, and ensuring 'education for all' by 2015.

Although the World Bank suggested allocating 4% of national revenue for the improvement of primary education NGO reports suggested 6%. Bangladesh spends 2.4% in this sector, which is the lowest in South Asia. Moreover, the government had increased funding for education but the expenditure per student is still low. Teachers are poorly trained and paid. Teaching methods and materials are generally sub-standard.

The government is well aware of the second goal of MDG, which is "achieving universal primary education" for all, and aims to achieve it by 2015. It is expected that children everywhere will be able to complete a full course of primary schooling within this time frame. The major initiatives of the government are: stipend program for rural students, food for education, girls stipend program, SLIP (School Level Improvement Plan) and so on.

### Present status of dropout in Bangladesh

Despite all the initiatives, the standard of education has not increased. Most alarm-

ing is the increasing trend of dropping-out, especially in primary education, but no initiative has been taken to reduce it. As per base line survey conducted by the Department of Primary Education (DPE), drop-out rate in primary education in 2002 was 33%, which became 47% in 2006 and 52.2% in 2007.

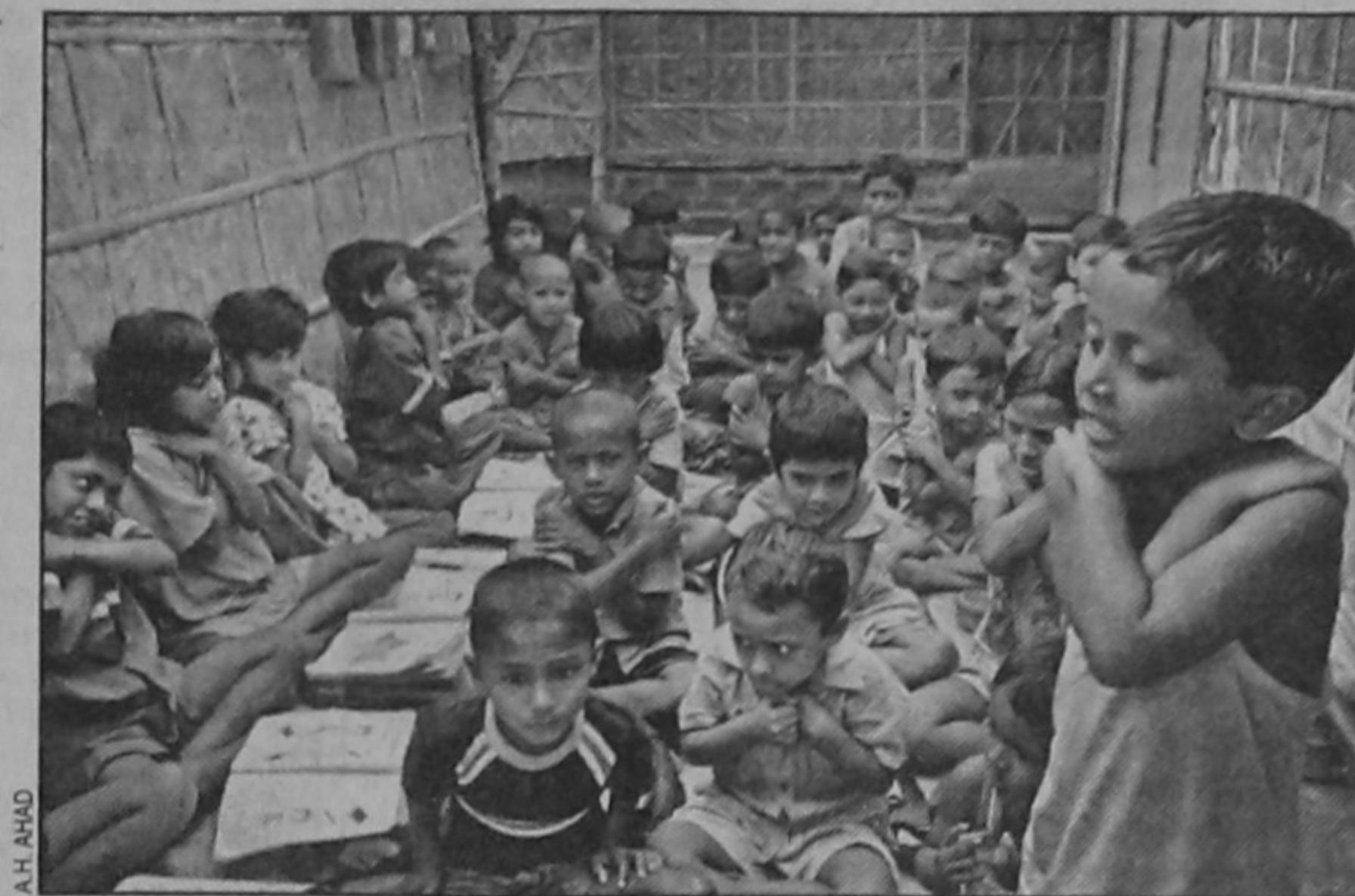
A study was conducted on this issue and many reasons were found for increased drop-out rate. They are: (i) poverty, (ii) early employment to support family, (iii) female children support family activities, (iv) lack of study facilities at home, (v) conditional stipend programs, (vi) no stipend programs in urban areas, (vii) poor guardians are not motivated, (viii) shortage of teachers in remote villages, (ix) improper distribution of teachers among schools, (x) teachers-students ratio is irrational, (xi) lack of skilled teachers, (xii) lack of teaching facilities in schools of remote villages, (xiii) teachers are engaged in extra-academic activities, which hampers teaching, (xiii) over-crowded classroom, (xiv) society is not responsive, (xv) government programs are not monitored as per guidelines, and a number of other related issues. Thus, all educational programs need to be re-designed to reduce drop-out rate to below 10% by 2015.

Recommendations for appropriate policy formulation to reduce dropout

- Teachers, school management committees (SMC), local administration, local authority and non-government organisations have to work in an integrated way and formulate an action plan for every year and implement activities as per plan;
- To ensure competency of the teachers, the government may start recruiting teachers subject-wise; particularly in English, mathematics and science;
- Guardians have to be aware about the performance of their wards in the class so that they can monitor them during study at home;
- Social responsiveness has to increase

by motivating the privileged section of the community;

- All PTIs are to be strengthened and school teachers are to be trained in modern teaching methods so that they can make study more effective and attractive;
- Teachers have to be attentive in the class and study should be completed at school level to avoid homework;
- Responsibilities of the officials involved in promoting primary education are to be strictly evaluated and necessary punitive measures are to be taken for negligence of duties;
- The performance of the students should be regularly reviewed at school. SMC can monitor this responsibility by making sudden visits to the schools;
- Officials should regularly visit the schools to see the attendance of both teachers and students and to evaluate the quality of education;
- Recreation facilities and co-curricular activities like sports, games, and debate competitions are to be organised and practised in the schools;
- Study tours, picnics and cultural programs are to be arranged for arousing interest among students in going to the school;
- Poor students are to be fed in the school during lunch-time;
- Systemic monitoring of classroom performance is needed; so that teachers and officials can know what is going on in the school;
- Poor guardians are to be given loan without interest so that they are encouraged to send their kids to school;
- The number of stipends should be increased to 75% at village level school and conditions should be relaxed. Urban primary schools are also to be brought under stipend program;
- Computers with internet connection could be ensured to introduce computer literacy. It could be started at the union headquarter schools of the country.
- SLIP (School Level Improvement Plan) committee prepares an annual plan for



Don't let them leave school.

one year, but SMC doesn't know or have any idea of this program. Thus, SMC is to be involved with SLIP initiatives;

- SLIP program is to be re-designed and involve SMC for efficient implementation. Thus, it could contribute in reducing dropout and improving quality of primary education;
- A clerical staff/officer assistant can be recruited in each school to relieve teachers from extra-academic activities;
- Teacher student ratio should be kept at 1:40 to ensure intensive teaching for improving the quality of education;
- Parents' day, mothers' gathering, quarterly SMC-guardian meeting should be arranged to make them aware of their responsibilities;
- Being local government representatives, the UP chairmen and members have a vital role to play in reducing drop-out rate and improving quality of education.

### Conclusion:

Education is called the backbone of the nation. Education removes darkness,

enlightens the mind, and develops the mental and moral faculties of human beings. Despite progress in access to primary education in Bangladesh a large number of children still have not yet got the opportunity to go to primary school due to various constraints. There are too many drop-outs (more than 52%) among enrolled students, especially in primary school. In order to make the compulsory free primary education program successful, the nation has to solve the problems that stand in the way of enrollment and promote drop-out. That is why the recommendations suggested here will help in formulating a strategy for reducing drop-out in our primary education. To achieve the MDG and target "Primary Education for all by 2015," multi-sectoral approaches need to be launched. Prior to this, the government has to formulate programs in a participatory way and implement them the same way.

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## How Eurocentric is your day?

This fall, I began my first lecture on Eurocentrism by asking my students: "How Eurocentric is your day?" I explained what I wanted to hear from them. Can they get through a typical day without running into ideas, institutions, values, technologies and products that originated outside the West -- in China, India, the Islamicate or Africa?

M. SHAHID ALAM

**A**t the outset of the classes I teach, I always address the question of bias in the social sciences. In one course -- on the history of the global economy -- this is the central theme. It critiques Eurocentric biases in several leading Western accounts of the rise of the global economy.

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The question befuddled my students. I proceeded to pepper them with questions about the things they do during a typical day, from the time they wake up.

Unbeknownst, my students discover that they wake up in "pajamas," trousers of Indian origin with an Urdu-Persian name. Out of bed, they shower with soap and shampoo, whose origins go back to the Middle East and India. Their tooth-

brush with bristles was invented in China in the fifteenth century. At some point after waking up, my students use toilet paper and tissue, also Chinese inventions of great antiquity.

Do the lives of my students rise to Eurocentric purity once they step out of the toilet and enter into the more serious business of going about their lives? Not quite.

I walk my students through their breakfast. Most likely, this consists of cereals, coffee and orange juice, with sugar added to the bargain. None originated in Europe. Cereals were first cultivated in the Fertile Crescent some ten thousand years BC. Coffee, orange and sugar still carry -- in their etymology -- telltale signs of their origins, going back to the Arabs, Ethiopians and Indians. Try to imagine your life without these stimulants and sources of calories.

How far could my students go without the alphabets, numbers and paper? Yet, the alphabet came to Europe courtesy of the ancient Phoenicians. As their name suggests, the Arabic numerals were brought to Europe by the Arabs, who, in turn, had obtained them from the



How Western is chemistry?

Indians. Paper came from China, also brought to Europe by the Muslims.

Obstinately, my students' day refuses to get off to a dignified Eurocentric start.

In their prayers, my Christian students turn to a God who -- in his human form -- walked the earth in Palestine and spoke Aramaic, a close cousin of Arabic.

When their thoughts turn to afterlife, my students think of the Day of Judgment, paradise and hell, concepts borrowed from the ancient Egyptians and Persians.

"Paradise" entered into English, via Greek, from the ancient Avestan *pairidaeza*.

Of medieval origin, the college was inspired and, most likely, modeled after

the madrasa, or Islamic college, first set up by a Seljuk vizier in eleventh century Baghdad. In a nod to this connection, professors at universities still hold a "chair," a practice that goes back to the madrasa, where the teacher alone sat in a chair while his students sat around him on rugs.

When they finish college and prepare to receive their Baccalaureate at the graduation ceremony, our students might do well to acknowledge another forgotten connection to the madrasa. This diploma harks back to the *ijaza* -- Arabic for license -- given to students who graduated from madrasas in the Islamicate.

Our student runs into fields of study -- algebra, trigonometry, astronomy, chemistry, medicine and philosophy -- that were introduced, via Latin, to Western Europe from the Islamicate. They also encounter a variety of scientific terms -- algorithm, alkali, borax, amalgam, alembic, amber, calibrate, azimuth and nadir -- which have Arabic roots.

If my students play chess over the weekend and threaten the king with "check mate," that phrase is adapted from Farsi *Shah maat*, which stands for "the king is helpless, defeated."

When they use coins or paper currency, or write a check, they are using forms of money first used outside Europe. Gold bars were first used as coins in Egypt in the fourth millennium BC. With astonishment, Marco Polo records the use of paper currency in China, and describes how the paper used as currency was made from the bark of mulberry trees.

At college, my students will learn about modernity, ostensibly the source and foundation of the power and the riches of Western nations. Their professors in sociology will claim that laws based on reasoning, the abolition of priesthood, the scientific method, and secularism -- hallmarks of modernity -- are entirely of Western origin. Are they?

During the eighteenth century, many of the leading Enlightenment thinkers were keenly aware that the Chinese had preceded them in their emphasis on reasoning by some two millennia. By the end of this century, however, a more muscular, more confident Europe chose

to erase the debt to China from its collective memory.

Similarly, Islam, in the seventh century, made a more radical break from priesthood than the Reformation in Europe. In the eleventh century, an Arab scientist, Alhazen -- his Latinised name -- conducted numerous experiments to test his theories in optics, but, more importantly, he also theorised cogently about the scientific method. Roger Bacon, the putative "founder" of the scientific method, had read Alhazen in a Latin translation.

When students read the sonnets of Shakespeare and Spenser, they are little aware that the tradition of courtly love they celebrate comes via Provencal and the troubadours (derived from *taraba*, Arabic for "to sing") from Arab traditions of love, music and poetry. When our male student gets down on one knee while proposing to his fair lady, he might do well to remember this.

On a clear night, with a telescope on the dormitory rooftop, our students can watch stars, many of which still carry Arabic names. This might be a fitting closure to a day in the life of our students, who, more likely than not, remain Eurocentric in their understanding of world history, little aware of the multifarious bonds that connect their lives to different parts of the Orient.

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## I'll have the string with meatballs, please



**Y**OU may have seen the recent news report that rice consumption in Asia has fallen sharply as people throughout the region turn to pasta. This worries me. I think pasta is weird, dangerous stuff.

An Italian friend named Giovanni once tried to convert me by inviting me to a pasta buffet at a hotel coffee-shop. I told him that I'd had it at my office canteen but he sneered: "Asian noodles are nothing like real pasta."

The first thing he showed me was farfalle. This consisted of small blobs of

shaped pasta. Next he showed me conchiglie. This consisted of small blobs of shaped pasta. Next came penne (small blobs of shaped pasta). Then we had cavatelli (small blobs of shaped pasta). These were followed by rotini, orecchiette, fusilli and gemelli (all of which were small blobs of shaped pasta).

The weird thing was that he introduced each one to me as if it was dramatically different. At this stage, I began to back away from him and started eyeing the door.

I mean, what's the deal with this? Can you imagine if we Asians did this with our food?

Hello, foreigner. Try this square chunk of chicken curry. Isn't it yummy? Now try this: a rectangular chunk of chicken curry. How different it tastes! Now have a bite of this: it is a trapezoid chunk of chicken curry. Completely

I wanted to shake him and say: "Giovanni: get a grip on yourself. These are all the same thing."

But I didn't. Europeans are dangerous, violent people. Look at all their wars.

A few days ago, I accidentally bought a packet of macaroni -- a pasta shape I associate with small children. Well, would you believe it: my youngest child ate four bowls of it (plain, no sauce) and begged to have the same thing the following day. The ingredients and brand were exactly the same as the pasta my wife bought last week. The only difference was the shape.

To find an explanation, I consulted my mentor/bartender. He said different pasta shapes tasted different because they retained different amounts of sauce. But that didn't explain the reaction of my child, who eats her pasta sauce-free. He suggested that shapes



had different associations. Macaroni was kid's food, fettuccine was wine bar food and spaghetti was canteen food.

But my belief that pasta was weird was reinforced when I got someone to trans-

late pasta names for me. Fusilli means "guns;" orecchiette means "children's ears;" strozzapreti means "priest-stranglers;" ditalini means "children's fingers;" vermicelli means "tiny worms;"

spaghetti means "bits of string;" agnolotti means "the ears of lambs;" linguine means "the tongues of small ones" and so on. (You see why I think Europeans are violent?)

Anyway, I wouldn't tell the Giovannis of this world, but it has just been proved that Asian noodles predate Italian pasta by thousands of years. Scientists recently found the world's oldest bowl of noodles, right here in my office canteen. No, wait, I mean they found them in an archeological dig at Lajia on the Yellow River in China. Radiocarbon dating revealed that it had been cooked 4,000 years ago.

But amazingly, they exactly like the noodles cooked at my office canteen. The only difference is that it looked fresher.

Now you know why I prefer rice.