

University For Masses

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WE are only 10 years away from the 21st century. Yet it is most painful to realise that the age-old problems of poverty, ignorance, malnutrition and disease continue to plague millions of disadvantaged people in the rural communities of the developing countries. These problems persist even as, within the past three decades, mankind has made tremendous advances in science, technology and mass media. Food, clothing, shelter, medicare and education are considered as basic needs. In some cases, education is even more pervasive than the other basic needs. It is the foundation, the bedrock, the root cause of man's state of development or underdevelopment. It is ignorance, more than any other single factor that breeds poverty. Poverty is both a result and a further cause of ignorance.

For developing nations such as Bangladesh, education can equalise opportunities, especially for the deprived and disadvantaged, and therefore must be delivered with efficiency and quality. The latter involves costs and resources of a magnitude that are not within the means of the country. Yet its people must be nurtured with the proper values, the required knowledge and appropriate skills so that the minimum standards of life, a sense of dignity, and the sustainability of everyday survival can be attained. EDUCATION IS THE NUTRIENT THAT SERVES AS A CATALYST FOR ALL THE NECESSARY INPUTS TOWARDS THE TOTAL DEVELOPMENT OF MAN.

Without vision, the prophets say, a nation perishes. So it is with community. As we span the next 10 years towards the 21st century, decisions about the future must be made now. But these decisions must not begin with the approach of designing and specifying physical targets or material wealth. The problems are so massive and the time is so short that we must have a panoramic vision that must start with the prioritisation of the values that ensure the fullest development of mankind. And the value that will ultimately count the most is one which can categorically say that the primary beneficiaries of development decisions ought to be to underprivileged of the developing societies: the poorest and the most destitute and deprived, namely the rural poor, particularly the children and women. Such an emphasis has become essential in the light of today's pervasive culture of poverty.

Today, ignorance, illiteracy, or the lack of education are regarded as among the biggest obstacles to sustained growth and technological progress. Conventional means of spreading education are proving to be inadequate in the face of rapidly increasing populations. Furthermore, the quality of schooling remains low, particularly in remote, rural areas. There is a marked need to supplement formal schooling with non-formal education, distance education and out-of-school education for people who have either missed schooling or have simply dropped out, or want to continue

their studies while on-the-job.

Educational systems including universities are the creation of society. They have to function in society and for society. They draw their sustenance from society. Therefore, they have a duty not only for the future, but also for the contemporary society. Hence, the universities must accept full responsibility for, among others, mass education programmes. The close liaison between the universities and voluntary agencies devoted to mass education and the active assistance rendered by the former to the latter is considered important. The universities must develop comprehensive programmes for education for masses in a determined effort to eradicate adult illiteracy first and then, to promote education of an all-round nature among all citizens.

Formal education systems including conventional universities have grown shells around themselves and no longer seem to be sensitive to the educational requirements of the communities. This, of course, is also a result of the neglect of, and discrimination against our rural people (masses) and the disadvantaged groups, including women.

The universities are expected to play an important role by undertaking some community problem-solving activities. I am, however, sorry to say that in many of the Asian countries, particularly those which have had colonial rule, the universities became highly detached from the community. Such self-inducted isolation and delineation, based on a false sense of intellectual superiority is totally unwarranted and illogical as the universities have, traditionally had hardly anything to do with the ordinary people. In India and in several Asian countries, we have not been able to get out of this colonial perspective. I am not oblivious of the fact that there are some glorious exceptions to this rule in some of the developing countries. However, our universities, by and large, have yet to develop their interest in identifying the problems of the community around them and involving the faculty and citizens in a continuing search for tackling the same.

Alternative Systems

Therefore, there is a need for development of alternative systems to address these demands. The mass education, as proposed here, means essentially teaching people who already have considerable knowledge, and experience, concerns and responsibilities. Knowledge, wisdom, and education, though closely inter-related and inter-linked are different entities, more so in this age of information-explosion. The universities, by providing for education for masses and its involvement in development activities can learn a lot and acquire invaluable experiences. I feel that the relation of universities

and the adult world today should be an inseparable part of the whole university programme. Open university through distance education can provide one of the alternatives to achieve strong relationship between the university and the adult world. Through establishment of such a relationship serious efforts for education for masses could be made to address the problems of poverty, low productivity, malnutrition, sickness and illiteracy as well as under-utilisation of resources, especially human resources which are in abundance in Bangladesh.

The conventional universities and schooling system could be characterised as a limited and finite model of education and, therefore, are inadequate systems to address the issues and problems related to education for masses. Open university is a unique organisation for delivering education for masses through multimedia approach and structured course which could be made available to home-based students. The introduction of open university as an institution through which adults who, for one reason or the other, had not previously entered the formal education although fully capable for it, has come at a time, when the purpose and availability of educational opportunities have been widely reexamined.

Moreover, the educational systems of the countries of Asia share many common problems including rising costs in the face of budgetary constraints, lack of curriculum renewal, lack of textbooks, lack of trained teachers, inadequate level of compatibility between education systems and the world of work; gaps between the supply and demand of teaching aids leading to low quality and low systemic efficiency of education, and very limited access to good education for many groups especially the rural poor and disadvantaged, including women. About 60 per cent of the population of Asian developing countries live in rural areas. DMCs are finding it difficult to fulfil the goal of universalisation of primary education, and are also not able to meet the increasing goal of universalisation of primary education, as also unable to meet the increasing social demand for education at all levels for all target groups through the formal structure of education. The illiteracy rate in the region continues to be high and education for all could well remain a distant dream for the region as a whole. Judging by the present trends, the important features of the socio-economic environment of education development, both quantitative and qualitative, in the 1990s, are likely to include the following: (a) severe financial constraints; (b) continued rapid population growth; and (c) structural changes of the economy, including profound changes of the ways in which the economy functions. The education

that developing nations desperately need, and constantly seek, is one which equalises opportunities for the poor and disadvantaged children and women in particular; and therefore one that must be delivered with efficiency and quality. Technology can help distribute education from all of the world's best sources to all the people, irrespective of age, sex, creed, religion, socio-economic status, who are in urgent need of education wherever, thus crossing all geographical constraints. Through distance education strategy, specially tailored programmes for each target group can be prepared and delivered. Such a strategy would bring to their very huts, no matter how deprived, an array of resources that can adequately empower the poor of the Third World and bring new wealth and opportunities to improve their quality of life.

Through the use of new communication technologies, access to good educational programmes can greatly be extended to large audiences in rural and remote areas with tremendous flexibility of subject matter content, in locations served, and with a choice of narrow or wide band formats. Two new technologies, namely satellite communication and fibre optic cable, have dramatically enhanced educational capabilities, but others such as the VHF terrestrial radio telephone, cellular radio technology and various new mobile communication techniques are making important contributions. Satellite and fibre optic transmission technologies are, in fact, complementary. Satellites are still the best for broadcasting to provide for rural and remote access, while fibre optics are well suited to linking centres of learning, university campuses, etc. Fibre optic-based educational network can also be "piggy-backed" onto telecommunications networks at a modest cost. Today, the future for educational transmission costs is very promising. Fibre optic cables can now be made for about @ \$ 1.00 a foot, while micro-terminals, complete with microprocessors and printers, can be purchased for about @ \$ 2,000. The fibre-optic line provides sound and picture quality that antenna-bound TV viewers can only dream of. Within the next 10 years satellite transponders could probably be purchased for as little as \$250,000. In short, the reduced costs of technology could make a large number of educational services available, through the distance education mode, to more and more people. Where appropriate, we must examine, evaluate and utilise the many new transmission and programming capabilities that are now available from advanced communication technologies, especially satellites. Now, the question is not whether developing countries can afford the peaceful uses of outer space. Rather, it is whether they can afford to ignore them. Furthermore, effective coordination through regional cooperation could help realise the potential of such remarkable technologies.

(To be continued)