

**U**NIVERSALISATION of primary education (UPE) has been receiving priority attention in Bangladesh since the early 1980s as it is considered essential to build a solid base of literate population for human resources development. There is no tuition fee charged by the government primary schools and private schools are receiving state subsidy (registered schools) and textbooks are supplied free to all the students of these schools.

In 1997 there were 16.68 mil-

lion children (roughly 9:8 male-female ratio) studying in primary schools. Besides, there were 360167 children studying in community and satellite schools, 785556 in madrassahs, and 752361 in NGO-run schools/centres (see table).

The Table shows two new category of primary grade schools, namely satellite schools and community schools. Satellite schools supply additional class room space for grade I and II children in community provided structures away from the parent school (a

**Table**

A. Number of Primary Level Schools/Institutions together with the number of Teachers and Students (As of March 1997)

Category of Schools	No of Schools	No of Teachers	No of Students
Govt. Primary School	37,710	15,8057	11,808,345
Expt. Primary School (attached to PTIs)	52	256	7715
Regst. Non-govt. Primary School	19,529	78168	3,894,884
Un-regst. Non-govt. Primary School	3,472	11,973	583,616
Community School	1,962	4,977	321,515
Satellite School (Grade I and II)	1,042	1,042	38,652
Kindergarten	1,545	10,058	208,089
Primary Section of Secondary Schools	1,292	7,896	383,301
Ebtedai Madrassah	8,231	32,316	542,039
Ebtedai Section of High Madrassah	2,850	11,742	243,517
Sub-total	77,685	316,485	18,031,673
NGO-run school/centre	21,740	24,733	752,361
Total	99,425	341,218	18,784,034

B. i) No. of sanctioned posts of teachers in Govt. primary schools-164,598

ii) No. of teachers working against sanctioned posts-158,057

iii) Overall student-teacher ratio-55:1

iv) Student-teacher ratio in Govt. primary schools-75:1

Source: Primary and Mass Education Division, Ministry of Education, September, 1998.

# Universal Primary Education The Challenge In Bangladesh by Mahmood Aminul Islam

dents which, besides other reasons, seriously affects the teaching-learning process. A teacher-student ratio of 1:30 is thought to be the minimum requirement for efficient classroom management and proper learning.

The present high teacher-student ratio has to be brought down by increasing classroom space and hiring more teachers at an affordable cost and without sacrificing the quality of education. The satellite schools and the community schools described above provide a practical framework of meaningful government-community co-operation maximising primary enrollment at minimum cost. The present congestion in primary schools and the fact that there is still a substantial number of school age children who are being deprived of primary education (as occasionally reported in the print media) justify establishment of many more satellite schools. Similarly, the need for community schools in unschooled areas is keenly felt.

The success of satellite schools is ascribed to strong community involvement smaller classrooms with squatting accommodation for students (community cannot af-

ford the usual classroom furniture), attention to teacher training, effective supervision by the parent school head teacher and other education officers, and management support from the thana education committee (TEC) represented by the local school and general administration.

As regards community schools some of them are, reportedly, facing problems of scarcity of students due to wrong location. This is essentially a local problem and should get resolved locally at the intervention of the TEC.

A decentralised school-centered development of primary education as exemplified by the satellite and community schools seems to hold much promise in a resource poor country with a large primary school age population like Bangladesh. The school management committee in government primary schools which lay dormant for decades has become active with the reconstitution of the committee. The thana education committee has also been playing a vital supporting role in the smooth management of primary schools. These encouraging trends of local initiative and government-community partic-

ipation in promoting primary education should be allowed to grow with more power and responsibilities given to the TEC to develop and administer primary education under the proposed upazila (sub-district) system of decentralised administration. The process seems to have started with the reported move to decentralise short term teacher training to thana level (specially required for untrained teachers recruited locally for the satellite and the community schools), and open a resource centre in each thana.

With the provision made for more class rooms and teachers, the quality of learning will, among others (curriculum, teacher training, supply of textbooks and other instructional materials — responsibilities assigned to specific institutions by the central government), depend on efficient school administration and learning time at the school i.e. contact hours.

The standard of efficiency in school administration is set by the head of the institution — his academic qualification, competence as a teacher, dedication and quality of leadership. Besides teaching, he is to perform as a manager and supervisor capable of giving administrative and academic leadership. He should be able to inspire confidence in the parents and the community by running the school efficiently. He therefore deserves a status and authority commensurate with his management responsibilities. The headteachers should therefore be carefully selected and given special training in management, academic supervision and community relations.

It is found the world over that time spent by students in

government primary school) and they are taught by teachers (almost all females) selected by the community. The rental for the classrooms (not exceeding Tk 300/- per month) and teachers' pay (Tk 500/- per month) come from the project fund. The technical inputs like instructional materials, teachers' training and academic supervision are provided by the local education administration. So successful has been the implementation of satellite schools since its beginning with 200 schools in the early 1990s, that opening of more schools upto 4000 has now been taken in hand under a new project.

Community schools which belong to the same category as private primary schools are being established since the mid 1990s, in unschooled areas in response to local demand on cost sharing basis. The community donates the land, performs management functions, including teacher selection while the government constructs the school building, provides technical inputs and pay for teachers' salary. For normal functioning a community school has to have a minimum roll strength of 150 students in different grades (I-V).

The gross enrollment ratio (GER) of 6-10 years old children attending primary schools and other primary grade institutions, is calculated to be 96 per cent. The net enrollment ratio excluding the repeaters, and overage and underaged children is estimated to be 72 per cent by the Directorate of Primary Education.

The growth in primary enrollment from 5.25 million in 1970 (Bangladesh Bureau of Educational Statistics) to 16.68 million in 1997 has been quite impressive. But this remarkable increase in enrollment has given rise to genuine concern as to the quality of education. How many of those completing the 5-year cycle of primary education acquire the basic skills of reading and writing with comprehension and computation, the traditional 3Rs which would equip them for the world of work and for attaining further and higher level qualifications?

Of the factors which determine the quality of education, classroom accommodation and teacher-student ratio are of crucial importance. Every student has to sit in minimum physical comfort, and interact with the teacher. In a crowded class, a teacher can hardly pay individual attention to the student.

In Bangladesh, the instructional time in a school year of about 200 days, averages 600 hours — 400 hours for grades I and II, and 800 hours for grades III to V — as against the global average of some 880 hours. Even this reduced time cannot be fully utilised due to natural calamities which regularly visit Bangladesh during August-September. It may be seriously considered if the effect of adverse weather conditions could be minimised by changing the January-December academic year to April-March corresponding to Bengali calendar year. This will allow, weather-wise, the best four months of the year from November to February to be utilised for uninterrupted studies at school.

Quality of education will be at a premium in the next century to cope with the technological revolution that is now sweeping the world. Knowledge, more than anything else, will be the basic resource in future. In this changing context, Bangladesh has to accept the challenge to universalise primary education maintaining not only the present learning competency level in primary schools but also improving it well beyond of what literacy means to-day.

The author, a retired Additional Secretary, was directly involved in the planning and management of primary education in the 1980s.

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