

## A DISTANCE EDUCATION STRATEGY FOR BANGLADESH

by

Dr Gunvant Shah\*

Director, International Youth Council

14-Vinayak Society

Old Padra Rd, Baroda-390020

India

This paper purports to discuss the role of distance education in the context of certain actualities of the third world environments with a focus on Bangladesh. Certain geopolitical and socio-cultural realities of the Indian subcontinent seem to favour distance education networking in more than one ways. In developing countries, emergence of distance education could be looked upon as a process similar to osmosis. It holds a promise of setting in motion a new communicational process resulting in a larger and perhaps more effective system of information distribution through which new ideas, attitudes and understandings might begin to ooze through the layers of the disadvantaged environments.

It took thousands of years for the human population to reach the one billion mark in 1930 but only one hundred years for the second billion, thirty years for the third and a mere fourteen years for the fourth billion.<sup>1</sup> Now that we are five billion 'strong' since July 11, 1987 the major chunk of the world population is to be in Asian countries. In other words, the centre of gravity of poverty, illiteracy and disease is more likely to be somewhere in the Indian subcontinent because it is estimated that India would surpass China in terms of population by the turn of the century. If the total world population were to settle in Australia alone, its population density would be about the same as it is in Bangladesh today. Bangladesh, with its

---

\* The author worked as Education Systems Specialist on a fact-finding mission to Bangladesh appointed by Asian Development Bank, Manila, November 1984.

1. *New York Times*, March 16, 1980.

population of 95 million<sup>2</sup> and approximately 657 persons per square kilometer, excluding the riverside areas, is the most densely populated country in the whole world (only the urban island nations of Singapore and Hong Kong exceed this).

Most developing countries today have access to various mass media like radio and TV, but the reach of such media varies considerably with the level of development and size of individual countries. Media utilization, too, varies from country to country as well. The potential audience for the mass media in developing countries is huge, predominantly rural and poorly educated. The main emphasis of all educational efforts in a country like Bangladesh is to reach out to a vast number of people with a view to making them more productive at the least cost per person. Mass media are well suited to this purpose.

Bangladesh cannot afford the luxury of accepting distance education just because it is a new idea or an innovation that is being talked about the world over. The high rate of wastage and repetition at all levels of education, the under utilization of instructional capacity and an ineffective public examination system are some of the major weaknesses of the education system of Bangladesh. Any thinking regarding a distance education programme for the country must not only be down-to-earth but productive. Of all the problems facing Bangladesh today, none is so pressing as that of improving the quality of the life of people, the majority of whom live below the poverty line. In view of the realities that exist, it is rather expedient that we take stock of the situation before charting out a strategy to distance education.

Any strategy for distance education in Bangladesh has to be operationally feasible in the first place. Misplaced and misperceived priorities can harm a developing country because the resources are always scant and there is so much to do. It seems that in Bangladesh distance education should address itself to the following areas in order of priority:

1. universalization of primary education and adult literacy;
2. non-formal education programmes to reach out to the masses; and
3. supporting formal education programmes by:
  - a. school/college broadcasts; and
  - b. teacher training strategies through TV, radio and microteaching modules.

---

2. Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics: *Statistical Pocket Book of Bangladesh*, 1984.

## 1. UPE and Adult Literacy

The government is keen to eliminate illiteracy. This clearly reflected in the following:<sup>3</sup>

'Only 26% of the population is enumerated as literate and three-fourths of the population are illiterate. A subsistence economy tends to enforce subsistence knowledge and through it the tradition. In this vicious circle economic development cannot proceed at a desirable pace. The experience of those countries in the third world which have enjoyed development success (is that they) have also had a high rate of literacy, though the reverse may not be true, there is no doubt that education is not only a means to knowledge but also molds people's attitude towards life and work. So while striving for attaining universal primary education before the end of the third plan, a substantial reduction in adult illiteracy must be achieved by the end of 2000 A D.'

The Second Five Year Plan (SFYP) emphasizes the use of mass media to assist and accelerate the process of development. The Plan identifies UPE and the eradication of illiteracy as the two top-most priorities in the education sector. The question is how to use mass media like radio and TV to strengthen the efforts connected with UPE and adult literacy. In order to make the strategy operationally feasible and result-oriented, the following input parameters should be kept in view:

1. Radio Bangladesh covers the whole country with national transmissions from Dhaka totalling around 19 hours daily. There are also six regional stations transmitting locally originated programmes. Much of the programming is in Bengali, with some English and minority languages, the latter especially from the regional stations.
2. Television transmission is from Dhaka with some regional relay stations. It was intended that television transmission would cover 90% of the whole country during the period of the SFYP.

---

3. Planning Commission: *Thoughts About Perspective Plan*, Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh, Dhaka, September 1983.

3. The Film Wing of the Film and Publication Department of the Ministry of Information produces films for exhibition at commercial cinemas and in their own 70 mobile cinema units. The Wing has a production unit and a processing and printing laboratory, operating both 16mm and 35mm. The films produced include weekly newsreels and special news, cultural and documentary programmes for the government. There are cinema halls in most substantial population centres, but the cinema remains largely an urban facility.
4. School buildings are used for 4-5 hours a day on working days and are available for full-time use for about 200 days in a year. Furthermore, 400 community schools have been established through bank assistance all over the country.

It should be noted that there is complementarity between universal primary education and the reduction of adult illiteracy. Both these aspects are circular in nature and cross-fertilize each other. Television can be of immense help in literacy efforts. A programme like 'Sesame Street' in the US is an example of how TV can be used for making children literate. TV is now being used for adult literacy programmes in Yemen, and alphabet training is also given by TV.

## **2. NFE Programmes for the Masses**

A distance education network has to be geared to educating the masses irrespective of whether they are literate or not. It would be a good idea to locate one place in every village and name it the 'community centre.' Such a centre could be either a primary or a secondary school, depending upon the quality of building and availability of floor space. A madrasah could also be used. It is hoped that construction of a special building for the purpose would be avoided.

Each community centre would have a teacher (from either the primary or the secondary school depending upon availability) in charge of operating a TV set and a transistor radio. The community centre would be open to all, and the person in charge would operate the equipment and be responsible for maintenance as far as the maintenance schemes provide (see later). One TV hour best suited to farmers, workers and landless labourers would be designated as the Sonar Bangla Hour. Bangladesh Institute of Distance Education (BIDE) could take up the responsibility of

production of material. Two examples will give an idea of how the whole machinery would operate.

Experience in the Ivory Coast suggests that TV programmes intended to increase farm production result in higher income for families. Parents who were reluctant to become literate themselves became very keen to send their children to school. TV programmes should be so designed that adult learners get all the advantages of 'mediacy,' meaning a person's ability to learn from mass media such as TV or radio.

Project IMPACT (Instructional Management by Parents, Community, and Teachers) was implemented in the Philippines to test an approach to primary education that would sharply reduce costs per student without loss of educational quality. Canada's International Development Research Centre funded the project, which was developed by the Center for Innovation and Development) evaluation of the project, based on a review of records and interviews with parents, teachers and IMPACT officials, is given below:<sup>4</sup>

'Under the project, 100 or more primary school students, divided into groups of 5-10, were taught by intermediate (grades 4-6) primary school students using programmed teaching modules under the supervision of professional teachers. Parents and skilled workers served as community resource persons, and a local primary or high school graduate provided clerical, administrative and logistic support.'

'Cost-effectiveness studies and academic performance tests indicate that the project achieved its objective. An added benefit was the greater poise and personal initiative evinced by IMPACT students over their conventional counterparts, possibly as a result of IMPACT's stress on independent study and peer group interaction. Unfortunately, initial project savings were not used to maintain qualitative levels in subsequent years (eg, by replacing texts and equipment and repairing school buildings), resulting in declining professional support for IMPACT. Parents viewed IMPACT as benefitting the brightest students, but as less successful with average students.'

---

4. USAID, *Project IMPACT Evaluation Report* (Project IMPACT: A Low-cost Alternative for Universal Primary Education in the Philippines), No. 38, September 1982.

Project IMPACT has a transfer-potential for Bangladesh because it:

- a. is cost-effective,
- b. ensure community involvement, and
- c. is likely to succeed because it has been tried out in a Third World country.

A meaningful linkage between non-formal educational efforts and the distance education network has to be ensured in order to get the returns in terms of vastness of audience, community involvement and quality of production. Below is given an outline of the action programme that indicates how the whole machinery would operate.

It is suggested that 12 Upa-Zillas be selected from each of the four Divisions and, within each selected Upa-Zilla (48), "all" the villages might be provided with a community TV set. It is estimated that each Upa-Zilla would have about 150 villages. In order to start the community centers in the villages, the programme would require at least 7,200 (48 x 150) TV sets. In some cases, more than one TV set would be required, depending upon the size of the community.

It is suggested that the task of maintenance would be undertaken at three levels:

- a. a central workshop for major repairs and storage;
- b. mobile service units to cope with routine maintenance, checks and breakdowns; and
- c. first-aid maintenance, for instance, changing batteries, by the 7,200 teachers in charge of the community centers.

Last but not most important, the production of instructional materials would require highly professional manpower, equipped with skills in film production, graphics and direction. The team of professional people would see to it that the Sonar Bangla Hour was very entertaining, educative and thus popular. It would have to catch the attention of people, and so the best skills of good production should be put to use. In order to achieve a very high level of sophistication and quality of production, BIDE should be made to play a very vital role.

Institutional reorganization of BIDE might be necessary in terms of expansion and reinforcement to ensure highest possible quality of production, efficient distributive

machinery and a built-in feedback mechanism for continual improvement and modification. BIDE might therefore require additional manpower as well as enhanced capability of the existing staff and material resources to prepare for the challenging task.

In the proposal on non-formal education that follows, a detailed note on other non-media aspects of non-formal education is presented.

### 3. Supporting Formal Education

It is envisaged that provision of radio and/or TV time on the national network would be relatively cost effective, as the structures of formal education at the primary, secondary and tertiary levels do exist. TV and radio networks are available throughout the country. Bangladesh Institute of Distance Education (BIDE) caters to 1,062 secondary schools, about 424,800 students and 10,620 teachers through its regular radio and TV programmes. It also broadcasts a 40-minute radio programme on subject content daily, which is used both by regular students and by out-of-school youth. BIDE has a pivotal role to play as it has a resource base for all the activities connected with educational technology and software production. It is quite gratifying to note that there is 95 per cent coverage by radio and 85% coverage by the TV network.<sup>5</sup>

Bengali is the language spoken by one and all, although there are dialects and minority languages. This is a truly advantageous position, as it allows production of text-books and support materials in only one language. It also implies that large-scale production of instructional materials would result in reduction of unit costs. A reform injected into the system could have a multiplier effect because every little initiative in the field of education ultimately improves population quality.

The Commission on Instructional Technology, in a report to the President and the Congress of the United States, identified several potential benefits of educational technology, as follows. Technology can:

- i. make education more productive;
- ii. make education more individual;
- iii. give instruction a more specific base;
- iv. make instruction more powerful;
- v. make learning more immediate; and
- vi. make access to education more equal.

In order to gain all the benefits listed above, a well-planned distance education strategy should be worked out with the involvement of the following agencies:

- i. Bangladesh Television
- ii. Radio Bangladesh
- iii. BIDE
- iv. Film and Publication Department of the Ministry of Information
- v. Bangladesh Broadcasting Academy
- vi. The Institute of Graphic Arts

In addition to regular broadcasting sessions for students, BIDE should also develop programmes for teacher training. In a report entitled *Distance Education in Bangladesh*<sup>6</sup> a British Council team suggested the following for distance education in support of primary school teachers:

1. The recent nationwide programme for the reorientation of primary teachers should be strengthened and extended through a course prepared by BIDE using distance teaching methods.
2. This course should be offered to all primary teachers over a period of four years.
3. A pilot version should be tested with 11,750 teachers, which would then be revised and used with the remaining teachers.
4. The course should last 16 weeks and utilize print, radio, television and workshop/tutorials.
5. National organizations involved in curriculum development and teacher training should be involved in the preparation of the course materials and in the training and provision of tutors.

---

5. However, there are 148 persons for each licensed radio and 465 persons for each licensed TV set. Source: Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, 1984.

6. The British Council: *Distance Education in Bangladesh: An Implementation Study by a British Team*, May-June 1981.

7. 'Microteaching' is a scaled-down encounter wherein the term 'micro' implies that a small content area is taught for about 3-7 minutes to 4-5 students. It also implies 'simulation' in teaching for development of teaching skills like questioning, stimulus variation, giving illustrations, etc.



6. There should be continuous assessment and an end-of-course examination, with the award of a certificate for successful completion.
7. Consideration should be given to the granting of an extra increment or other inducements to those teachers who are successful.
8. There should be pre-course motivational programmes for all teachers.
9. A Project Coordinator should be recruited as soon as possible, followed by the appointment of two subject specialists.
10. Four hundred seventy part-time tutors should be assigned and trained for the pilot cycle, and this number should be increased to 1,000 for the remaining cycles of the course.

BIDE should use microteaching<sup>7</sup> strategies for the training of teachers at all levels, with or without hardware. The training colleges in countries like India and the UK have used this training strategy with a certain amount of success. It can be made very cost effective if closed circuit television (CCTV) is not insisted upon. Research has shown that the efficacy of microteaching is not significantly reduced if CCTV is not used and only tape recorders are used. It must be recognized that microteaching can also be resorted to without any hardware whatsoever; at some training colleges in India this has become a regular practice. BIDE should develop expertise in this area of teacher training and produce modules of micro-lessons for training colleges.

In conclusion, it is suggested that in addition to the one TV hour suggested for non-formal education to reach out to the masses, TV and radio should also be used for supporting ongoing formal education programmes. It should be noted that in 1983 there were 203,000 black and white receivers and 20,000 colour receivers duly licensed<sup>8</sup>. The task of reaching out to 15 million households is colossal, and it presents a challenge that deserves to be met squarely.

---

8. Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics: *Statistical Pocket Book 1983*, p393.