

# University For Masses—II

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**T**HE Asian Development Bank's initiative in the distance education arena stems from a professional staff paper published by the Education Division (IFED) of the Bank in 1985. This paper laid the ground work for a major Regional Seminar on Distance Education which was organised by the Bank, in Bangkok in 1986. The Bangkok seminar gathered together a group of internationally renowned distance education experts and the papers presented for the seminar (now published in two volumes) are recognised as a seminar resource in the field. One of the recommendations of the Bangkok seminar was to give serious consideration to the establishment of a mechanism for enough regional cooperation in Distance Education. As a follow-up of this recommendation, the Bank sponsored a Round Table Conference on Distance Education for some countries in 1989, which was held in Pakistan. The function, form, operational and financial viability of such a mechanism provided the central agenda of the Round Table Conference. The papers prepared for the Round Table Conference were published by the Bank, in a book form. In addition to the proposed Bangladesh Open University project, the Bank is preparing projects in the sectors of Pakistan and Sri Lanka and is considering increased involvement in other countries.

Bangladesh is one of the educationally backward nations. Out of the total population of 115 million, the number of children of 6-10 years age group is 14.87 million. All of them should be in primary schools but only 11.56 million are in schools and the remaining 3.31 million add to the mass of illiterates numbering about 75 million. Not only this, 65% of in-school children, i.e. 7.5 million will also dropout before reaching class 5. There are 19.63 million children in the age group 11-17, out of whom only 3.04 million are enrolled in secondary schools. The remaining 16.63 million children are illiterates or dropouts from primary grades. There are 9.90 million adolescents in the age group 18-21 out of whom only 0.70 million are enrolled in colleges, universities and other institutes of higher learning. The remaining 9.20 million consist of illiterates and dropouts from primary and secondary grades. There are many difficulties in recruiting and training sufficient number of qualified teachers to improve primary and secondary education. In 1989, the number of untrained primary and secondary teachers was 41,898 and 89,480 respectively.

Higher education in Bangladesh is the privilege of the few. There are 458 colleges with a total enrolment of 650,300. In addition there are 7 Universities (48,800), 18 Polytechnics (4,000), four BITs (2,400), one BUET (500), three Agriculture Colleges and one Agriculture University (7,400), nine Medical Colleges (7,400), one Dental College (60), one IPGMR (200), and one College of Nursing (20). There is fierce competition among

students to gain admission in these institutes. For example 28,250 students applied for admission in the University of Dhaka in 1990-91 against 3,635 seats. As a result only 12.87% applicants were admitted. In the entrance test for admission in BUET, 2598 students appeared and only 508 qualified. On one hand the majority of students are unable to get admissions, and on the other the output of existing institutions is so low that the human resource needs cannot be met. For example, in 1985 the stock of graduate physicians and dental surgeons was 16,000 and 500. It was expected to be raised to 22,500 and 7,500 respectively by 1990, but the gap has not been filled up. At present the number of graduate doctors is 18925 and the number of dentists is 530, i.e. the increase in six years has been only 2925 and 30, respectively, which is depressingly low in the context of the population.

No precise data about the human resource demands of the country vis-a-vis the training capacity of the institutes in different sectors is available. But the information collected by the team of consultants for the BOU project has revealed that there are 7000 trained and employed nurses who desire to undergo a degree course in Nursing but the only College of Nursing in the country, admits only 120, p.a.; the actual stock of Health Assistants in 1984-85 was 15,000 and it was to be raised to 23,000 in 1989-90. During 1988-90, 5000 Health Assistants were trained leaving a backlog of 18,000. In addition to this backlog, 5000 more Health Assistants will be recruited in 1991 for whom a training programme is being designed but the existing backlog of 18,000 will continue. There was no stock of Family Planning Assistants and Family Welfare Assistants in 1984-85 but the target for 1989-90 was 4,500 and 35,000 respectively. Discussions in the Directorate of Agricultural Extension have revealed that there are 13,000 employees under the Directorate who have completed the two-year inservice course in Agriculture Extension and are now working as Block Supervisors, Junior Extension Officers and Assistant Agriculture Officers. A one-year course for upgrading their knowledge and skills has been designed by the Directorate but it is unable to train the above-mentioned extension staff through the existing extension institutes because of inadequate facilities and financial constraints.

Similarly, during the consultants' discussion with the Executive Director, Mass Education Programme, it was found that until June 1991, a total of 519,090 learners in 11-45 years age group benefitted through 12,534 literacy courses of about one-year duration each. These courses were organised in only 177 Upazilas. This programme has to be extended to other Upazilas and will require training of additional mass education teachers, trainers, organisers and supervisors.

Thus, it is clear from the foregoing description that the existing facilities in the educational system are in-

adequate to meet the educational and training needs of the country. On the other hand it is not possible to expand the conventional system because of financial constraints. Bangladesh must therefore look for an alternative system of education. It must take education out of the stranglehold of ivory towers, away from the elitist approach and open the gates of education at all levels to the masses. The education system has to be democratised because educated people can be an asset in the building up of an economically sound nation.

The education of people in the villages, and above all, the women and rural youth, needs to be given priority in all future educational plans. The need today is to provide varied kinds of functional education to these people so as to help them increase their earnings and come out of the wretched environs of poverty. Education at all levels must be made relevant to the needs of society and the nation. The conventional system has failed in this respect because of its limitations. Therefore what is needed is a highly innovative system of education which should widen access to education at all levels and provide meaningful education. Of course some general basic education is needed to instill values of life in the minds of the people, particularly the upcoming generation. But how can it be done when thousands of the teachers working in the schools continue to remain untrained. This indicates another direction for the new system of Education for the Masses i.e. training of the trainers. We must remember that with the rapid growth of knowledge, education has to be regarded as a continuing, life-long process. People engaged in all vocations and professions will need periodical updating education in order to keep themselves abreast of the new knowledge and developments in their fields.

Fortunately, we now have highly developed communication technologies which transcend time and distance and can thus help provide education to the masses where they live and grow. Printed course materials supplemented by Radio, T.V., Audio and Video Cassettes and other inventions in this area can help in providing an effective education system.

Let us therefore step out of the beaten track and adopt an alternative educational system which can help in achieving the goal of education for the masses. The existing conditions in Bangladesh strongly favour the idea of an Open University, which can usher in a new era by taking education to the doorsteps of the people. The conventional system too can continue to perform an important role by reshaping their curricula and by making education relevant to the needs of the society. Teachers working in the conventional system will be considerably involved in preparation of open university course materials and providing counselling assignments. Thus there will be a mutual give-and-take, a pooling and sharing of knowledge and ideas, ex-

periences and resources, etc. The conventional system too would benefit from this by trying to convert the age-old class room system into an inter-disciplinary and multi-media teaching system. This could best be achieved by allowing students' mobility between the two systems. The conventional system can not offer wide course offerings to their students because of various limitations, whereas the open university can. However, if the students' mobility is allowed it should be possible for the conventional system to include some courses of the open university if they find such courses to be more relevant to their needs.

The open university through distance education could provide a wide variety of courses at levels ranging from literacy programmes to higher degrees and assisting the poor and those residing in far-flung, rural areas to develop functional literacy, livelihood skills, self-reliant enterprises, and information useful to their own personal growth. Open learning system is the means for millions of teachers, new and inservice, to upgrade themselves; for government employees to achieve higher educational levels; and for millions of farmers, extension workers and rural families to get up-to-date market information, more employment skills and production know-how. Without detracting from the achievements and usefulness of the schooling system, the overriding concern is how to promote self-reliance as a strategy for education thus liberating the learner to achieve the ultimate goal of education for all (which I doubt could be achieved without full use of communication technologies) especially with self-learning capabilities as learners will become their own best teachers and will not be dependent upon the provision of a school and a teacher to acquire knowledge. All these characteristics and functional advantages of Distance Education have to be harnessed for the education of the masses and to achieve the goals in the shortest possible time with DE's proven efficiency and effectiveness. Ignorance is the singular great enemy; liberation of the learner is the ultimate mission; and self-reliance the strategy for education.

Finally, the most potent weapon for self-reliance is the education of people in general—education modelled on visions, aspirations, capabilities of the people concerned, in the context of their socio-political-economic environments, traditions and cultures. Ignorance should be tackled with serious plans for action, and not with empty rhetoric. The immediate challenge facing the government leaders is to devise practical strategies, encourage communities to take the lead and to implement activities for growth. Furthermore, these strategies need to have appropriate resource support: men, money, media and management. (Paper circulated at a recent workshop on open university, in Dhaka).

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