

MEHER UNIVERSAL PRIMARY EDUCATION PROJECT

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Introduction

The education system of Bangladesh has to be seen in the context of poverty, low per capita incomes (around \$100 per year), illiteracy rates of about 65 per cent male and 85 per cent female, poor physical infrastructure, unemployment even for many of the educated and an ever increasing population putting intense pressure on land, food and resources. The education system remains largely academic and examination orientated, the legacy of Pakistan and before that of British India. It is a rigid system which has failed to cope with the problems arising from the universalisation of primary education, making secondary education more relevant by the wider introduction of science and technology, and the raising of standards at tertiary levels.

Primary Education in Bangladesh¹

Numerous difficulties stand in the way of universalisation, despite the Government's intention to do so by 1985. The Second Five Year Plan, 1980-85, gives priority to primary education, with 40 per cent of the total educational allocations going to the primary sector. But the amount has since been cut. A decentralised administrative structure of Local Education Authorities was to be set up but as yet this is hardly underway. Free books to half the students and free clothes to 30 per cent of the girl students were envisaged. The latter has been carried out to a certain extent.

Primary education has a well-established structure of schools, teachers and administrators, although the schools are in poor condition, the teachers too few and the administration overworked. Textbooks are uniform for the entire country. These are fairly good in content but the prices are unaffordable by the poorer families. About 30 per cent of the primary school age group is outside the education system. Of those who enrol, 70 per cent drop out before class 5. Two million fewer girls than boys attend school. Poverty is often the main factor affecting enrolment, retention, success or failure at school. Schools are plagued by repetition and examinations. Enrolment is stagnant. In 1981 it was estimated at 8.2 million of the age group population of 12 million.

There is no long-term perspective planning in education. A realistic assessment of educational needs, types and level of education required and possible future employment opportunities is lacking. The education sector operates in isolation. There should be long-term future planning based on the best estimates of population and economic growth available. Five years is a short time-frame for education where twenty may go to create the highly specialised individual. Five years is merely a convenient administrative and financial reference point. What is the future of the children to be educated under UPE? What employment options will be open to them? How can the education system itself aid those options?

Universalisation, used in a strict sense, means that all children of primary school age are in school. There is no drop out at all. Every child who enters class 1 passes through all the classes and completes class 5.

As primary education cannot physically cope with the children presently enrolling, about 7-8 million, and as little physical renovation has been carried out, it is hardly possible that 12 million children (the present primary school age group) can be accommodated in the schools by 1985 even under a double-shift system. There simply are not enough schools, classrooms, benches or teachers let alone other educational facilities such as simple equipment or books to enable Bangladesh to provide universal primary education. At present the enrolment of 12 million children is not a practical possibility, not to speak of their retention in the school for five years. Current drop-out is 70 per cent between class 1 and 5 and girls enrol in far less numbers than boys.

There have been no attempts at non-formal schooling in the primary sector nor in the secondary. The First Five Year Plan (1973-78) envisaged feeder schools and educated housewives as teachers at the primary levels while community education centres were planned for the secondary level. None of these plans were carried out. In the Second Five Year Plan these suggestions are not repeated but there are plans for the universalisation of primary education along with the decentralisation of administration and, at the secondary level, non-formal vocational education and skill training for school leavers. In addition a mass education programme to impart functional literacy was envisaged, and has been functioning on a wide scale since 1980. The universalisation and the skill training programmes are hardly underway.

Bangladesh Association for Community Education (BACE)

This organisation is a voluntary, non-profit making educational organisation dedicated to improving the quality and quantity of education available in Bangladesh. Before detailing its objectives and programmes, it is necessary to discuss its members and their role, for their interests and activities determine and dominate the function of BACE.

Members, presently about 30, are all professionals drawn from universities, government service, the business community and educational institutions with a few retired civil servants. Together they set up the organisation, drew up its constitution and framed its rules and they give their time and money to its development. Every two years a nine member governing body is elected from the general members. This governing body meets every two weeks and also appoints committees to deal with various aspects of BACE work. These committees make reports and recommendations to the governing body which passes the appropriate resolutions when necessary.

Through these committees and regular meetings, to which all are invited, BACE members keep a firm control on all its activities. They direct and guide programmes, aid the staff with all project preparation and write many BACE reports. There is close co-operation between BACE members and BACE staff which enhances BACE operations, for most BACE members are highly skilled experts in their various fields. It is the enthusiasm and dedication of BACE members which keeps the organisation going.

Objectives

BACE was established (i) to utilise community support to make education more efficient, more effective and in particular more responsive to the needs of the community, viewing non-formal education as supplementing and supporting the formal system, and (ii) to provide a forum for educational ideas and innovation, to develop models appropriate in the context of Bangladesh and to spread ideas on educational innovation, appropriate technology, health-care and population control.

Additionally BACE wished to aid the most disadvantaged groups in society - the poor rural dwellers, girls, illiterate youths, and urban slum people. These are the groups not merely socially disadvantaged but excluded from the formal education system by virtue of their socio-economic condition. The two disadvantages reinforce each other; BACE viewed education as a means to break the reinforcement by giving literacy and practical skills which would both enhance life and generate income. In addition BACE viewed primary education as the main vehicle for achieving national literacy.

BACE members were all well aware of the problems of the education system and they envisaged developing and supporting projects which provided solutions that were practical, replicable and low-cost. The main strategy lies in the belief that communities and individuals know their own requirements, can contribute towards programmes in numerous ways, and should therefore be actively involved in programme activities.

BACE Programmes

BACE runs five main programmes: scholarship programmes at the secondary level, a universal primary education project, non-formal community schools, a widely distributed journal and women's programmes.

Meher Universal Primary Education Project

Seven years ago the pilot project on universal primary education began in Meher Union (a union is the lowest tier of the local government institutions, comprising 10-15 villages) situated 22 miles west of Comilla. It is funded by the Ministry of Education and BACE is the executing agency. The project began first in a group of villages called Panchagram where, in 1975, a special village development co-operative had been set up.

The Panchagram Shamabay

This co-operative, Meher Panchagram Shamabay, was the first multi-purpose village development co-operative ever registered in Bangladesh. It aimed at total village development and committees were organised under a village council to supervise and improve all aspects of life - livestock, fisheries, poultry, education, culture, religion and welfare, roads and communication, irrigation, agriculture, electrification, youth and women's activities.

The Co-operative was organised first in five villages, hence the name Panchagram, but shortly after its inception it took in two small adjoining villages; thus it consists actually of seven villages but retains its original name Panchagram. In 1977 the whole of Meher Union, consisting of 24 villages, organised itself as a Shawnirvar (self-help) union. Meher Union was divided into seven Shawnirvar blocks of which Panchagram was one.

When the project started there in March 1976, the area was very different from what a visitor may find today. There was no motorable road into the area, not even a rickshaw could reach the village from the main road because of the unbridged deep Khal (canal) next to the main road. Only two bamboo poles lashed together served as the link between the road and the footpath to the villages. The first two villages were reached after 25 minutes fast walking on a narrow, pot-holed path winding between the paddy fields and bamboo clumps.

It was a typical sleepy, backward area where time seemed to have no meaning, where footpaths were washed out in the rainy weather and where isolation, fatalism and rural primitiveness were predominant. There was no electricity, no rural industries, no "development" of any kind.

The starting of the Panchagram Shamabay was the turning point for the area. It had one priceless asset - leadership from a truly committed village elder who was delighted to spend his time and energy in helping the advancement of the people. But development was slow and at the beginning only the education project strongly supported by all classes of villagers was effective. Other development works did not gain momentum until 1977. However, in the first two years tanks were cleaned, roads made up and the entire Panchagram was surveyed by the village youth. The community also built four "feeder schools", (so-called as they "feed" the children into class 2 and 3 of the primary school). Land, building materials and labour were all donated by the community. This was in accordance with the education project agreement that if the community provided schools, the project would provide money for teachers, books and equipment.

These schools were completed by January 1976 when the project should have started, but funds were not available until June that year. However, the local education committee hired teachers and ayahs, scrounged around for old books and opened the schools in March, enrolling over 400 children within two months.

Within one year villagers from the rest of the Union were asking for their area to be included in the education project. Eighteen more feeder schools were built to accommodate all the out-of-school children, and almost two thousand of them were enrolled. This area became the extended project area and received funds from June 1977.

Organisation and Administration

The whole Union is organised into a Union Education Committee composed of the Shawnirvar Block chairmen, local primary school headteachers and other elected Shawnirvar and Shamabay officials. It meets once a month and discusses educational problems and approves the action of project officials. It praises teachers for good work, censures teachers for poor performance and can recommend disciplinary action.

The project is run by locally hired personnel - a project officer and his deputy, one part-time accountant and a field assistant. All have bicycles and they travel all over the Union checking up on the schools and helping the teachers. Twice a month, on alternate Saturdays, all teachers attend in-service training at the project office.

Project officials are responsible to the Project Director who is a member of BACE Governing Body but, except in policy matters, the Director stays in the background and encourages all decisions to be made locally in consultation with the Union and Shawnirvar Block Community. The overall administration of the project is by BACE, and Annual Reports and audits are submitted to the Ministry of Education. BACE officers liaise with the local project officials and the Union Education Committee.

Community participation and continuing interest sustain the project. The project never had funds for building schools; all land, materials and labour had to be donated by the local community. The response has been excellent especially considering that this was accomplished in what was then a backward rural area. There is criticism that the education project succeeded because it was in Meher Panchagram but the fact is that the two things, organisation and rural development, grew together. The organisational, administrative and development aspects of the project are simple and may be replicated anywhere in Bangladesh.

A second important feature of the scheme is the employment of local people. Only one individual, an education specialist, of the 75 employed in the project has been from outside the Union. This makes a large number of people in the Union interested in, and aware of, educational progress. The Union Education Committee has 30-40 members and they, together with all the employees, make over 100 individuals concerned with education. Compared with any other neighbouring Union, one can state that more individuals in Meher are aware of educational problems and that many of them have been involved in finding solutions. This results in an enlarged awareness about education beneficial to the entire Union.

Non-Formal Aspect

Meher UPE used a non-formal approach - the feeder schools - to supplement the inadequate formal education system. In 1976, the primary school enrolment could not cover all the children in the Union. There were eight primary schools, only three of which had a permanent or semi-permanent building. The others were in a very poor condition. The official enrolment was about 1,600. No class 5 exceeded 16 pupils and the drop-out was about 80 per cent. Less than 50 per cent of the Union's children were in school. There were about 3,700 primary school age children.

The feeder schools were opened to accommodate pre-class 1, class 1 and some class 2 students. The idea was to teach reading, writing and counting, and then "feed" the children into primary schools. The primary schools, relieved from the usual enormous class 1 numbers, would be able to cope better with enlarged classes 2-5, as the years passed. Moreover, this scheme would enable the experienced primary school teachers to have the more vital upper classes. The idea worked. In 1981 enrolment at all the primary schools averaged 292 students despite having no class 1. Two of the schools enrolled over 4000 students each.

Feeder School Teachers

Hiring professional teachers would have made the cost too high. Moreover, not enough trained teachers would be available in the Union to staff the feeder schools. The Director reasoned that any literate educated person could, with goodwill and enthusiasm, teach a child to read and write. All education systems begin with less qualified, untrained teachers; so would the UPE project. Forty-four local people, two-thirds women, were employed as teachers. They received in-service training at the project office twice a month. In general they have proved to be quite adequate as feeder school teachers.

Women Teachers and Ayahs

Each feeder school employs an ayah to provide a respectable "chaperone" to the girls. Even in schools where women are employed, an ayah is appointed and she helps the teachers with infant pupils. The majority of the ayahs are elderly widows but some are married and a few are young unmarried girls. The appointment of women as teachers was another

crucial feature of the project. The Director insisted on women teachers for it was thought that their presence would encourage girls' enrolment. Also, women were believed to be better teachers than men for the beginning classes.

There was opposition to this in the community, but after one year's critical scrutiny community attitudes veered sharply. The women were acknowledged as good conscientious teachers far better than the local primary school teachers. In contrast with the latter, the feeder school teachers opened school on time every day, taught double-shift and had no students dropping out. The lesson was lost on nobody and as the years passed subtle community pressures forced the local primary school teachers to emulate the women teachers.

The use of local women as teachers has now become quite acceptable. Local feeder school teachers know their students and students know their teachers. No corporal punishment is allowed. Poetry and singing is encouraged and fairy stories and folk tales are read to the children. School has become an interesting place and an attractive experience. To some extent this had influenced the primary schools too; the schools in the Union have a liveliness and enthusiasm usually absent in other primary schools. The teachers cope well with the large classes and appear stimulated by the situation. This is in contrast to the early days when feeder school students were refused admission to class 2 because there were too many of them.

Salaries

No teacher is paid over Tk.150 (\$8) per month except for 6 "master" teachers who receive double that amount. In an isolated village setting, this is an attractive wage for no other employment is available to the teachers. Were the project nearer a town or city, wages might have to be higher to appear attractive. There have been no wage increases but to celebrate entering the fifth year of the project all employees were paid a bonus of one month's salary in 1980 dependent upon their length of service. Teachers' turnover is about 5 per cent a year and there is never any difficulty in filling the positions. Many of the teachers have taught between 3-5 years in the project.

Provision of Free Textbooks

Initially the project supplied textbooks only to the feeder school students and to those who continued in the primary schools. This restriction became awkward once the extended project opened in 1977 and so free books were supplied to all the primary school students in the Union as well. This was much appreciated especially after the price increases in 1978 as it made primary education virtually free. In the feeder schools the project provides chalk, slates, exercise books and pencils but these are not provided to the primary school students. However, as an incentive to accept and teach the large numbers of students entering classes 2 and 3, the project also supplies chalk to the primary schools as the Tk.3 per teacher per month allowed to each school is insufficient for this purpose.

Apart from free textbooks, educational equipment and extra story books, the project has provided one steel cupboard for every feeder school. In some cases benches have also been provided. Additionally, a medical inspection has been given every year and medicines have been provided for diarrhoea, intestinal worms, and vitamin deficiencies.

Enrolment and Drop-out

There is still 100 per cent enrolment of children in the feeder schools. They cannot be retained; many drop out when it is time to be transferred to the primary schools. A recent independent survey of the project area estimated a 43 per cent drop-out up to grade 5. This is an improvement over the national figure of 70 per cent drop-out especially as Meher Union begins with 100 per cent cohort enrolment in contrast to the national cohort enrolment of around 60 per cent. Records on the 1976 cohort as they moved up the school found a 26 per cent drop-out over five years. These children all went to the first four Panchagram feeder schools.

Table 1

Enrolment in 22 feeder Schools of Meher, 1981

	Infant Class	Class 1	Class 2	Total
Boys	342	366	90	798
Girls	296	330	83	709
Total	638	696	173	1507
Average class size in 3 schools only	29	32	50	

As Table 1 shows, the 22 feeder schools had over 1,500 students in 1981. Because of the number of schools, the class average is low and each child received more personal attention from teachers than in the usual overcrowded class 1 of the primary school.

Table 2

Enrolment in 8 Primary Schools of Meher, 1981, Class 2-5

	Class 2	Class 3	Class 4	Class 5	Total
Boys	418	308	247	203	1,176
Girls	441	295	249	177	1,162
Total	859	603	496	380	2,338
Average class size Meher	107	75	62	47	292

Source for Tables: Fifth Annual Report, Meher, UPE, 1981.²

Table 2 illustrates the high enrolment and retention in the Union's 8 primary schools. The average class size, class 2-5, is far higher than the national average and shows the success of Meher UPE in enrolment and retention of students. A class 5 average of 47 for village schools is unique. Moreover, retention is increasing each year and is expected to be 90 per cent cohort retention of grade 5 by 1985.

Girls' Enrolment

The project achieved its goal of 100 per cent enrolment of girl students and five years later the ratio of boys to girls at the 8 union primary schools had reached parity whereas nationally it is 63:37. This is a good achievement, nor has girls' drop-out rate been higher than boys', as is usually the case. The local people are pleased that girls do not have to walk far to school and they are pleased about the female teachers. Some girls, perhaps one per cent, do not attend the primary schools but stay on at the nearest feeder school for as long as possible.

Over 50 women in the union are employed in the project and their example must help to raise the status of working women, as well as to be a model for the girls.

Repetition

This has been a great problem. For universalising primary education, automatic promotion is a necessity. Students who repeat classes, especially classes 1 and 2, practically all drop-out of the school system. Only recently however, it has been possible to win over local opinion on this point. Even in the feeder schools instructions to promote the children every year were ignored and the Director eventually had to force the issue. Once the students are in the primary schools, there was no control over them and of the 1976 cohort 31 per cent were retained in lower grades in 1980, whereas all should have been in grade 5. By 1981 attitudes had changed and repetition in the primary schools was only 6 per cent that year.

This illustrates the enormity of the problem, the strong entrenched attitudes and the difficulty of change even under the best of conditions. In Meher it took six years before the near abolition of repetition took place. There is little understanding by teachers themselves of one of the most serious problems of primary education. There is no justification for repetition although numerous excuses may be made for it. Apart from the harm to the individual students, it makes the entire system inefficient.

Costs

Nearly two-thirds of the total fixed costs of the project was financed from local resources.³ The annual⁴ cost per student in the feeder schools was estimated at 76 takas in 1980. These costs include not only teachers' salaries but also the provision of books, slates and equipment. As large numbers of children are enrolled, costs per student are kept low. The same must be true of the primary schools where enrolment is far above average.

These low costs make the scheme attractive and the initial contribution of the community to the fixed costs has been impressive. "If local resources could be mobilized along this line elsewhere in Bangladesh, the Treasury could be relieved of a substantial financial burden",⁵ was the conclusion of a recent evaluation.

Impact of the Project

There is no doubt that the project has had an influence on education within the Union. Additionally it has provided 75 jobs to the local people. It has enrolled and kept hundreds of children in schools who would never have attended otherwise. It has had success with the enrolment of girls and indirectly it may have changed the quality of education imparted in the primary schools.

It has not been able to prevent drop-out. Children from the poorest families drop out still, so do boys and girls who enrolled late in school. Repetition has not been entirely eliminated. Students still crowd the lower grades.

A positive sign has been the increasing accuracy of educational statistics collected. A 1975 educational survey was useless as a 100 per cent inflation of registered students was normal (by the primary schools). Today that has changed and figures published in the Annual Reports of Meher UPE are accurate. However limited, these provide some accurate statistics on primary education in rural Bangladesh.

Evaluation

There have been two independent evaluations of the Meher UPE Project.⁶ Both reached positive conclusions and praised community involvement, girls' enrolment, low costs and easy replicability of the project. The main findings are given below:

- (1) The Project has had an enormous impact on girls' enrolment with 49 per cent of all the students being girls. Moreover, girls' retention in the higher grades continues to be very good - better than the national average.
- (2) The standard of instruction in grade 1 was higher than that in the primary schools of the adjoining Union.
- (3) Attendance rates in the Union were higher than those for the country as a whole.
- (4) 90 per cent of all the households with primary⁷ school age children are sending those children to school. The concluding recommendation is that "if the people of the community participate with their own interest then it will be helpful for the Government to introduce universal primary education within a short time by establishing feeder-schools in the non-school villages⁸ rather than establishing any more primary schools." Such a scheme would generate considerable employment on a large scale basis, but costs

would still be lower than in the present primary schools. This evaluation recommended phased expansion of the scheme to cover the whole country within 5 years.

Relevance and Replicability

Many of the problems of primary education in the area have been partly or wholly eliminated. The latter include girls' low enrolment, lack of female teachers, lack of community involvement, poor teacher attendance and performance, low enrolment, and inflation of rolls. Partially eliminated are drop-out and repetition.

On these grounds the project is a success and the use of feeder schools and local teachers, unqualified and untrained but intelligent and enthusiastic, as a supplement to the primary schools has proved to be a far more efficient method of primary education than just the traditional primary schools. Moreover, costs are low - lower than primary schools generally even with all the extra inputs.

Perhaps the most significant feature is community participation and local contribution. The cost of building 22 small schools would have been high and would have made the project quite unrealistic as a model for achieving universal primary education. As it is, the local involvement, local committees, locally hired teachers, ayahs and project officials, are all easily replicable elsewhere. The feeder school system gives the children a chance to develop a positive attitude towards education, a chance to learn basic reading and writing so that entry into primary school is easy, and a chance to learn the daily discipline of school in a caring homely atmosphere.

It is the opinion of many observers that the project offers a practical model to ensure universal primary education over the whole country if adopted on a large scale. Meher UPE had been copied in several areas of Bangladesh, most notably in the Chagalnaia and Luxmipur thanas in Noakhali, in Rangunia thana in Chittogong and in other scattered localities particularly the Shawnirvar thanas. It is attractive because of the low cost and community participation. But even so, the salary and book costs are high unless borne by some outside agency, such as by the Danish International Development Agency (DANIDA) in Noakhali.

Meher UPE being a rural experiment has much to offer. First it shows how communities are willing to become involved in education on a continuing basis. The people did not merely build the schools; they continue to contribute by repair and maintenance work. One lesson can be accepted: that once organised, rural communities are most willing to work and contribute for the welfare of their own children.

Meher UPE shows how intelligent but untrained people may be used although, in this case, there is an in-service training component. Perhaps the greatest value of Meher UPE is that it demonstrates how a non-formal component can act as a supplement to the formal school system and double the latter's efficiency. The feeder schools, by enrolling all

the children, demonstrate one way of universalising enrolment at the primary level. By imparting basic instruction to the children in infant class and class 1, they prepare the students to enter the formal school system at class 2. The formal schools, relieved of the burden of class 1, can manage to cope with the even larger class 2-5 enrolments.

A comparison in the following table of the class-wise distribution of enrolment nationally and in Meher UPE shows how those areas are superior to the national average.

Table 3

Class-wise Distribution of Enrolment Between Classes,
Meher UPE and National Average (as a percentage) 1980

Classes	Meher UPE	National average
1	22	41
2	32	21
3	19	16
4	15	12
5	12	9

Source: Meher UPE Annual Report 1981: BACE Report

Also, total costs are low, even though all books are free. These low costs make it an attractive programme and the simplicity of its operation also makes it easily replicable. Until such time as the government is able to provide primary education facilities in the formal schools to all the children, the Meher UPE model offers an easy and inexpensive way of universalising enrolment. The salary structure helps to keep the overall costs low and the model may be adopted and made even cheaper by the use of one-teacher schools, where appropriate, or by the provision of books to the poorest children only.

A particularly important feature of Meher UPE has been the infant class. Given the mainly illiterate background from which primary school children come, it is essential to establish "infant classes" all over the country. This may be compared with the one year kindergarten of the American school system before the child begins formal learning in grade 1. After completing infant class the child stands a much better chance of coping with the class 1 experience. It is an essential head start for the deprived children from the poorest sections of rural and urban society. Feeder schools, infant classes, mosque schools, maktabas -all may be used for this essential head start programme.

Summary and Conclusions

Bangladesh is one of the poorest countries in the world. It has a

rapidly increasing population and limited resources. There is a formal educational system with primary education, till very recently, being the most neglected sector. The decision to go for UPE is a most necessary step towards the path of national development and the growth of the nation's greatest resource - the brains of her people, but the pace of universalisation cannot be quickened without far greater resource allocation to the primary sector. If, by 1985 the administrative structure of primary education is decentralised and expanded it will be a great achievement. If, at the same time, through school mapping exercises and the establishment of new and improved facilities, enough school places are created for the estimated 16 million children of primary age, it will be a tremendous achievement. If, in addition, enough trained teachers are available to staff the schools Bangladesh will be upon the threshold of a move towards universalisation. The preconditions for universalisation must be created before the actual universalisation drive begins or Bangladesh will find, as other countries have done, that universalisation is an empty promise and must be restarted several years later.

However, a great deal could be achieved, with a shift in emphasis and a willingness to encourage people and communities to assist in the effort, with a more realistic statement of goals and objectives.

Additionally, of course, there would be the compounded problem of children out of school increasing annually. An approach which might yield results would be the use of all existing institutions, recognised and non-recognised, religious and secular, and taking cognisance of their potential while planning for universalisation.

References

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