Chapter VI

CONSTRAINTS IN ACHIEVING UNIVERSALIZATION OF PRIMARY EDUCATION IN BANGLADESH
Bangladesh is one of the poorest countries of the world with scarce natural resources. Millions of people have to cope without having their basic human needs met. Since the government cannot draw upon the public exchequer for all those needs, suitable opportunities and environments have to be created to enable the poor to help themselves. This can be done through following a pattern of growth in which the existing abundant labour is productively used and by providing basic social services to the poor, particularly primary education, primary health care and family planning so that the capacity of the poor to take advantage of work opportunities increases. While no sustained improvement in human well-being is possible without economic growth, human development remains critical to economic growth.

The education system in Bangladesh is presently quite wasteful and unproductive. At the primary level a little over 77 percent (1990) of children enroll, only about 50-60 percent attend regularly and about 65 percent drop out during the 5-year cycle. Fewer girls complete primary education. Primary and secondary education do not presently meet the real life-needs of students. Out of those who do complete the primary level, very few join the higher level of education. Of the 67 million adolescent and adults belonging to the most productive age group of the demographic pyramid, about 46 million or 69 percent are illiterate, the majority being women. There are also striking urban-rural disparities. This chapter will deal with the existing constraints in the society which create obstruction in the process of universalisation of primary education in Bangladesh.
6.1 Socio-Economic Factors

During the process of Universalisation of Primary Education, a number of studies were carried out to investigate the causes behind low participation, drop-out of primary school children, and other instances of poor performance in the primary school system. Most of them were referred to above when trying to establish the status of the key indicators. The analysis of socio-economic factors in relation to participation of children in school has in the various relevant studies been done mainly in terms of households, landholding and income or combination of those factors in to categories of economic solvency. The educational level of the household is a strong factor influencing children’s school activity. A more general analysis is based on regional or local economic and cultural differences between villages in Bangladesh. The starting point for these studies is a dichotomy of high and low literacy villages, or the concept of cultural poverty.

The economic reasons for not sending children to school by taking the opportunity cost into consideration may overstate the role of economic factors but it cannot be neglected without assessing the role of the poor children which might serve as a background for discussion.

Most of the parents have identical reasons related to their economic status and consider the child as an important source of labour. A marginal farmer or a landless peasant do not have the capacity to hire an adult labour or forego the income from the labour of their children. Further, the benefits of primary education are also not readily
visible to parents who are illiterate as well as poor. To these parents, a child who can read, write and count is likely to aspire activities which will take him away from the immediate labour requirements of the parents. Besides, the home of the illiterate does not foster an environment of books and learning. The tendency among the poor parents is not to enroll their children or more likely to withdraw them after few years of schooling.

In order to overcome this stressing need of child labour during peak seasons of plantation or agriculture, some initiatives can be taken to accommodate these children by bringing changes in the time schedule. The study carried out by M. Hankanson reports that, "flexible scheduling of school hours and calendars to reflect local timing of local plantation and harvesting would make education more available to children involved in agricultural works".1

Social and religious traditions especially affect the enrolment of girls. When girls reach puberty, particularly if they are from the lower strata in society, they are not allowed to move around freely. Further, if a poor family can afford to send a child to school, it would most likely be a son, for it is generally believed that girls will eventually leave the family to be married. The vast majority of primary school teachers are male and this further discourages the parents from enrolling their daughters in school. Although attitudes are changing, only about 60 percent of the girls cohort ever enroll in schools and retention to class V is less than one-third of the initial enrolment. In explaining girls school participation, the opportunity cost factor is also compounded by cultural ones.

The study conducted by Qadir Ahmed in 1980, started with the assumption that, "the status of the family has direct influence on the participation of its children in education".

The findings reveal some extraordinary inequalities. Only 7 percent of the girls coming from a totally uneducated family go to a primary school, whereas the corresponding figure for a girl from a family with an average of 8 years or more of education in the family is 91 percent. ²

6.2 Education Breeds Education

The level of development of the village plays an important role in influencing children's participation. This analysis was discussed in a study undertaken by Haque and others, UNESCO, 1983. The main ambition of this micro study was to account for the remaining variation of participation. In the earlier study, it was stated that the family education level, land ownership and income were important determining factors for participation of children in primary schools. But still they were found to explain only 12 percent of the variation of participation.³ Most of the variation was instead to be explained by others more general characteristics of the locality as communications, availability and quality of services etc. It was for example, found that participation was

highly correlated with the literacy rate of the locality.

**PRIMARY SCHOOL PARTICIPATION MATRIX**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rich Household</th>
<th>Low Literacy Village</th>
<th>High Literacy Village</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Poor Household</td>
<td>Lowest Participation</td>
<td>Highest Participation</td>
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The report presented by Haque and others in 1983 mentions, contrary to the previous report, that the access and quality of school facilities may explain the tendency to participate in school. But this question has not been dwelt upon in the report. Instead the research has taken the different characteristics between high and low literacy villages as its starting point. The assumption is then that it is the general economic, cultural and educational level of a locality that will mainly influence the performance of the primary school. The low in contrast to high literacy village, is said to be, characterised by “cultural poverty” implying a general lack of interest in education.

The educational attainment in the higher literacy villages vastly supersedes that in the low literacy villages. Sixty three (63) percent in high literacy households were recorded to have passed primary school or acquired higher education. The findings of the

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summary reveal a significant difference between the two village categories in the proportion of families sending all their children to school": 71 percent in high literacy and 31 percent in low literacy villages. The difference was also found to be high in the case of not sending any children to school-24 percent compared to 54 percent.5

As expected, it is the poor and very poor families in both types of villages who do not send their children to school. So the strategic implications for UPE is that special and prior attention needs to be given not only to the lowe literacy villages but also to the poorer homes within both low and high literacy villages. To get them to school, local mobilization is necessary for economic and educational progress.

6.3 The Role of the Teachers

The importance of the material and financial aspects of any primary education cannot be overemphasized, but the heart of the matter is the teachers and their commitment to work. The role of teachers stands out as the critical factor in the primary education system. The low working morale of the teachers does not seem to have improved after nationalisation of schools. There are even allegations of a deterioration since that time.

The vicious circle of low competence and non-commitment of the teachers is seen as a major cause to over 80 percent drop out rate among the students. The teachers have only rarely been found to care for retaining their students in school. Rather they favour

5 Ibid, p.71.
the children of the elite from whom the teachers may earn some tuition money. The elitist system is thus preserved.

Female teachers are observed to care more for children, but they are on the other hand reported to be more strict in promoting students and they often give up their teaching after a few years due to marriage, or inability or reluctance to teach outside their own locality.

Within the UPE project, the role of the teachers has been considered essential for the success of the programme. The teachers engaged in the primary school should be given proper training so that they are able to motivate the parents to send their children to schools and be able to retain the students in the school. However, only 6 percent of the UPE allocations under the Second Five Year Plan was set aside for teacher training and the Third Five Year Plan allocated only 1 percent for the same purpose. Besides while recruiting teachers, special care must be taken to recruit female teachers so that we can ensure better participation of girls in the process of UPE.

6.4 Access to School

The government standard specifies one primary school for every 2000 population, or some 330 primary age children. The insufficient number of classrooms is not the only problem to meet a hopefully growing demand for primary education. It has been found
that the number of villages served by one school may vary between 1 to 16. There can be several kilometers between villages. The distance to school is then too far for many children. Access to school is a severe constraint in increasing enrolment and retaining students in the school.

The enrolment figure has also found in one survey by Ahmeduallah and others in 1984, to increase sharply along with shorter distance to school for the children. 60 percent of the students have less than half a mile to school. Only a few boys and girls have to walk more than a mile. No significant difference between girls and boys are registered in this survey.

This is further illustrated by a minor study carried out by Gustavson in 1987, in a locality of three villages. In one of these villages, there was no primary school. This village was larger in population than one of the other ones in which one new project school had been located. The villagers had tried for many years with petitions and bribes to get their present non-functioning non-government school nationalised, but without success. The walking distance to the neighbouring project schools, around three kilometers, was regarded to be too far for the children. About 200 primary school age children of this village were thus in practice deprived of primary education. It seems that any expansion of school facilities must consider children's walking distance and difficult or dangerous crossings of rivers or highways. New additional schools should therefore be

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built in the villages.  

6.5 Supply of Textbooks

Textbooks reported to be distributed to all primary schools in 1988. The supply of free textbooks to all primary school children make up about a fifth of the total project outlays. The decision and achievement to give all primary school students free textbooks is a significant step towards UPE, as it allegedly eliminates a prerogative of the elite, the capacity to buy books.

The new colossal and costly undertaking of distribution of 20 million books by 1990 is naturally affected by several problems. Studies and other observations point to the following. The books are erratic and still lacking relevance for the life and need of the common students. In some places students still have to pay for the books. The books are further not reusable due to continuous revisions and poor quality, in paper and binding. This enormous waste of money is aggravated by the fact that most schools get too many books, due to inflated enrollment figures. These books are either floated on the market or later sold as paper waste. The quality of instructional materials (maps, charts, globes, etc) supplied also requires improvement.  

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7 Ibid, p.94.

The textbook wing of the NCTB is central to the textbook production and distribution process. Its approval is required for all textbooks used in schools, and it is the publisher of all books at primary level. The Board is financially and administratively weak. A government decision that books should only be sold at the cost of production has brought losses. The staff of the Board are mainly deputed from schools and colleges and none have commercial or publishing experience. The rear monopoly of the NCTB has provided little opportunity for private publishers to develop the capacity to put additional texts on the market.

The problems of poor quality of the textbooks like misprints, irrelevance and yearly revision to make old books reusable is reported to remain unabated. However, the distribution seems to have improved. Most students receive their textbooks. But according to newspaper articles they still do not get the books in time and they also have to pay for the books.\footnote{The New Nation, Dhaka, 11.12.87.}

6.6 Low Level of Community Involvement

The low level of local involvement is generally considered to constitute one of the major constraints in making a breakthrough towards universalizing primary education. To achieve the two main objectives of the UPE programme of increased enrollment and higher rate of retention, the Third Five Year Plan gives priority to raising the level of community engagements through involvement of community in management and
administration, particularly by forming Parent-Teacher Associations, at the school level. The existence of PTAs is reportedly very low and they also play a secondary role in relation to the more common school Managing Committee.

The rationalization of primary schools appear to have caused a void in community participation in running the primary schools. This has become the responsibility of the government. This is how the local people in general perceive it. They do not have any larger show, any interest to support their local primary school. Above all there is no mobilization of local resources in terms of money or manpower for the government schools. This lack of involvement needs to be avoided.

The government's strategy and ambitious to "bring education back to the people" by raising the level of community involvement does not seem to have made much progress. The ongoing efforts to build up a national system of management for the primary schools have created communication gap. The "communication gaps" are indeed also an outcome of the power struggle between the upazila and central authorities. These contradictions have evolved since the upazila reforms and with partial decentralisation of primary school matters.

6.7 Financial Burden on Parents

During the Second Five Year Plan, primary education was officially declared free for all five year grades. But it is common knowledge that in practice schools and teachers continue to extract various fees from the students.
The teachers extract various fees for admission, examinations, transfer and even for sports and religious events. The size of these semi-authorized favours is not surveyed. The Bureau of Statistics on household expenditure on education is incomplete and is not broken up according to social classes. But the trends seem to be that households are spending more and more on education. Students also still seem to pay for their books in spite of the stamp on the back of books prohibiting sales.

During the admission of students at one new project primary school, the interview taken by Gustevsson shows that parents and students have to pay Taka 20 per student to get admission. Taka 20 is about half a day's salary for an unskilled worker in the Dhaka area. The headteacher admitted that the children of the poor families would think twice and consider alternative expenses before they pay this sum.10

Along with this, the parents often have to pay expensive tuition fees if their boy or girl is to stand a chance in the recruitment examinations. Paid tuitioning or coaching is a general feature in the educational system of Bangladesh.11 The practice of tuitioning and recruitment examinations seems to be an effective mechanism for keeping the school system a prerogative for the privileged classes.

Even if poor parents find it possible to spare their children's labour or with no land or small households, find it difficult to engage their children in work and therefore

10 Gustavson, n.3p.102.

might as well send them to school, they still may refrain from doing so due to the costs of purchasing acceptable school dresses. The norm for a proper school dress is set by the better classes and it will probably require unusual courage to deviate from this norm, especially during the examination days.

The minimum cost for primary school students seems to be at least Taka 150 per year. A rural wage labour earn only around TK 20-40 a day which is too little to support a family. He can, therefore, hardly forego the income from the labour of his children, no less can he afford to give priority to education of his children.\(^\text{12}\)

Primary education is, therefore, not free. It seems rather to be an expensive institution, making it unreachable for the poor or pushing them out from the school when the costs add up too much. Examination, tuitioning and fees appear to be deeprooted practices in the educational system of Bangladesh. These are all institutions to uphold the elitist character of the schools.

An obvious prerequisite to attract children from the poorer classes to school seems to make the primary school really free and consequently also eliminate not only examination as a means of passing or failing, but also the costly system of private tuitioning. Rate of enrolment and retention will hardly improve unless these non-official extractions are effectively banned and eliminated.

\(^{12}\) Gustavson, n.3p.103.
6.8 Physical and Financial Limitations

A conservative estimate of the development perspective for primary education indicates that the present governmental design for achieving UPE through expansion of the government school system is hardly attainable. The need for future investment for achieving UPE depends very much on the design of the plan for creating necessary additional classrooms. The present programme to create more classrooms in the country by reconstruction of old schools and adding new classrooms to existing schools seems costly and inefficient.

The need for classrooms for the year 2000 when UPE is to be reached, is some more 100,000 units and 17.5 million students. The present gross target is about 5000-6000 classrooms per year. But may be half of these are actual additional classrooms. This means that only some more 40-50,000 additional classrooms will be built by the year 2000 if the present design and rate of construction is continued during 1990s.

This calculation for compulsory primary education is based on two conditions, neither of which is met today. Firstly, the active and committed cooperation of the community of teachers. Secondly, the involvement and support by the local people. In addition to these prerequisites there is also a pressing need to produce a relievable school map to base the calculations. The failure to include possible local resource contributions result in a calculation of staggering rise of cost. The planning cell at the Ministry of Education has estimated the cost for compulsory education as some Taka 750 crores, the
same as the total revenue budget for Ministry of Education. There is, according to this report, from the planning cell no present means to bear such costs. Special taxes are suggested, but there is as yet no other alternative construction programme or of any cost saving programme by mobilizing the teachers and the local community. Moreover, the donors and the government have taken one step in this direction by introducing low cost alternatives in the next UPE project.

A down-up perspective may illustrate the potentiality in local resource mobilisation. There are some 85,000 villages in the country. If every village is willing to contribute one classroom, the need for accommodating primary children would be fulfilled. In fact, in most of the villages in the country the people have by their own means have their mosque or Madrasa school erected.

However, the overall financial constraints, in the final analysis, may be viewed against the still extremely low expenditure on education seen in a global context or within the region. Therefore, the need of the hour is to rethink and reallocate funds according to the priorities, which depends totally on the political will and the decision of the government.

Despite the present inefficiencies of the primary education system, there have been steady improvement in gross enrolment ratio, completion and attendance rates. Given the social and traditional milieu of the villages, it is not possible to achieve universalization of primary education in a very short period. What is needed at this point of time is the mass awareness campaign through which only it will be possible to ensure community
involvement to make it a successful programme. Besides all these existing structural and operational constraints Government of Bangladesh is doing in the field of primary education.