

## Education for all?



VISUAL: MOZART/GETTY IMAGES

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ROMINA DEWAN KABIR

**B**ANGLADESH has made impressive progress towards achieving primary education for all over the last two decades. Yet, development of primary education poses a daunting challenge because of inaccessibility and resource constraint.

The quality of education at this level is extremely poor. The deterioration of quality, high drop-out rate, and low attendance have negated the benefits achieved through rapid expansion of enrolment.

As per a base-line survey conducted by the Department of Primary Education (DPE), the drop-out rate in primary education in 2007 was 52 percent. Many reasons were found for the increased drop-out rate, but how far has the draft education policy addressed these issues?

The National Education Policy 2009 Formulation Committee presented their draft report to the education minister last September. To make the policy effective, the following issues should be clarified and considered:

**Admission fees**

The recommendation in Chapter 2 (Objective and Aim) is in line with the constitution that quality primary education will be compulsory and free for all (page 4), but it is not clear whether the admission is free as the draft only says that they do not have to pay

monthly fees.

In Chapter 2, page 7 serial 21, in the clause for street children and deprived children, it is mentioned that they will be given free admission. Does it then mean that other children have to pay for admission?

If they have to pay the admission fee then how much will it be? Different schools charge different amounts as admission fee, and call it "annual donation." It was revealed by an Education Watch Study of 2006 that poverty prevented households from paying school fees, and/or other direct and indirect costs, that may be required for school admission or full participation in primary school. It was also revealed that 82 percent to 93 percent of the total annual expenditure was for private tuition, stationary, fuel, tiffin, health care, and school dress.

This year, many children either had to change their school or did not get admitted as they could not afford to pay the enhanced admission fees. Most guardians do not know that education is free for their children, or even how to avail this right.

Informal charging of admission fees should be formalised by standardising the admission fee so that it does not become a burden for the poor families, and the schools can also be accountable to the guardians. The guardians can also demand quality teaching for the payment.

**Private tutoring by school teachers**

Studies show that private tutoring on pay-

ment is a pervasive practice even at the primary level. The cost of private tutors was the single largest item of expenditure, as revealed by an Education Watch study in 2003-04.

Unsatisfactory quality of education forces the parents to either go for private tutoring or to pull out their children from school, thereby increasing drop-outs. Strong action should be taken against those schools which encourage private tutoring by the school teachers, as this allows the teachers not to finish the lesson in the classroom, thus forcing the students to go to them.

The recently introduced public exam of class five will hopefully reduce the dependency on private tutoring and enhance the quality of teaching and learning in the classroom.

**Different tasks of teachers**

It is reported that children take an average of 8 years to complete primary education. Pupil assessments have found that those who do complete the primary cycle perform on average at a third grade achievement level and lack essential problem-solving skills, and almost one-third of students leave primary school without acquiring basic competencies.

Although teachers are often blamed for providing poor quality of education, a primary teacher has to carry out 73 tasks alongside teaching, reveals a report published by Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB). These range from birth registration to polling duties during elections. This year, teachers were busy with the data collection of the household survey till the end of January.

The education policy did not give much emphasis on how the quality of teaching and learning would be ensured. The government should ensure that teachers do not have to do other work when the schools are open. The concerned departments, like the Bureau of Statistics for household survey, Health

Ministry for EPI programs, etc should use their own people rather than using teachers.

**Quality of English**

The teachers are facilitators in teaching and learning in the classroom. The pupils look up to teachers for help and see them as role models. If teachers are not qualified and trained properly they will not be able to help the pupils when needed. Teaching English in particular poses more problems.

The Primary School Performance Monitoring Project (PSPMP) of the Department of Primary Education, assisted by Asian Development Bank, identified some common characteristics of teachers, among which is mispronunciation by the majority of the teachers -- especially in English.

Even though all the education policies took various steps to improve the teaching of English, the quality of English is still very poor. It is reported by PSPMP that 23 percent of the teachers misspelled words. Most of the students cannot write a simple sentence, or even their name and address, properly.

The reason behind this is the lack of efficient and qualified English teachers and grammar books. As the teachers are themselves weak in English, they take the help of different grammar books from the market and advise the children to do so.

The government should provide English grammar books and train teachers on how to teach in an effective way. This is not the case for English only; improvement of Bangla is also needed, as it is our mother tongue.

In order to make the compulsory free primary education program successful, the nation has to involve the people and the communities to help solve these problems which stand in the way of enrolment and lead to children dropping out.

Romina Dewan Kabir is Executive Director, TRK Consultancy Services.



## Elevator Etiquette

**E**VERY year at about this time, city dwellers should show their gratitude to the man who gave us our skylines. You see, it was on March 23, 1857, that Elisha Graves Otis launched the first commercial elevator, making tall buildings possible. But in doing so, he introduced a transport conundrum that adds stress to the lives of billions of apartment block dwellers every day. If you live or work in a building with more than three storeys, you know what I mean.

When I was a kid, I had to catch the 7.50 am bus. So I went out of my front door at 7.49 am. Easy. Then I moved to an apartment. I still had to catch the 7.50 am bus. I walked out of my front door at 7.49 and waited for the elevator. It delivered me to the bus stop, sometimes one minute later, sometimes eight minutes later, or sometimes at noon the following Tuesday.

"This lift has a mind of its own," my flatmate told me. "And it hates us." I didn't realize she meant it literally until I got to know it. The thing would zoom past us sniggering on the way up. Then it would fill itself up with people and zoom past us laughing on the way down. The third time it whizzed past us I'm sure I heard it say in an electronic voice: "Nyh-nyeh, you can wait till doomsday, losers." A lift engineer told me it was true. Lifts actually do have minds.

These days, the stakes are high, and we cannot afford to miss it. All three of my children take different routes to school. If we don't get to street level at the right time, we miss all the school buses and car pool rides and my life becomes a misery.

If that happens, and it has done many times in the past, I need to find alternative transport to get everyone to their destinations, a total nightmare. In Asia, all buses and taxis are full all the time when you need them.

After months of experimentation, I have become the elevator Nazi. I worked out that there is a slight lull in elevator traffic in my apartment block at precisely 7.41. If we call the elevator at that moment, we will all catch our respective rides. If not, suicide is the preferable option.

I tell my kids we have to get in the lift at precisely that time, whether ready or not.

Last Tuesday, this meant getting dressed in the lift. On Wednesday, it meant packing our bags in that small space. On Thursday, it meant eating breakfast in the elevator. (Sorry about the mess, neighbours.) On Friday, we were really behind schedule. In the 7.41 elevator we got dressed, packed our bags, ate breakfast, did hair bands, tied shoelaces, applied cosmetics, had a de-stress massage, and picked spinach off our teeth.

The long-suffering people in the floors above are used to us now, and will hold our coffee and bags while I finish making the kids' packed lunches.

It's amazing how fast you can butter bread when the ground floor is approaching at 200 meters a minute.

Once, I found I had put my trousers on back to front and had to whip them off and put them on again. Given that there is a full-colour surveillance camera in the elevator linked to a colour TV monitor in the foyer of the building, our family's lift high-speed lift activities surely provides hours of entertainment for everyone. Of course, it is only a matter of time before I am arrested for indecent exposure.

I will post Mr. Otis.

This blogging has mainly been an overview of how lifts have changed our lives, and how one has to use "elevator strategy" to make sure they are a bonus rather than an additional source of stress. I know that this is a huge issue for readers -- the comments column and my mailbag is always lively when this topic comes up. I think it would be useful to make a list of rules of elevator etiquette, or perhaps just a general database of lift wisdom.

A mystery: yesterday I paid my fee to the cashier at a shopping mall before heading down to the underground car park. "Can I take a lift down to the car park?" I asked. "No," he said solemnly. "You have to take an elevator." Huh?

To educate yourself further on pros and cons of your everyday elevator routes, visit our columnist at [www.vittachi.com](http://www.vittachi.com).

## Senapati's route to heroism

The Congress has, for the moment, officially rallied around Chidambaram, but there is very clearly a major internal debate that is seeping out of the confines of inner-party curtains. Dantewada might, paradoxically, strengthen a hawkish home minister, but it is not going to extinguish the two-eyed view of an admittedly difficult problem.

M.J. AKBAR

**P**. Chidambaram first tried out the resignation route to heroism when he was in P.V. Narasimha Rao's Cabinet. Rao, a bit like his protégé Dr Manmohan Singh, was a Prime Minister wrought by fate; he had, in fact, retired because of a heart condition and sent his impressive library to Hyderabad, where he intended to spend his time. He did not contest the elections for the 1991 Parliament that made him prime minister. The younger Congress leaders, consequently, tended to underestimate him. Rao surprised the political class, and

shocked the victim, by accepting Chidambaram's resignation. The scar never quite healed; Chidambaram eventually started his own party, and was brought back into the Congress mainstream only by Mrs Sonia Gandhi.

Chidambaram, despite the consistent colour of his dark hair, is older and wiser now. He knew there was no chance that Dr Manmohan Singh would accept his pro forma offer to resign over the Dantewada bungle, largely because the prime minister believes in what his home minister is doing. The resignation gesture was not an immediate response. His first reaction was to test whether an alibi that this was a

"joint" operation, meaning that the state Government was equally culpable would work. It did not, because there are too many retired and respected police officers and security experts ready to explain and reveal precisely what happened.

The surprise of the week was surely not the endorsement Chidambaram received from his prime minister, but the warm support he got from the BJP. There have been some cross-party surprises of late. Publicly, the Congress made a colossal fuss when Amitabh Bachchan was condemned as evil because he was seen with Narendra Modi. Away from the limelight, the prime minister endorsed Modi as head of the working group on consumer affairs at a chief ministers' meeting. Then Goa's Congress Chief Minister Digambar Kamat, after this CMs' conference, told the world that Narendra Modi was his best friend and he would happily visit Gujarat if invited. Kamat could not have been unaware that his counterpart in Maharashtra, Ashok Chavan, was casting, at the instigation of Delhi, for what might be called "third-degree contact

with Modi, because he had been civil to Amitabh who had been civil to Modi. Such "first-degree" proximity should be sufficient reason, by publicly declared standards, to remove Kamat, but he is clearly unconcerned. Does he know something that we do not? Politicians do not risk their gaddi very easily. Is Congress trying to finesse the new, emerging Opposition unity in Parliament, which threatens the passage of the Women's Reservation Bill in the Lok Sabha, by being nice to the pre-eminent lightning rod in the BJP? In the absence of answers, we can at least ask questions.

The BJP's support for Chidambaram, however, is based on ideological strategy rather than tactical requirements. The BJP has never been dubious about its aversion to democratic Marxists, and complete hostility to violent Maoists. The BJP considers Chidambaram the perfect "senapati" in the war against Maoists, because the home minister shares its uncomplicated view of Maoists as nothing but cowards and criminals who deserve complete elimination. This is a

conviction shared by the prime minister, who has described Naxalites as the greatest threat to India.

Other politicians might hedge: Nitish Kumar believes that Maoists cannot be defeated only by force, Buddhadeb Bhattacharya is certain that this cannot be treated as just a law and order matter, and Mani Shankar Aiyar, who heads the committee organising the Congress' 125th anniversary, is certain that a one-eye policy focusing only on security will be counterproductive. But Chidambaram is a one-eyed man when it comes to Maoists; after all, you cannot take aim with a gun if both your eyes are open.

The Congress has, for the moment, officially rallied around Chidambaram, but there is very clearly a major internal debate that is seeping out of the confines of inner-party curtains. Dantewada might, paradoxically, strengthen a hawkish home minister, but it is not going to extinguish the two-eyed view of an admittedly difficult problem.

There is as much uncertainty in the Congress about the contours and conse-

quences of a caste war as there is about a class war. The Congress was splintered during the heated arguments over the Mandal Commission in 1990, and its confusion lost the party UP and Bihar. There is always a price to be paid for irresolution. A strong section of the party is in harmony with the BJP over Maoists, just as many Congressmen agreed with V.P. Singh on Mandal. The left has been weakened within the Congress by the domination of Rao and Dr Singh in the last two Congress Governments, but it has not disappeared. Scratch Pranab Mukherjee and A.K. Antony and you will find Jawaharlal Nehru and Indira Gandhi in their blood. Mrs Sonia Gandhi has already indicated that she is not going to abandon the Congress left, but remains palpably unsure about the extent to which she can rehabilitate it.

A general-purpose warning to Congress Cabinet Ministers: think thrice before offering to resign. You never know when it might be accepted.

M.J. Akbar is Editor of *The Sunday Guardian*.