

## Drop-out from primary level education

Ways must be found to drastically reduce its magnitude

Where universal primary education is the goal, it comes as a disquieting piece of news that 2.81 lakh students out of 24.88 lakh registered did not take this year's Primary Education Terminal Examinations. This happens in the second year of the introduction of the primary level terminal examination system. It seems, the number of absentees keeps rising by the year. Whereas they were 1.54 lakh last year, this time around the figure has swelled by another 1.27 lakh making a total of nearly 3 lakh students falling out of the system. This is tragic in view of the high rate of illiteracy the country continues to smart under. Taking into account the drop-outs from class I-V, the addition of absentees from the terminal primary examinations raises the whole figure to an alarming proportion.

The commonly cited reason for this phenomenon is poverty, an inducing factor behind the parental reluctance to send their children to schools at all, instead to have them earn money to make both ends meet. Even though they might be initially put through schooling, their attendance would be highly irregular to be of any use.

We know the primary level education to be free with no tuition fee charged and text books distributed free of cost. Most of the parents are so poor that they cannot bear the cost of minor requirements like paper, pencils, drawing book or other stationery items. We suggest that the whole package should be given free of cost with modest mid-day meals served which would incentivise the poor students to go to the schools and be in the stream.

A terminal public examination at class V is a make-or-break event; it is crucial for an aspiring student because a pass certificate would qualify him or her to be moving to class VI and onwards up to SSC level. So the absentees risk losing out if they do not reenter the system.

The avowed purpose of the introduction of public examination at the primary level is to bring uniformity in the standards of education at that preparatory phase. But we wonder how the sheer introduction of a terminal examination at some stage by itself can ensure quality education unless a uniformity is established in standards of teaching in different schools. May be in many schools students don't find the curriculum and the method of teaching interesting enough, an area needing attention.

## Combating HIV/AIDS

Thrust should be on awareness and prevention

Eight years after the fatal disease Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome (AIDS) was first recognised in the USA, the first case of AIDS was detected in Bangladesh in 1989. So, we cannot say that Bangladesh is quite new to awareness about this disease. And according to the UN's regional office for South Asia on drugs and crimes, the number of people infected with Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV), the virus that causes AIDS, over the last two decades is only 1745, while 204 of those victims have succumbed to the syndrome until December 2009.

So, considering the spread of the pandemic worldwide among some 60 million people with 25 million deaths as reported by UNAIDS in 2009, it can be said that the prevalence of the disease in Bangladesh is rather at the lower end. But that should, however, not be any reason for complacency. For the UNAIDS country coordinator Dr. Salil Panakadan at a recent roundtable informed that 28 to 30 per cent of the HIV-infected people in the country are aged below 25 years. And since these AIDS victims belong to the younger generation, they are also more susceptible to the infection if only because they are also more attracted towards the liberal lifestyles and hence less attached to the more conservative traditional, social norms and values.

Among those most-at-risk are also the drug addicts, especially those who inject the drug into their bodies and those who are prone to unsafe sex. Female sex workers and their male customers are therefore dangerously exposed to the disease. Blood transfusion is also another source of infection unless the blood is properly screened and the needle is sterilised.

Unfortunately, the adolescent section of the population who are exposed to the risk of contracting HIV lack the necessary level of awareness about danger the disease poses. That is particularly because, the society they are born into has many barriers to the smooth transfer of information on HIV/AIDS to the youngsters. Open discussion on sex is a taboo in the family. So it is also in the schools. As a result, despite the fact that we have introduced education on HIV in the general curriculum at the primary and the higher secondary level, neither teachers, nor students are comfortable with the subject in the classrooms. So, where any discussion on sex and sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) like AIDS is an anathema, one can easily understand what may happen to a person who is infected with the disease. For there is the real danger of her or his becoming an instant pariah.

Social conservatism is the main barrier to the programmes aimed to develop mass awareness against HIV/AIDS in the country. And since prevention should be the thrust of the campaign against the disease, the stakeholders including the government, the civil society, the non-governmental Organisations (NGOs) must give the topmost priority on awareness raising programme to fight the pandemic.



## Politics of hartal

Let us be clear, *hartal* is a political right but only as long as it does not infringe on the right of others. Anything that curtails the right of others cannot be a universal right. *Hartal* has become much maligned; because of the way it has been misused, it no longer is seen as a political right but an instrument of coercion.

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We have endured another general strike -- two in the space of a fortnight -- and after almost four years of *hartal*-free life, these appeared to the suffering public as aberrations. It is not that we have not had to face continuous *hartal* before, but in the current context many cynics may be tempted to ask -- what took it so long to come?

Indeed, given that we in Bangladesh have been so psychologically attuned to accepting general strikes as a part of our life, one is compelled to say, at the risk of sounding facetious, that life is rather meaningless and boring without it, particularly for the politicians, more so for the hon'ble members of the parliament belonging to the other side, so to say.

And how does a *hartal* fare? That depends on who the question is directed to, and as certainly as not, the answer will be exactly in line with the position taken on the justification or otherwise, of the damaging expedition that *hartal* has become in recent times.

Not surprisingly, both the political parties offer their thanks to the public at the end of the day -- the opposition for helping to make it a "grand success," and the party in power for helping to make the *hartal* a "resounding failure." And nobody knows better than they that both are so horribly wrong.

It is interesting to hear the justifications for *hartal* proffered for public consumption when a politician is asked about the efficacy of *hartal* as a political tool. The answer depends not only on who is reacting to the question but also on the context of the time -- and whether one is in the opposition or in the party in power. And the position of the BNP and the AL on the issue is so utterly illuminating given the diametrically opposite views they propound when in power and when out of it that it appears to me that mendacity has been made into an art and the power of distorted arguments have lent dignity to the word "deceit."

The justification is done in such a brazen and shamefaced manner that one is reminded of what Tocqueville said about principles and political parties in the US,

that there are many men of principle in both parties in America, but there is no party of principle. One could easily apply that to the political parties in Bangladesh. It is shattering to imagine that we are so bereft of principle in our collective psyche that no one has the guts to take a principled stand against *hartal* in either of the two major parties.

For those who are calling *hartal*, it is a political right being resorted to for establishing democratic rights, it is being done to force the government to fulfill its promises, and a litany of "justifications," which to a concerned citizen are insipid excuses for petty partisan interests. And for the government and the party in power, it is a destructive mechanism; it is counterproductive, that it will not help establish democracy and civil liberty, that coercing the public to close shops and staying off the roads is no test of the oppositions claim to success, and the likes.

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Looking back at not too distant a past, people participated in *hartals* against autocrats and military dictators, both before 1971 and after. Nobody had to force the people to make *hartal* a "success." It

was resorted to, to restore democracy in the country, and the people did not mind the consequences of *hartal* since they were prepared to undergo temporary distress for a greater long-term gain. Do such situations obtain in the country at present?

Whatever may be the justification for the BNP's call for *hartal*, very few are convinced that it is not directly connected with the cantonment residence of its president. The issues of price rise, electricity, coal policy, transit etc, are all genuine matters that concern the public but have been diluted by the timing of the *hartal*.

The BNP must go back to the parliament if it is genuinely interested in addressing issues of national significance. Being on the streets may be a form of protest but the only forum for holding the government accountable for its actions is the parliament. And in this regard the speaker has a lot to do -- to start with he should admit the call attention notices of the BNP for discussions. If what the BNP says, that not one of its notices had been admitted, he must do more to justify the "nonpartisan" tag that many attach to his name.

It is futile to look for an alternative to *hartal*. Nor can one legislate against it. And on this matter there is rare unity of view between the AL and BNP. Let it be a handy political tool, but only to be used most judiciously.

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## Socio-cultural factors influencing fertility

All too often, explanations of fertility change concentrate primarily on the dynamic influences of social or economic change, or organised interventions to spread fertility control. Very little attention has been paid to the particular mixture of cultural features that may facilitate or inhibit fertility behaviour.

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MOST demographic surveys in Bangladesh consistently report that a large majority of women of reproductive age do not want any more children after the initial few births. Survey findings also show that these women do not practice family planning. These findings are often dismissed on the ground that they do not capture the realities of the situation. It is contended here that they are valid, but also inadequate.

The results truly reflect the individual desires of women but they are inadequate in that they fail to identify the social and cultural constraints which prevent women from translating their desires into practice. All too often, explanations of fertility change concentrate primarily on the dynamic influences of social or economic change, or organised interventions to spread fertility control. Very little attention has been paid to the particular mixture of cultural features that may facilitate or inhibit fertility behaviour.

A clear understanding of the social position of women in Bangladesh appears to be the best possible approach in comprehending the discrepancy between reported desires and behaviour. The concept of female autonomy is more amenable to empirical measurement than the concept of status and is, therefore, adopted for this article. Autonomy indicates the ability -- technical, social and psychological -- to obtain information and to use it as the basis for making decision about one's private concerns and those of one's intimates.

In the agrarian society of Bangladesh, female autonomy is strongly influenced by kinship, family and marriage relationships. The experience has been that it is also

greatly influenced by age, religion, the political system and cultural norms and practices, including the division of labour between the sexes.

The kinship structure in Bangladesh is characterised by the principles of village and kin exogamy, relatively close ties between matrilineal related males and control of property by males. Of course, Muslim women in Bangladesh have the legal right to inherit property from parents; in actual practice it is more likely that brothers will get control of women's share of inherited immovable property regardless of the latter's wishes.

Women are normally not found to own moveable property. According to the custom of a patriarchal society, a newly married woman is brought from her family of birth and placed in her husband's house. The preference for lineage and exogamy attenuates a woman's ties with her family of birth and reduces the possibility that her family will intervene on her behalf after marriage.

In Bangladesh, as in most agrarian societies, kin relations still constitute for the great majority of people the prime avenue of access to such scarce social resources as information, economic assistance and political support.

An individual's power, influence and social range are closely related to his or her ability to exploit kin linkages. Thus, cultural practices, such as patrilocal marriage, that tend to constrain or erode personal links between a married woman and her natal kin directly diminish a woman's autonomy.

At the same time, norms of avoidance make it difficult for a woman to establish effective links within the household into which she marries. She is, therefore, left socially almost powerless. Arranged marriages and difference of almost 10 years in

age at marriage between bride and bridegroom place a woman in a subordinate position relative to her husband.

Dowry is still a part of marriage in Bangladesh, although it is not an Islamic tradition. The size of dowry demanded usually far exceeds the amount of dowry given, which again puts women at a disadvantage. When a woman from a poor family cannot bring any dowry with her, and has nothing to inherit, she is endowed with neither money nor property that is her's alone. This situation further reduces her influence among the members of the husband's family.

Beneath the larger social organisation, there exists in each village an organisational subsystem, called "*bari*" that regulates the life of groups in the village. It acts as a source of collective security for its members and as a guardian of their mores. Membership of a *bari* or caste is crucial when individuals are faced with a choice, as in the case of accepting an innovative idea or adopting it in practice. Moreover, it puts a great restraint on female autonomy, particularly the movement of women outside the home.

Difference of age is strictly adhered to in Bangladesh, regardless of class and creed. As mentioned earlier, women are in a disadvantaged position by being on average almost 10 years younger than their husbands. Among women, solidarity and potential resistance are undermined by an age hierarchy that often allies older women with men in dominant positions. The young bride enters her husband's household to find herself under the control and supervision of her mother-in-law. In general, older women dominate younger women -- mothers-in-law dominate daughters-in-law; elder brother's wife dominates younger brother's wife and so on.

The predicament of dependent women that forces them into relative seclusion within their own house compound also denies them access to economic opportunities outside the homestead. In Bangladesh, a division of labour among household members has evolved whereby women specialise in work inside or near the homestead and men specialise in work outside the home (with some exception, such as garment industry).

This division of labour itself engenders a powerful element of men's control over women, enforcing female dependence on men by denying women direct access to income-earning opportunities. The sexual division of labour applies to all women in the rural areas and the costs, in terms of abuse and loss of status, of engaging in types of work that require movement outside the homestead are often very high.

In societies in which women are excluded from inheritance and mainstream economic activities, parents place a great premium on sons. The preferential treatment of the male child severely retards the personal development of girls and hence affects their autonomy in later life.

Complete dependence of younger women on men and older women, difference in age and lack of access to the outside world make it difficult for them to resist pronatalist pressures. Moreover, early marriage increases the risk of pregnancy in the absence of opportunities to regulate their fertility. Females are made to believe that their own wishes and interests are subordinate to those of the family group. They are, therefore, likely to sacrifice their own wishes to regulate fertility, even at the cost of the health hazard of repeated pregnancies.

Given the situation of relative social isolation faced by newly wed women, there are clear advantages to high fertility. A wife is encouraged to create her own effective social group by producing children, especially sons, as a potential source of security, both economically and socially. The lack of female autonomy contributes to high fertility.

There has not been any major decline in fertility in Bangladesh. The reason appears to be deep-rooted in the structure of society and associated cultural practices. The forces of modernisation, which are gradually gaining momentum, will perhaps help women to gain necessary autonomy to resist pronatalist pressures. Until such time, fertility will tend to decline at a very slow pace in Bangladesh.

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