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Waste In Education

We all know that the country's primary education is in a shambles. But unless some competent researchers or organisations explain the fact in terms of data, figures or analysis, we cannot quite grasp how bad the situation is. The Asian Development Bank (ADB) has come up with a study on primary education in four countries of South Asia namely Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal and Pakistan. The fact that Sri Lanka and India have been excluded shows that those two countries are way ahead of these four countries in educating their children. The four countries have been bracketted together because the state of primary education in these countries is at a comparable stage. What is revealing is that all four countries have to sustain a huge amount of loss of resources due to drop-out and repetition of classes at the primary level. Waste of resources on these two heads for Bangladesh is 26.3 per cent and 6.6 per cent, for Bhutan it is 30.7 per cent and 15.3 per cent, for Pakistan 26.9 per cent and 8.3 per cent and for Nepal 18.2 per cent and 18.4 per cent.

The figures show that Bangladesh has a slight edge over the other three countries in managing resources allocated for primary education. Similarly, the country's drop-out rate is less than the average of its South Asian counterparts. Whereas 52 per cent of those enrolled in grade one complete grade five in Bangladesh and Nepal, the comparable figures for Pakistan and Bhutan are 51 and 49. However, Nepal has the highest rate of drop-out and repetition in grade one at 34 per cent. Add to these the learning scores of students, on which account Bangladesh has the highest score, and the country's advantage is unquestioned.

Is all this a cause for celebration? Not at all. That only 52 students out of a 100 enrolled in grade one can cross the five-year hurdle is a shame for any society. There is no reason to think that all school-age children enroll themselves in our country. This means that more than 50 per cent children of the same age either swell the rank of the complete illiterate or fail to acquire what is called functional literacy. Those who qualify for the secondary education also do so with incomplete or inadequate knowledge and soon have to drop-out at this stage. So there seems to be a competition for dropping out all along the line of education.

The ADB report is very critical of the facilities and quality of primary education. It holds large class size, shorter class period, little parental guidance, unqualified and untrained teachers responsible for the poor quality of education. A comparable study of schooling time in a year with China, Sri Lanka and even India shows that we have the shortest duration. Chinese children spend more than double the days their counterparts in Bangladesh do in the process of learning. This is important. When can children prefer school to their homes? If the time they spend at school is more enjoyable than at home. There exactly comes the role of the teachers. If the teachers know the trick or trade how to attract young learners, only then the duration of yearly learning time can be lengthened. There is of course, the question of financial support. Although, primary education in Bangladesh is free and compulsory, the stumbling-block comes in the shape of parents' poverty. Different organisations have been experimenting with different strategy to meet this challenge with varying degrees of success. So far providing children with tiffin and or meals has proved effective to attract and retain children. We would like to suggest this step to be combined in a package for still better results. Let the feeding programme for children be tagged with the poverty alleviation programmes, such as micro-credit and group enterprises, as undertaken by the NGOs. Individuals and groups enjoying such financial support would not be allowed to take away their children from school. The task can be made easier by arranging parents' sessions where attempts will be made to convince them of the need for their wards' schooling.