

জন্ম... 29/12/79  
... 7 ... 3

ENEMIES OF THE CHILD: PART THREE

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# Where child's education lags

The education of the world's children, like their health, fundamental to their own and their societies' future. In the industrialised world, enrolment of children in schools has been running close to 100% for many years. In many developing countries, on the other hand, illiteracy has long been a brake binding against almost every aspect of social and economic development. Not to be able to read a newspaper, the manufacturer's instructions on a tin, the advice on a nutrition leaflet or the manifesto of a local candidate, not to be able to check prices, measure land, or calculate interest rates, severely restricts a people's access to the means of improving their lives and participating in the decisions which affect them.

But in recent times, strenuous efforts on behalf of most developing nations have brought about significant improvements in the education of their children. Enrolment in primary schools in the developing world has doubled between 1960 and 1975 and there are now, for the first time, more school-age children in school than out of school. The latest available figures show that 62% of the children between the ages of six and eleven in the developing world are now enrolled in school.

Despite worries about regional discrepancies, drop-out rates, class-sizes and the disparities in educational opportunity between boys and girls, these figures represent a substantial gain.

Yet even greater efforts will be needed in the years to come if the current rates of school enrolment are to be maintained. And even on the most optimistic projections, the absolute number of chil-

dren not going to school, and of adults without the ability to read and write, is due to rise by the end of this century.

Rapid population growth has left the developing world with 40% of its population under the age of fifteen. And the constraints on resources available to meet the demand for education makes the question of priorities unavoidable. The world cannot afford, at present, to provide Harvard-style education for the majority of its people any more than it can afford to provide them with Harley Street medical care. It is evident, concludes the South East Asian Ministers of Education Organisation, that the formal school system cannot meet the demands of the rising school population for general education, let alone cover the wide range of skills required for social and economic advancement.

In many developing countries more than 50% of the total resources available for education are now used as if their sole purpose were to provide a small, intensively-trained elite for the modern administrative and economic sector. School examinations, and thereby school curricula, are often designed to introduce pupils to the skills required to be civil servants and administrators, teachers and doctors, scientists and engineers — and to select those who are capable of acquiring and developing these skills. The net result is that the estimated 80% of primary school leavers who do not qualify for the restricted number of places in secondary schools are left with a sense of failure and frustration and with the beginnings of an education largely irrelevant to the mainly rural

and agricultural jobs which are the only opportunities available to almost three-quarters of the developing world's people.

Many school leavers having failed to obtain an examination certificate, which is commonly seen as both a train ticket to the city and a passport to the modern world are then stranded without either the knowledge or incentive to work for the improvement of an impoverished countryside. Every year millions of these young people set off for the nearest town or city to see if they can squeeze into the 20th century by the back door.

All children should have the opportunity to acquire information and understanding relevant to the control and improvement of their own lives. The particular components of such an education must, by definition, be decided by each country or region for itself. Pioneering efforts in the Third World to gear education to the needs of the majority — the Brigade Schools of Botswana, the Village Polytechnics of Kenya, the Mobile Training Schools of Thailand, the Village Schools of Afghanistan, the 'Modulo System' in Guatemala, the Los Valles experiment in Panama, and the farm-schools in the Ujamaa Villages of Tanzania — have tended to opt for basic literacy and numeracy; knowledge of preventative health measures (including nutrition, hygiene and family planning); house improvement and constructional skills; techniques of increasing agricultural production; knowledge of the skills required for earning a living; child care and home management education; for participation in community and political life; understand-

জন্ম... 29/12/79  
... 7 ... 3

ing of the natural world, and the encouragement of positive attitudes towards the work of community and national development.

These ventures, seeking to involve the majority of children in schools which fulfil the true purpose of education by equipping them to improve the quality of their lives, are surely a glimpse of the future. But it does them no service to ignore the problems inherent in this approach.

Many parents and pupils do not agree with the advocates of 'Basic Education'. One of the many reasons why poor parents try to send and keep their children at school — often at great cost in terms of money, other needs unmet, and help foregone in homes and fields — is that school offers a chance of escape to a wage-earning job in the town or city. For millions of poor families, the dream of a son returning home to tell of his new job and open his wage-pocket is the equivalent of the man from the state-lottery knocking on the door.

Unlike the system of academic education for the fortunate 10%, 'Basic Education' does not divorce children from their community. At its best it is sensitive to, and builds upon, traditional values and perceptions. And it prepares the learner not only for survival in a fixed environment, but create the capacity to adapt and improve that environment.

Nor does the concept of 'Basic Education' mean that the door to further education is closed to the children of the poor. Equal if restricted, opportunity for further education, in the service of the community and the nation is

the goal. And to achieve that great efforts will be necessary to maintain and improve the availability and quality of education in rural and poor urban areas. Such an effort would, of course, go against the grain of education system which reflect the divisions between rich and poor.

Finally the very definition of education as a building into which pupils enter at a certain age and leave at a certain age needs to be re-examined. Non-formal education — women's and youth organisations, cooperatives, political parties, folk music, the media — is an important force whose potential is not fully developed. Generating moral and material support for this wider concept of education is necessary in order to serve both those who never attended school in their childhood and those who dropped out at an early age.

This year an estimated 250,000 children will go blind. In almost all cases, their sight will be taken away either by malnutrition or by preventable eye diseases. Indeed some experts say that 250,000 children are blinded every year for the lack of a daily handful of green vegetables.

Without the special care available for the blind which exists in most industrialised countries, and with the additional health and nutritional problems already touched upon, the plight of these children can hardly be imagined.

The major causes of blindness are xerophthalmia and trachoma, onchocerciasis and cataract. And the fact that there are now 32 million blind people in the developing world is testimony to N.R. Fendall's famous epitaph on twentieth century medicine: — 'Brilliant in its discoveries, superb in its technological break-through, but woefully inept in its application to those most in need

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