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The Eradication Of Illiteracy—II

-John Hastings

THE lessons of recent years have given us quite precise guidelines for pursuing each of the five major steps to achieve a literate nation.

(a) The primacy of **Adult Functional Literacy** must not be abandoned. Without it, none of the other steps can be effectively taken.

(i) AFL must be planned to reach all unschooled adults and adolescents. A goal of 60 or 70% is not acceptable since that would confirm the deprivation of the remaining 40 or 30% of citizens of their human right. It must therefore work systematically towards annual goals of at least 6 million new literates, otherwise the increasing, runaway number of the illiterate population puts completion further and further ahead and increases the cost beyond imaginable reach. (The illiterate adult population of Bangladesh has been increasing by 1.9 million per year.) It is still possible to make Bangladesh 90% literate within an expenditure of Tk. 2,441 crore, but only if immediate steps are taken along the lines of the LEMA Plan, and if the methodology and materials used are cost-effectively inexpensive. Every extra one taka per learner puts the bill up by 6 crore. $1.6.! Whatever funds are available, it must be ensured that the maximum numbers of people, now illiterate are benefited.

(ii) AFL requires a Government-controlled joint agency within which are integrated donors' representatives and technically competent staff gathered from NGOs. Administration must be business-like, strictly disciplined, and reliant on field-proved methodology. Adult literacy is a professional job. The procedures cannot be experimental or treated as whimsical welfare hand-outs; rather they need to be adopted as a 'jihad' against mass injustice.

(iii) AFL must follow a fast, creative learning methodology, with maximum components of self-instruction, providing the impetus and style for non-formal Continuing Education. It must cover the complete basic curriculum as nationally approved, and lead all learners into EC with access to local libraries of appropriate books, helping new readers to form groups for economic and general human development. There must be stress and special inputs on family planning, and on women's development—women and girls being the large majority of the potential beneficiaries. No initiating course can be considered successfully completed until the new literates are using literacy and numeracy skills for their daily needs and have become actively engaged in their own further education.

(iv) AFL must be community-based. Each local community should adopt goals and plan their achievement through committees in which illiterate people, including women and adolescents, are vocal members. The committees' terms of reference will include organising adult literacy classes, libraries and the regular use of them, working to improve the performance and standard of the local primary school, encouraging all parents to enroll the children, and energising the local movement for permanent education reform. At the union or urban ward level, elected Members/Chairmen/Commissioners will be called on to secure adequate provision of schools, with evening classes for working children, and to adopt and carry out systematic planning for the eradication of illiteracy from the area of jurisdiction. Each Thana will require a promotional cell for mass and non-formal education involving the TNO and statutory officers as well as members of the public. At district (or at least regional) level, Monitoring Cells should ensure comprehensive coverage of each district, and should have representatives of all communities, taking particular care that there is no neglect of the needs of tribal or other communities liable to be marginalised. At the national level, all Members of the Assembly would be expected to monitor and encourage the various agencies responsible for educational development (on each of which agencies selected MPs would be co-opted). Besides this structured participation (detailed in the LEMA Plan) local action groups of Education For All Network, and other bodies committed to nation-building, will strengthen at all points the community base for Adult Functional Literacy, Continuing Education, Non-Formal Education, and Universal Primary Education incorporating Non-Formal Primary Education.

(v) AFL must incorporate crucial elements of the other four steps for illiteracy eradication, NFPE, UPE, CE/NFE and ERM (Education Reform Movement). It must generate new writting and provide many new appropriate publications for CE/NFE, including writting by new literates. In all local discussions leading up to adult literacy classes, primary education needs should feature strongly. Here too has to begin the stimulation of the populations of each union and village for the essential action for an ERM.

(b) **Non-Formal Primary Education,** as an alternative to traditional primary schools and maktab education, has recently received a much-needed boost through the successes of BRAC's Non-Formal PE programme. At over 6,000 centres, in three-year courses for age 8–10, and two year for children over 10, an effective method of primary education is being demonstrated, with less than 2% drop-out rate, proving that it is not impossible to deliver education to every child in Bangladesh. In terms of turning out effectively educated adolescents, the cost per child is considerably lower than that of the formal sector.

The development of alternative PE has of course been precipitated by the general condition of rural primary schools. It is widely conceded that standards of PE have gone down since its nationalisation in 1974, reducing community participation and local control or influence. At the end of Styrbjorn Gustavsson's recent (1990) comprehensive survey of PE in Bangladesh, he terms the situation "alarming" (p.160). "Improvement will hardly be possible without a revision of strategy for UPE and an all-out national effort" (p.154). His book has the title "Primary Education in Bangladesh—for whom?" and the answer he gives is: "for the rich". The many ways in which the poor are in practice excluded are fully documented. Yet the very well-to- do despise "their" schools and "transfer their children to the few good government schools or opt for private schools.... There is ...a growing loss of interest and confidence in the public schools... Neglect threatens the government primary schools with further decline. A parallel school system is apparently under way at the expense of the poor." (p.155).

Well-known facts about PE not already mentioned include these: a quarter of primary-age children never start school at all; of those who do, two-thirds drop out before Class V; whereas nearly all girls of rich families go to school, only one-tenth of girls in poor families go (and then rarely for more than two years); of 50 beginners, it is normal for only 3 to 5 to get through Class V; the standard and momentum achieved even by Class V is rarely enough to keep children reading, and few books are available in any villags; it takes many children nine years to complete five Classes; children aged 6-14 are sometimes found reading together in Class I or II; though PE is supposed to be free, fees and levies are often charged and even text-books are sometimes sold, so that parents may have to pay out from Tk.150/– a year (rural) to Tk.1,500/– a month (Dhaka) for education (Gustavsson, pp.102–3), apart from cost of private tuition: private; private tutoring degrades school standards, enforcing repetition of classes for the untutored.

Even if corruption were eradicated and if local community management of schools could be strengthened, the need for alternative, non-formal PE would remain for three main reasons:

1.) The virtual exclusion of the poor has become engrained in the system, and such radical change is required in planning, in the philosophy and methods of teaching, and in the accumulated social norms which now tolerate the condition of rural primary education without protest, that it will take many years to reform PE, and even if 70% retention is achieved 5 million children will still be unprovided for; so meanwhile an alternative path of access of education has to be offered to the excluded masses.

2: It is questionable whether Bangladesh will be able to make budget provision for the required extension of formal PE, especially in the face of lobbying for more funds for secondary education; two-or three-year courses of NFPE, held for 2-2½ hours each evening primarily for marginalised families with children who cannot be free to attend day-schools, and geared to their economic and cultural needs, would prove a cost-effective alternative.

3) Above all, Bangladesh, like many other developing countries, in order to cope with the increasingly likely event that it will never be able to pay for costly universal formal education out of revenue budgets, needs a low-cost, high-quality form of education as a permanent alternative which will not be a second-best to 'real' education, but a better and more creative way forward for Bangladesh.

(c) **Universal Primary Education** can only be contemplated once parents have become literate through AFL and thus ready to send their children to school and help them in their learning, and once NFPE provision is being made for children outside the range of formal PE.

Clearly, little progress will be made just by injecting funds to double the amount of primary schooling at present provided, extending the present system. Since there is little dispute about the analysis of the ills of PE, it is to be expected that the necessary reforms will be built-in policy priorities. As noted above, some steps for improvement have been taken. It has been alleged that these are cosmetic rather than reformatory measures, and related only to finance. Whilst it is essential for the primary share of the education budget to be restored to 50%, and for more development funding to be injected, many reforms require little or no finance. It is axiomatic that UPE means education for all, not just the better off citizens, that the 40% very poor and the 40% poor must receive equal opportunities and treatment with the 20% rich. But it will take time for that new attitude and its derivative implementation to supplant the present ingrained assumptions of those who deliver education. Perhaps the first of the reforms should be to turn the primary teachers' unions round from being obstacles to reform to becoming supporters and co-planners, by proving to them that universal enrolment, restriction of private tutoring, less boring teaching techniques, outlawing corrupt practices, evening school shifts, more employment and a career structure with efficiency incentives, less children per teacher, and a total change in working environment due to popular supportive participation in primary education, and so on, are all reforms which in the long run will be beneficial to teachers and more importantly, vital for nation-building. If the unions fail to cooperate, even deeper reform may be necessary: Government may well take advantage of the fact that there is a large pool of PTI-trained men and women, since only one in seven have been able to get posts after training.

A Government-controlled agency within which selected NGOs and donors' representative are integrated could be appointed for NFPE (like the structure proposed for the control of the LEMA programme), and this agency should contribute to formal PE re-planning and UPE development. Once the NFPE parameters and its conditions for enrolment are agreed, quantitative planning for UPE can be set out. Much will then depend on the re-training programme—another vital area for reform (for which finance is not the prime concern, seeing that at present it consumes only 1% of project funding). What is now largely wasted on outdated, over-theoretical inputs—and an output which is damned by the assessment that "teachers with professional training do not appear to teach better than the untrained teachers" (M. Haque's review of Teacher Effectiveness, 1986)—can be injected at the point from which the primary education scene could be transformed into a beacon of hope for the nation.

It is also in the area of UPE that community participation could prove most significant—this reform is not merely inexpensive, it reduces management costs. With more parents functionally literate through AFL, and made aware of their responsibility for helping to bring about UPE and other education reforms, a much more creative role can be expected of the School Managing Committees. Community planning and management is also required for Early Childhood Education, whose programmes could be run from local resources, supplemented perhaps by a small input for training: his would save ECE from becoming another contender for the allocation of scarce education finance. Also, as Gustavsson points out, possibly half the costs of construction could be saved through community participation (p.164).

(To be continued)