

PEOPLE'S PRIMARY SCHOOL - SAVAR GONOPATHSALA

Sayed Rowshan Qadir

Introduction

Primary education is now recognised as a fundamental right of all people. Whether the communities which are actually deprived of educational opportunity, particularly poorer parents, think of it as a basic or primary need for their children is a different question. What is important is that these communities have come to recognise that education does not mean employment and that the present system of education alienates children from work. In reply to a question "why she did not send her children to school", in a survey (1), an earning mother replied "the school does not provide him or her food, but working somewhere else he or she can procure food". For a poor parent, the primary need for children is to provide food first, not education. They think that education does not provide any solution to children's practical life. Since primary education is imparted in full-time schools and children of the vast majority of rural families have to work for their survival, for all practical purposes these children have no access to primary education.

The National Setting

The above represents a picture of today's Bangladesh, the major part of the land that was Bengal, well known even in this century as the most intellectually advanced and affluent in the sub-continent. The tragedy is that today's Bangladesh formed the primary producing hinterland for the city and factories of Calcutta until the partition in 1971, achieved through a devastating liberation war, found the territory "lagging behind ... in many areas of life" (2). The close of the 1970s, according to official records, witnessed all the problems of "poverty, malnutrition, unemployment and illiteracy" (3), with 85 per cent of the population subsisting below the poverty line. About 90 per cent of population is rural, of which 50 per cent are landless agricultural labourers.

The educational scene has also been dismal according to expert opinion. The so-called development policies and action followed for more than two decades until recently on the iniquitous base of the social structure in

effect contributed to polarising disparities of income and education. Only in recent years is an attempt being made to genuinely universalise education. From 1947 to 1980, the increase in enrolment in primary schools has been only 132 per cent compared to 3400 per cent in higher education (4). The rate of literacy is only 27 per cent for males and 13 per cent for females. Only 58 per cent of the primary school age population 6-10 enrol in schools, and of these 50 per cent drop out before completing grade V. A national survey revealed that while 30 per cent of the families belonging to the upper layer sent all their children to primary school, 56 per cent in the bottom sent none of their children to school (5).

In a recent learned paper, Chowdhury calls education in Bangladesh 'dysfunctional' (4). Primary education does not help the child to affirm his relations with nature and other ecological forces and as such does not impart receptiveness to change. Secondary education alienates an individual from traditional society, but does not reintegrate him with the modern sector. Institutions of higher education have become the 'constitutional refuge' of the disguised unemployed. That the education system is not productive is attested by the fact that while Japan with only 8.4 million acres of rice land and 24 per cent of its population in agriculture has a rice surplus after meeting the food requirements of its 100 million population, Bangladesh with 23 million acres of the rice land and 70 per cent of its population on farms is unable to feed its 85 million people (6).

The Locale and the Agency

The Gonoshyastha Kendra (GK) (people's health centre) where the Gonopathsala (GP) (people's primary school) is located is in Savar, 22 miles from the city of Dhaka, the capital of Bangladesh. Savar is also a thana - an administrative unit equivalent to a county. According to the 1974 census the population of Savar thana was around 200,000. The thana consisted of 300 villages and 12 Union Parishads (the lowest tier of local government) - a Union comprises 10-12 villages with populations ranging from 12 to 20,000. GK is located in the Pathalia Union, on the highway connecting Dhaka with the northern districts. Some modern industries and a university have come up alongside the highway. Still the thana is primarily rural and depends on agriculture, and as in other rural areas of Bangladesh, the people of Savar thana are generally poor, illiterate, and suffer from malnutrition and ill-health.

GK was started as a modest health centre in 1978 to provide medical care to the people of the surrounding areas. The founder was Dr. Zafarullah Chowdhury, a young medical doctor, who actively participated in the liberation war of 1971 and drew his experience from organising medical camps and care of the wounded. Gradually an intensive health programme developed with centres and village based paramedics, a health insurance scheme, and preventive and curative services. Soon it was realised that health-care alone would not solve the people's problem; indeed, as GK's 1974-75 Progress Report noted, over-population and illiteracy are symptoms of the poverty syndrome. This led GK to work towards a programme of socio-economic development. It instituted some income-generating activities at the centre like Gonoshilpalaya (People's workshop), Nari Kendra

(women's centre), Gono Paduka (people's shoe industry), Gono Krishi Khamar (people's farm), etc. While these activities have been taken up, the emphasis of GK continues to be on family planning and health care. As Manzoor Ahmed has pointed out GK has set impressive examples of integration of curative medical services, preventive health care and family planning, and has also integrated these with the various socio-economic activities. Another sphere in which GK has broken new ground is community participation and effective training of workers at the base level (7).

In 1972, a scheme of non-formal adult education for men and women was introduced by GK. The classes were held in the afternoon and evening. A teacher was appointed from the locality. In course of time, discussions revealed that this education seemed useless as it did not enable them to raise their income. The older people suggested that education should be given to children who had their whole life before them and further it should have some economic opportunities as well. This experience with adult males led GK to institute their education programme for children. GK workers held extensive discussions with villagers for opening a school for children. They collected information from twelve government primary schools and undertook a house to house survey in neighbouring villages (8).

This survey helped them to identify problems of school age children. It was found that about 70 per cent of them were admitted to class I and II of the government schools in the villages. But only 33 per cent of these entrants stayed in class III, and just 13 per cent continued in class V. The students of class V belonged to well-to-do families. The timetable which was followed by government schools was not suitable for the majority of village families. Some poor families could not afford to send children to a school because the parents depended on the earnings of children employed as domestic servants or shepherds. The prevailing education system contributed little to alleviate their daily problems.

The findings of the survey helped workers to map out an education plan which would not alienate students from the realities of their life and would help the families directly or indirectly.

Gonopathsala - People's School

Realising that the structures of the country still oppress the children of the poor, the philosophy behind the school is to educate the children of their own community. Gonopathsala's primary purpose is to spread education among the children of landless and marginal farmers who otherwise have no opportunity for education. It is to engage students in activities - in addition to studies - which would preserve interests and skills considered valuable by their families (9).

Gonopathsala started with 50 students in 1977; the number has increased to 286 in 1982. The school received government recognition in October 1981. This ensures that at the end of their study at Gonopathsala students would be able to get admission to other schools. The authorities of GK have not accepted government assistance to avoid unnecessary intervention as it is their aim to build the institution in a spirit of self-reliance.

The Pathsala is situated within the campus of GK. It covers approximately 2.5 acres including a spacious courtyard, used as a playground for the students. The school comprises two big rooms subdivided into 7 rooms. One room has mud walls with corrugated iron sheets on the roof, the floor is of earth; the other big room is fenced in by bamboo. The Pathsala has a floor space of approximately half an acre. In the classroom students and teachers sit on mats. The furniture includes one table, three chairs (in the teachers' common room), three blackboards and one cupboard. These are the physical facilities provided for 286 students and six teachers in Gonopathsala. They have a tubewell and the necessary toilet facilities, a field to work and play where the children have swings which they use in between class hours. The students have their own wall-board for information about the villages, and news on health and nutrition. Students are given a boldly printed survey sheet for village information which they fill up in their own hand and discuss in the class. This exercise helps to raise their consciousness about the village social structure and their own place in it.

The Teaching Programme

The method which is followed by teachers and students of Gonopathsala is quite different from other primary schools of the country.

Classes are held five days a week (from Wednesday to Sunday) instead of six as in other primary schools in the country. Monday the teachers go to the villages supervising or conducting the classes there. Students of classes III to V are required to hold classes in the villages for those children who cannot come to the school site. Perhaps this is an indicator of the form that the school will gradually assume - the building may serve as the initial training ground, with some students staying longer than others, while the village becomes the accepted site of a regular school programme (10).

The premises of the school are used in three shifts: (i) orientation of the adult women workers of GK, (ii) orientation of the adult workers of GK who live on the campus and (iii) orientation of the students for whom Gonopathsala has been initiated. The daily routine, Wednesday through Sunday, of the Gonopathsala teachers is given on page 83.

The Daily Routine of the Gonopathsala Teachers

6.00 to 7.30 a.m.	Work in the fields.
7.30 to 9.00 a.m.	Bath and breakfast.
9.00 to 10.15 a.m.	Assembly of students, orientation of local workers engaged in various projects of GK, supervision of students in agricultural work, sending students for work in selected development projects of GK.
10.15 to 11.00 a.m.	Classes of I, II and III and supervision of children's games.
11.00 to 12.00 noon	Students take bath, and younger children have lunch. Teachers supervise. The older students help younger ones in taking bath and serving food in groups.
12.00 to 1.00 p.m.	Nursery and baby classes. Teachers supervise while students of classes IV and V teach.
1.00 to 2.00 p.m.	Lunch break. Older students and teachers lunch together.
2.00 to 4.00 p.m.	Classes IV and V.
4.00 to 5.00 p.m.	Students leave school premises and teachers evaluate the day's activities.
5.00 to 6.30 p.m.	Rest and relaxation.
6.30 to 8.00 p.m.	Classes for the illiterate workers of different projects of GK.

Gonopathsala in the Integrated GK System

The Gonopathsala operates as an integral and essential part of the system. The routine presented above is synchronised with interlinked activities of other projects, viz. health care, agriculture, metal workshop, centre for women's vocational training, shoe factory, restaurant and bakery, woodwork and publications. The nucleus of these activities involving production, training and extension is located in the main centre which has substantially expanded in area to include crop and horticultural land,

fish ponds, workshops, buildings for the health complex, a modern pharmaceutical factory, hostels and family accommodation for the GK workers etc. So far the spread in the spheres of health and agriculture (through formation of groups of the poor) has been noteworthy. In other fields, such as rural industry or establishment of co-operatives, things have remained in an experimentation stage. More than 300 men and women have come under direct GK employment.

People at GK are deeply conscious of the problems of transferability of the results achieved in their organisation, for they look at GK as a replicable model. The main characteristics of their programmes have been well identified: ensuring better health, increasing production and income through people's own organisation and management, training and education, and above all conscientisation. For this purpose, centres and activities have been established in interior villages. However, the task has not been smooth. Occasionally, there is serious opposition, even violence from vested interests. GK utilises incidents of violence to intensify their activities aimed at conscientisation.

Working Conditions

There are two kinds of GK workers - Centre based and village based. Life for all the GK workers is rigorous, particularly for those based at the Centre. Discipline is strict and routine demanding. The programme of work, from very early morning till nightfall, as mentioned in the timetable above, is compulsory for all residing at GK. Visitors are restricted, and respite in the form of holidays and vacations is scarce. Engagement of peons and servants is forbidden for all levels - executives, managers, section heads, teachers. Whatever be the educational level of the workers any semblance of elitism calls for immediate disqualification. There are stringent expectations from newly married couples both in regard to size of family, limited to not more than two, as well as to spacing of births. Nothing is free in GK system, but the resident workers get things cheaper, e.g. food produced in the Centre by their own labour. Accommodation is modest but rates are reasonable. On the whole, compared to salaried positions elsewhere with similar qualifications, GK workers appear to be better off. However, the rigour of life has compelled quite a number of workers to leave GK.

There is an enormous amount of interaction and participation among all workers. Project committees which comprise a combination of members from different projects must meet at least once in a week. It is compulsory for all workers to be present at the monthly general meetings. All decisions regarding the course of action of GK, service conditions of workers, discipline etc. are taken in the general meetings. The meetings take place in the evening and tend to get prolonged until early morning, since intensive debates are encouraged before arriving at a decision. The decision regarding the size of the family and spacing of children, for example, has been taken in the general meeting. Decisions regarding pay scales, leave rules, inter-project transfers, promotions, incentives for devotion to work in the form of advance increments, etc., are taken in the general meeting.

General staff conditions naturally apply in Gonopathsala as well. Regular meetings are held among teachers, and between teachers and students. Virtually all evenings are spent in evaluating the work of the day and planning the next day's programme. Teachers have to teach in schools, organise adult education classes and have to supervise the young students in the villages. All are required to read prescribed books, mainly for conscientisation, and to discuss them in compulsory group meetings. The older students of the Gonopathsala also share in the knowledge gleaned from such readings.

Special Features of Gonopathsala

As is evident from the preceding, GK is a rather unusual institution. It explores modes of development which are suited for the poorest sections in developing countries. Owing to the importance given to education and training by GK, Gonopathsala, although it is just one of the activities of GK, and not the most prominent one, has a special place of importance in the GK system. It is appropriate to review the important features of Gonopathsala and to draw certain conclusions on that basis.

(1) Community Education

The opening song which is sung by other government primary schools is the national anthem 'My golden Bangla, I love you', but in Gonopathsala students start the day singing 'We are all kings'. In the teachers' view the song helps to motivate the students to maintain self-esteem and to dream of a society based on equality, self-reliance and self-respect. No religious education is imparted. The basic philosophy is that the child should grow up as human being rather than a Muslim, Hindu or Christian.

The school authority combines family chores with school work. The students are permitted to bring to school cattle and goats, and keep them in the school field while they attend classes. On their way back they take their cattle home and also collect firewood and cowdung. There is no bar to carrying to school the work which they are supposed to do at home. In this manner the main disincentives to the enrolment of children in schools are overcome. Even more important, children are encouraged to engage themselves in productive and remunerative work and to develop skills which are of economic value to the family.

To make the students useful to the families, to inculcate in them an appropriate attitude towards manual labour, and to prepare them for the world of work, 10-12 year old boys and girls are given vocational training for 2-3 hours per day. (Four are in carpentry and six in metal work.) After 2-3 months training, when they are capable of doing productive work they are given a modest payment (TK 2, equivalent to

10 cents in terms of US currency) which is kept in their own savings fund for the future. The students also engage in poultry breeding. They take 12 week chicks home to raise on the condition that they will return two to other school students when their chicks hatch. This also encourages a spirit of co-operation. They work also in the agricultural field in the school, clean the courtyard, latrines and the poultry farm. The main idea behind this is to prepare students to do all types of work for the family and the community.

(2) Teacher Student Relationship

The relationship between students and teachers is very cordial. No punishment is allowed in the school - beating is totally prohibited. Teachers and students sit on the same mat together, discuss problems without any hesitation. Students insist on teachers playing with them in the field. Students sometimes argue with teachers on certain issues. A case may be cited. Ishaque, aged 13, a student of class IV, did not do his share of work in the agricultural field at the school. He was called by the teachers who tried to convince him of his remissness. His conduct was discussed by all the students, then with the approval of the students things were settled amicably.

(3) Development of Group Feeling

The students always work and study in groups. For convenience, the 286 students are divided into 21 groups. They are free to choose the group. A member's success or failure is considered as the group's success or failure. The whole group also feels responsible for an individual's faults. Training in first aid is given to each group so that they can jointly prove useful to the villagers in the time of need. Group training ensures that group members look at themselves not as individuals but principally as a group. Leaders generally of classes IV and V are elected in an open general meeting of students and teachers. Leaders, then, select their group members in consultation with the teachers. In monthly meetings, student leaders are given reports of the groups' problems and prospects.

In a country which traditionally treats people who do manual work as inferior, it is natural that the children of Gonopathsala should be subjected to derisive comment from certain sections of the village community. Gonopathsala does place more importance on manual work and on income generating activity in comparison to book learning. However, if the students of Gonopathsala were not studying there, they would have remained outside school. GK attempts to deal with this situation by developing among the students a sense of worth and the students of Gonopathsala consider themselves as a separate class of people.

This feeling is further sharpened through a variety of conscientisation type activities and programmes. On the whole, it can be said that most of the students of Gonopathsala grow up with a critical consciousness about their own predicament and about their environment.

(5) Syllabus, Teaching Practice and Evaluation

Up to now the school is using textbooks prescribed for government schools, which they know are irrelevant for their students. The school authority is seriously thinking of new curriculum and textbooks for students. Though the teachers follow the textbooks prescribed by government they teach in their own way. Government textbooks are supplemented by readings from newspapers and other suitable books and improvised material considered useful for the students.

As mentioned earlier, classes are held in two shifts for nursery to class II from 9.00 a.m. to 12.00 noon; for classes III - V from noon to 3.00 p.m. The former class is taken by the students of classes III - V, with teachers serving only as overseers while engaged in other work.

Every night teachers discuss their classes for the next morning and decisions are made on their lessons. There is an elaborate class routine and care is taken to complete textbooks that are prescribed for primary schools in the country. There are many ways in which students are evaluated. Older students have to be familiar with their textbooks. Younger students start with 'things' and 'environment' and are made to acquaint themselves well with the mother tongue, Bangla, through reading, writing and understanding. Emphasis is placed on self-development, village survey, health, cleanliness, etc. Their ability to apply what they learn is evaluated. Leadership qualities are also judged. Such evaluation takes place every week. At monthly meetings students and teachers report on their activities. Depending on progress made a student may receive even two or three promotions in a year.

(6) Instruction by Students

Students of classes IV and V are expected to teach younger children, especially girls, who cannot come to Gonopathsala or attend the government school. These classes are organised in groups of 8 - 12. Instruction is mostly imparted through games - with wood blocks (produced in the GK carpentry shop), marbles, leaves, roots and other material available in the villages. Children also learn something about health, sanitation and environment, including agriculture. These children in turn often transmit their knowledge to parents.

Students also teach adult men and women, either along with children or separately. They are taught to write their names and signatures, numbers, the alphabet and simple sentences. Instruction is also provided on subjects of health and hygiene. Adults feel no hesitation in learning from children. Children feel enthused when

their teachers come to supervise their work. Although classes are held regularly, supervision by teachers tends to be irregular. The headmistress told the author during discussions that the situation may improve soon with the appointment of more teachers. Villagers are happy about the work done by the students for the village and have developed a sense of community feeling. Some of them however consider that the children are not learning enough.

(7) Students and Teachers

Students come to Gonopathsala from 19 surrounding villages. Approximately 90 per cent of them graze their cattle in the normal hours (many of them bring cattle to school). The students come from the poorest section of society and the parents of these children are all illiterate. They want their children to receive education, but their financial condition does not permit them to send children to government schools. The parents complain that in those schools, in spite of free primary education, there is considerable expenditure on books, stationery, clothing, etc. The parents admit that if Gonopathsala had not given their children an opportunity for education, it would not have been possible to educate them. They consider that Gonopathsala is rendering a vital service to the community by providing education to their children and the opportunity to learn skills which they perceive is of great use to their children.

Attendance at school varies with the rural calendar. It rises to 80 per cent in the lean season and drops to 30 per cent at harvest time. No restrictions exist regarding the time up to which the students may be admitted. Almost every day some new faces turn up. Teachers do not keep records of new entrants and it is difficult to know the actual number of students at a particular point of time. In reply to the question why they come to school, 90 per cent of the students said because they get one meal and the opportunity to develop skills. They hope that after being fully trained they will be able to get work in GK. Only 10 per cent of students said they get more attention in Gonopathsala. Practically all students said that they hope to continue their studies after class V.

The background of the teachers shows that they work in school for six months to a year and a half. During the last four years, there was a turnover of 16 teachers. The teachers belong to poor families. From interviews with teachers, an impression was gathered that although they are devoted to their work, they are not satisfied with their remuneration and find the working hours excessive. The rigour and strain of work was evident; when asked whether they would leave Gonopathsala if they got another job, all the teachers except the Headmistress said they would. Among the reasons they mentioned were lack of freedom, over-work, small salary, no vacation and harsh discipline.

Conclusion

The objectives, methods, structure and spirit of Gonopathsala indicate

certain important factors. The outstanding feature about Gonopathsala is that it serves the children of the poorer sections, the landless and marginal farmers. Students are not only charged no fees, they are given free lunch, books and stationery, and are covered by the excellent health-care services of GK. It is obvious that the sponsors of Gonopathsala have their own philosophy of education which values work-orientation and considers as important the raising of consciousness of the poor. As a result of linking schooling with production and the creation amongst the students of a new identity the Gonopathsala has raised among the pupils, and through them among their parents, a sense of worth and status, even if in concrete terms the economic condition of the family may not have improved. The parents of the children participate in the educational process through adult education programmes and visits of the teachers to the villages, and encouragement is given to the children to share and discuss their learning at home.

Can the experiment of Gonopathsala be replicated widely in Bangladesh? We must acknowledge a number of unique features in this institution. The most important of these is the devotion and spirit of the GK authorities. Perhaps even more important is the fact that the kind of education being imparted in Gonopathsala has been possible because it is a part of the GK system, which already had a rapport with the neighbouring villages, mainly due to their health-care programme.

Besides, the existence of a number of workshops and agricultural farms make it possible for skill training programmes to be organised alongside other courses. Another noteworthy thing is the high expectation from teachers. While these and some other unusual features make Gonopathsala programmes difficult to replicate, there are some characteristics of Gonopathsala which can, perhaps, be replicated on a wide scale. The most important of these is student orientation (as against teacher-orientation, which is characteristic of formal schooling). School timing is adjusted according to the convenience of the students, school fields are allowed to be used for students' cattle and the fact that the students have to work for their family is fully recognised. A related aspect is the use of older students (of class IV and V) for teaching of adults and young children. While this has immense educational value, this also provides a suggestion regarding the manner in which schools with insufficient teachers may manage. While systematic skill training and health education activities may not be possible on a large scale, the approach to education as more than book learning has to become a part of all non-formal education programmes.

The Second Five Year Plan of Bangladesh aims at achieving universal primary education and mass literacy by 1985. This is a very ambitious target. The Government has already decided to organise non-formal education programmes for children and adults. There is much scope, therefore, to encourage innovation and to replicate successful innovations. Bangladesh is fortunate in having a number of innovative and experimental programmes and there is scope not only for their expansion, but also to learn systematically from their results.

Appendix .Table 1: Distribution of students in Gonopathsala according to sex in 1977 to 1980

<u>Admission</u>		<u>Continuation</u>		<u>Dropouts</u>	
BOYS	GIRLS	BOYS	GIRLS	BOYS	GIRLS
103	115	89	83	14	32
= 218		= 172		= 46	

Table 2: Classwise distribution of students in Gonopathsala by sex (January 1982)

CLASS	BOYS	GIRLS	TOTAL
Nursery	26	23	49
Baby	75	22	97
I	21	22	43
II	23	7	30
III	19	6	25
IV	13	11	29
V	6	7	13
TOTAL	188	98	286
	(65.73)	(34.27)	(100.00)

Appendix 2Table 3: Background of Teachers in Gonopathsala

	NAME WITH AGE	EDUCATION	DURATION AT GONOPATHSALA (YEAR)	LOCAL OR OUTSIDER	SALARY (TK.)	ACCOMMODATION
1)	Shamsunnahar (28) (Bachelor)	B.Sc.	1½ years	Outsider	600	Inside GK
2)	Mrs Fatema Begum (Separated)	S.S.C.	11 months	"	300	"
3)	Krishna Saha	S.S.C.	6 months	"	225	"
4)	Hoshne Ara (Divorcee)	S.S.C.	11 months	"	225	"
5)	Runu Acharyza (Married)	VIII	12 months	local	225	Outside GK
6)	Shandya Rani	VIII	12 months	local	225	"

References

1. Sayeda Rowshan Qadir, Women's Income Earning Activities and Family Welfare in Bangladesh, UNICEF, Dacca, 1981.
 2. Ellen Sattar, Universal Primary Education in Bangladesh, University Press, Dacca, 1982.
 3. Planning Commission, Government of Bangladesh, The Second Five Year Plan, 1980-85, Dacca, 1980.
 4. A.H. Chowdhury, a paper on Education in Bangladesh prepared for IIEP (Unesco), Paris and quoted in Higher Education and Employment in Bangladesh - A research study by the International Institute for Educational Planning, Paris and the National Foundation for Research on Human Resource Development, Dhaka (Dhaka: The University Press Limited; and Paris: Unesco, 1983).
 5. S.A. Qadir and K.S. Ahmed, Role of Education Projections in Educational Planning in Bangladesh: National Contribution, National Foundation for Research on Human Resource Development, (Dacca), 1981.
 6. A.H. Chowdhury, op. cit.
 7. Manzoor Ahmed, 'The Savar Project: Meeting the Rural Health Crisis in Bangladesh,' Meeting the Basic Needs of the Rural Poor, (ed). Philip H. Coombs, Pergamon Press, 1980.
- See also: Jayanta Kumar Ray, Organising Villagers for Self-Reliance: A Study of the Gonoshyastha Kendra in Bangladesh, Centre for South East Asian Studies, University of Calcutta, 1980.
8. Gonoshyastha (GK's weekly wall paper in Bengali), 8 Joistha 1386 (viz. 23 May 1979).
 9. Gonoshyastha Kendra, Progress Report No. 7, August 1980.
 10. Najibuddin Bhuiyan and Emdadul Huq, Education in Gonopathsala (a draft report), National Foundation for Research on Human Resource Development, Dacca, March 1982.