The Bangladesh Observer

তারিখ 30 AUG 1987
পৃষ্ঠা ... কলাম 3

চীফ অফিসম্যান বিভাগকে দেখানো যাইতে পারে।

Dropping Out Of School

—Mohinder Singh

The writer, in this article published in The Statesman, examines the problem of school drop-outs in India. Bangladesh has a similar problem.

HOW does the current Indian scene measure up to the long-promised universalization of elementary education ? The school network has expanded commendably over the years. Most children have a school within a kilometre's walk. The claimed enrolment figures, namely, 95.7 per cent for the 6-11 age group, and 53.2 per cent for the 11-14 age group by 1985 are however suspect when examined in the light of comparable Census figures and field observations. In fact, one could with a fair degree of certainty say that, for the 6-11 age group, not more than 50 per cent may be currently attending school in any regular, meaningful manner.

The most distorting and disturbing element in the whole system is the massive non-retention of poorer children in primary schools. The overall dropout rate (inclusive of stagnation) for Classes 1 to 5 has been hovering around 65 per cent and for Classes 1 to 8 around 75 per cent. There has been little improvement in this percentage during the last 30 years. In plain language, it means that of 100 children who join Class 1, barely 35 complete Class 5 and 25 complete Class 8. A large percentage drops out in Classes 1 and 2 iteself, lapsing back into the unlettered condition.

The drop-out rate is considered a key indicator in identifying the failures of an educational system. And on this score, ours comes out very badly. If perchance students stopped dropping out in such large numbers, the system would not be able to cope with all of them given its existing facilities. It would be in no position to increase enrolment unless its facilities were increased in a big way. So, the theory of a school for all in practice applies largely to the better-off sections.

But why do children drop out in such massive numbers ? Can anything be done about it ? On this central issue, the "Challenge of Education — A Policy Perspective", prepared under the guidance of the Prime Minister, is content to say: "Information in this regard is not available in sufficient detail". One is tempted to ask why. Why, after all these years, and with the problem becoming increasingly acute, has the drop-out phenomenon not been documented in requisite detail and researched in depth ? The scale of the research effort and funds involved would be insignificant in relation to the staggering wastage suffered—a wastage of resources and the more tragic waste of children's lives.

Admittedly, sample studies carried out by the NCERT, other research organizations, and scholars are there, but cohort-wise data is rarely compiled. The bulk of these studies rely on administering set questions to parents, consolidating those answers, and working out percentages. But the subject is far too complex to be handled in this facile manner. It would probably necessitate teams of social scientists, psychologists and educators backed by numerous experimental or observational schools and systematic long-term documentation.

The usual explanation offered is that a poor family very often cannot spare a child full-time for schooling purposes. The child is needed either for house chores like fetching water, taking care of siblings or animals, collecting firewood, or for income-generating activities like work in the field or at a craft. There are also other factors such as the inability to meet school expenses, particularly of acceptable clothing, sickness of the child or of members of his family, indifference or even a negative attitude towards the schooling of girls, parental illiteracy or abject poverty where life itself is without hope and a school meaningless. Some have explained the phenomenon of high drop-outs as being the result of the schooling network outpacing local educational needs.

Undoubtedly, external factors have an important bearing (in the same school some stay on while others quit), yet the impact of internal factors merits closer examination. When a parent enrols a child in Class I, he or she has to an extent indicated a wish to educate the child and to try to bear the sacrifices that go with it. Children, in any case, are not much of a help at home till the age of 9 or 10 (in fact, they could even be a nuisance). Girls are still to young to get their parents worried. So when a child under 9 or 10 drops out in Class 1 or 2 or 3 (and a majority drop out at that stage), external factors may not be playing as decisive a role as internal ones.

A parent often gains the impression that the child, over a period of a year or more, seems to be learning nearly nothing. That is the usual stage when a less motivated parent accepts a withdrawal. Or in reverse, the child finds school so unexciting so dull or even so distasteful that he is not inclined to continue. The less motivated parents—who themselves knew no schooling— acquiesce. In short the school exercises little pull. And, in all fairness, its negative factors may well-nigh be daunting scant teacher attention, more reprimends than encouragement if not discrimination and neglect, lack of learning material and organized recreation, and poor physical facilities. If the schooling was good and parents discovered that the child was learning to read and picking up interesting things. Many of them would probably be prepared to undergo further sacrifices (including work adjustments) to retain him there—perhaps in line with the child's wishes where schooling is fun. Of course, a hard core will still escape effective coverage in our conditions, such as nomads, the handicapped, the abject poor. But that at least is understandable.

FLEXIBLE: The general Indian schooling system is basically patterned on the Western model. At this stage of its formed development there is practically no course open but to improve renovate and extend it making it somewhat more responsive to our requirements. There is precious little scope of doing away with it lock, stock and barrel and replacing it with an indigenous system whether centred on agriculture or craft or any other theme. Our only hope is that the existing system can gain a special strength which in turn could make it more flexible.

Multi-shifts, shorter hours for beginning classes, adjustable school hours or days for working children, complementary evening lessons, greater reliance on self-instructional materials and methods, a range of entry points, automatic promotion, and a host of other methods of improving the schooling system could help. These are not novel ideas, nor is it true that they have not been tried out before. Their impact, however, will remain insignificant and marginal unless they are introduced on a very extensive scale, in a combination of ways tailored to local conditions, and through a structure inherently well-organized and sensitive to diagnosed individualized constraints. The readiness to take appropriate follow-up action should also be there. In that sense, these approaches have to become an accepted and operative part of the whole system. Properly conducted 300 to 400 hours of schooling in a year, coupled with some self-study, could suffice for many in primary classes. The bulk of what is now being assigned to the non-formal sector of education can with advantage be handled by strengthened elementary schools themselves. The overall strategy should be one that improves and improvizes, not duplicates.

Kurrien advocates an overriding priority and emphasis on reading skills, followed by writing and numeracy. He recommends shedding a large part of subject studies and otherwise unburdening the curriculum for the first three to four years in favour of accelerated imparting of reading and writing skills, Subject information can well be conveyed through the material used, but the basic purpose is the acquisition of an ability to read simple matter with understanding in one's mother tongue. This seems an eminently suitable approach.

NEW APPROACH: It calls, however, for different and newer methodologies, teacher retraining, and the mass production and distribution of suitable reading material. The variety of reading matter thus made available should reflect the environment of the readers. There should be more references to the rural setting for rural children. The underlying idea is not to ruralize education or place an emphasis on teaching agriculture or rural craft, but to make the reading matter more relevant, more intelligible, and nearer to the living conditions of the child. This approach of concentrating on reading skills in the early years with regular academic subjects somewhat postponed, can usefully be extended to more advanced schools also. Progress in academic subjects becomes faster with the attainment of a good language skill.

There is, of course, a percentage of children — whose number increases progressively — get a head start Through early initial learning in educated homes, in kindergartens from the age of three or less, and full time academically advanced schooling thereafter. There is the continuing advantage of family beckground and the likely urban setting which is strong in information and communication. The gulf between them and the rest is wide, and could widen further. And watering down of their standards will be stoutly resisted in fact it need not be attempted.

Educational "engineering" would have to be resorted to for effecting a certain interchangeability between school systems: bridges and ladders will have to be put into place with the buffers of compensatory courses. Although ideal conditions will remain elusive, a lot of useful practical accessibility can be built in . The latest move for a new Central Model School in each district may not be the whole answer. Even if these schools succeed in becoming models (the general practice is to upgrade existing institutions of promise rather than set up brand new ones), these will largely be captured by the rural elite and the small-town gentry.