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পঞ্জি পত্রিকা

## Universal primary education remains elusive in Asia

Suchin Vacharapongpreecha

How much progress have Asian and Pacific countries achieved in implementing the 1980 Karachi plan calling for universal primary education? After more than 20 years, not much, reports ESCAP in its annual regional economic and social survey. Despite considerable progress, the target has not been achieved in many countries well beyond the plan's deadline.

The deadline set was 1980. By that time, every country in the region should have provided a system of universal compulsory and free primary education of seven years or more, according to the plan. But as it is, notes ESCAP, this goal will not be reached in some countries before 1995.

### OBSTACLES

There are two major obstacles against its fulfillment.

The first is rapid population increase, and the second is inadequate resources devoted to education in general and primary education in particular.

That the "baby boom" has made it extremely hard for nations to achieve the target can be gleaned from these figures: the number of primary school age children (6-11 years old) in the region — excluding China — rose from 133 million in 1960 to

227 million in 1982. The percentage of children enrolled has, however, also risen quite rapidly. From 49 per cent in 1960, the figure jumped to about 71 per cent in 1982.

Still the absolute number of children who failed to go to primary school remains very large, says ESCAP. In 1982, there were about 67 million compared to 1960's 68 million.

"By 1985, the number of school age children not enrolled in primary schools was still estimated to be about 60 million," adds ESCAP. "This represents a formidable unfinished task and a continuing challenge to social development efforts in the region."

Compounding the situation

are two problems that militate against universal primary education. For one thing, there is a low level of the enrolment ratio among females.

Girls form the majority, sometimes up to three-fourths, of children not enrolled in the primary school age group. And nowhere has this been more true than in South Asia.

The only exception is Sri

Lanka where the goal has been essentially achieved, says ESCAP. But for the rest it's still touch and go like

Bangladesh, India and Pakistan.

India is an example. Because of sharply reduced expenditure allocated to the

primary sector, 72 percent of

the schools don't have library

facilities and more than 42

percent are without black-

boards.

Thirty-five per cent of the

primary schools have a sin-

gle teacher to handle three

or four different classes. Only

44 percent of the educational

expenditure is devoted to ru-

ral areas where more than

70 percent of the total popu-

lation lives.

Another common problem

faced is the high dropout

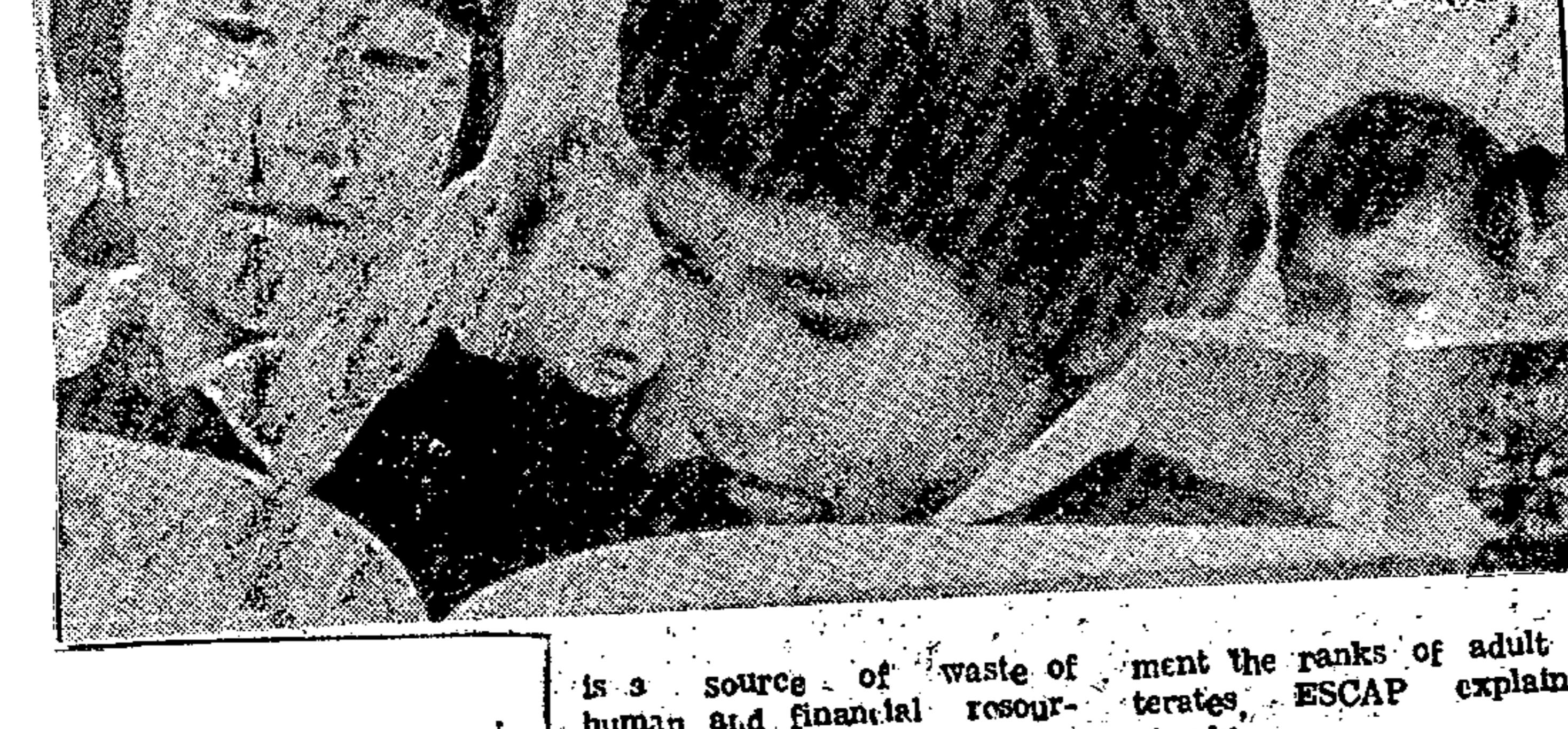
rate, usually within the first

two years. "Dropping out

The Bangladesh Times

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is a source of waste of human and financial resources invested in the system as no basic skills are retained within the first two years," ESCAP notes sadly.

"The causes for dropping out are diverse but they seem to affect children from poor families more than others. This also seems to be confirmed by inter-country comparisons which show dropout rates to be more significant in poorer nations (in the region)."

As the march towards free universal primary education is impeded so does the region's campaign to combat adult illiteracy. The low enrolment and retention rates at primary school level help aug-

ment the ranks of adult illiterates, ESCAP explains it simply.

In 1985, according to

UNESCO estimates, there

were more than 619 million

illiterate men and women

aged 15-64 years in the region.

Between 1970 and 1985, the

number of illiterates grew by

over 80 million despite the

increase in the aggregate liter-

acy rate from 53.6 to 63.6 per

cent.

The biggest increase was

registered in South Asia, in-

cluding Sri Lanka. On the

number of illiterates has de-

clined in all the members of

the Association of Southeast

Asian Nations (ASEAN) except

Malaysia.

Depthnews Bangladesh