

My heart leaps with joy every time I pass by groups of boys and girls in school uniform happily chatting away on way to or from school on village roads. I see the future of Bangladesh in them.

Such sights were not common a few decades ago. Clearly the efforts of successive Governments and NGOs to promote education in Bangladesh are bearing fruit. As a result even families that had no tradition of schooling are sending their children to school.

Another heart-warming development, which remains largely unnoticed, is the revival of a third force that has long played a critical role in promoting education in our society. These are people who either on their own or through motivating local communities set up schools and colleges in their respective villages or neighborhoods. In fact, Bangladesh society was long known for its tradition of such voluntary services. But with the advent of externally-funded NGO culture, much of this tradition has been lost. Voluntary community efforts have been largely supplanted by NGO activities. Nevertheless, there are still many inspiring examples from all over the country of peoples' creative initiatives to help others in society. [See: Subidhabonchiter Srijonshil Uddoyog Onusondhan, Prochar o Prosar; Qurratul-Ain-Tahmina et al., 2008, RIB Publication] The present article will focus upon a similar example concerning peoples' collective efforts to promote education of children from disadvantaged communities. I consider such efforts extremely important to ensure education for all.

My work takes me to rural Bangladesh quite frequently these days. I am often invited to visit pre-school centers in remote villages which are established and run by local communities to prepare their children for schooling. What they have achieved is simply astonishing. These communities are using a pre-school learning model, known as the Kajoli Model, developed through research support from Research Initiatives Bangladesh (RIB) (<http://www.rib-bangladesh.org>) with which I am associated.

The research began in January 2003 in Kajoli village in Sripur Upozila of Magura District with two main objectives. They were: one, to identify the education needs of children belonging to disadvantaged communities, and two, to come up with a model that would cater to those needs.

As an action research with active participation of the communities concerned, it was soon established that a primary requirement would be to develop a pre-school learning model which could be easily implemented by local communities without outside help. Pre-school centers established under the model would help local children to learn to read, write and count, among other things, through a process of fun and game.

The idea of the model would be to make early learning so attractive that children would develop a positive attitude towards learning and schooling. It would also remove the misconceptions in the minds of the parents, particularly of the most marginalised communities, that education is difficult and meant for the well-to-do only. Pre-school centers should, therefore, be set up specifically to meet the needs of the children concerned. The children would spend a year at such centers, beginning around age five, and be groomed to enter the government primary school system at age six. The centers would thus serve as a bridge to local primary schools. Within a year after initiation of the research, a model was ready for field testing. It comprised of

two components: a curriculum component and community ownership component. Both of these were tried out, as part of the research process, at pre-school centers set up at several places in the next two years.

After the model was further refined, it was made available for replication by local communities throughout Bangladesh with only technical support from RIB. It was agreed during the first phase of the research that, in order to promote community ownership, no external financial support would be sought to run the centers. It was felt that if the centers were able to stand on their own feet despite initial difficulties, they might be able to avoid the fate of many externally supported initiatives which fold when external support ends.

Experiments with the Kajoli Model have continued today in some one hundred centers all over Bangladesh and more centers are coming up regularly. Some adjustments, however, had to be made in the later years, as we shall discuss later, to the policy of independence from external support in view of difficulties experienced.

## **The Curriculum:**

It is the curriculum part, with its unique learning method, that made the Kajoli Model very attractive both to the children and their parents. At the beginning though, parents were concerned by the fact that no books, paper or pencil are used in the model. The latter have been replaced by a pocket board, a large number of pocket cards and blackboard space for all children to write on. The pocket board and pocket cards were specially conceived for this purpose. These were gradually refined over the years through observing children's reactions. Presently two sets of one hundred twenty seven pocket cards containing common words known to the children are used to introduce all the alphabets in Bengali, including consonants, vowels and the vowel signs.

I would suggest that readers look up the Kajoli website (<http://www.rib-kajolimodel.org>) to see a video display and pictures of the pocket board, pocket cards and other materials used in the model. But for those who may not have easy access to the internet, it may be useful to provide a word picture here.

The pocket board contains over a hundred pockets created by stitching a large piece of cloth up and down. These are meant to hold the pocket cards. To give an example, on the first day of class at a center, the teacher would put ten cards into ten pockets of the board, each containing a word written in Bengali. Below the word is the picture of the object which the word represents. For example, the word Aam (mango) would be written in bold letters in Bengali and below the word a picture of Aam would be provided. The other words would be similarly presented. So when the teacher asks the children to bring a particular card, say of aam, boi, ghor, and bol etc. all the children would jump to get it, since they can easily identify it. The children's eyes will be thus fixed on the board all the time as they see this as a game and wait for the next call. It is a sight to watch their excitement.

In this manner the children would gradually be introduced to all the words in the set, including words with different vowel signs, words containing more than two letters as well as conjunct

words. And at each stage when the children find it easy to identify all the words with pictures, a new set of cards containing the same words without the pictures are introduced.

It is amazing how quickly the children learn to identify the words visually without learning how they are spelt. Once a set of ten cards is thoroughly mastered, the teacher would ask the children to make the words by searching for the components of the words spread over the pocket board. The children would bring the individual components and put them together into a pocket to form a word. This way they learn to read and spell not only those words but hundreds of other words formed by mixing up the components, many of which are meaningless words. In the process, they learn both the alphabets and spelling of words at the same time.

The children learn to read simple words and sentences within three to six months, some faster than others, of course. They also learn to write at the same time because from day one the teacher asks them to draw the words on the blackboard. After a few initial days of fumbling, they learn to use the chalk and write on the black board rather confidently. It is a beautiful sight to watch!

It has been seen that after learning to read and write in this manner, children become quite eager to read real books. So over the years a story book, especially prepared for the children, was introduced. Towards the end of the study year the children are also introduced to the books used in Class One of the government primary school system. They are also introduced to paper and pencils. Thus when they enter Class One they have already completed the curriculum of class One, more or less.

The curriculum also includes learning numbers and to count, add and subtract. For the latter purpose, a set of playing cards have been developed which the children love to play. They also learn to recite a large number of nursery rhymes and poems; to dance and sing songs, as well as to tell stories. Regular physical exercise (PT), indoor and outdoor games are also included in the curriculum. Hygiene and cleanliness is emphasized and efforts are made to inculcate the values of patriotism, tolerance, friendliness, fellow-feeling and cooperation with others.

As a result of the combination of the above factors, at the end of a year's stay at a center, the children are so well prepared that they are warmly welcomed at the local primary school. I am told that at many places, the local schools have made known their preference for Kajoli graduates for admission. Some Headmasters have told me that the Kajoli graduates are useful to have in a class to help other children who did not come with a similar pre-school experience. Some of the children have even been admitted in class two.

## **Community Ownership:**

The above has been possible primarily because of the dedication and commitment of large number of men and women at each center. As stated earlier, Kajoli centers are set up and run by the local community. Usually a center opens as a result of the vision/interest of a person who serves as the "champion" of the center. He or she comes to know about the model and decides to replicate it in his/her area.

The primary requirement before opening a center is the psychological preparation of the local community to undertake the responsibility to run it on a collective basis, without outside support. The community will have to find a place where some 26 children would meet four hours a day, six days a week. Parents will have to be motivated to enroll their children at the center. Mothers will have to be mentally prepared to provide midday meals to all the children once a month

under an arrangement through which all the children would be fed all the 26 class days a month since all the mothers would do the same. Equally importantly a local girl/woman will have to be identified and trained to become the teacher. Most importantly perhaps, arrangements will also have to be made through local contributions to pay the teacher a monthly remuneration of at least Tk. 500. This is the main recurring cash requirement for a center.

The result of the experiment in the early years was mixed. As soon as its support for the opening of Kajoli Model pre-school centers throughout the country became known, large number of applications poured in. Because of lack of previous experience in this regard, RIB decided to provide technical support, including pocket board, pocket cards, blackboards and teacher's training, to all of them. Within a few months in 2005 over sixty centers were opened in one district alone. However, within another few months, RIB realized that a so-called "champion" had misinformed the local communities by telling them that once the centers were opened RIB would at some point provide the teachers' salary. The communities, long used to NGO activities, could not believe that as an externally-funded NGO itself, RIB would not be able to raise enough funds to pay for them. When RIB insisted on the value of community ownership for long term sustainability, many of these centers gradually closed down. After this, RIB became more careful in offering its support and helped only where the local communities were fully prepared to assume their collective responsibilities.

Notwithstanding the closure of many of the earlier centers, presently there are some one hundred centers throughout the country which are running more or less smoothly and new ones are coming up regularly. I say, more or less because at some of the centers the teachers were till recently been receiving only half the amount of Tk500 agreed upon by the communities as teacher's monthly remuneration. In other words, they received only around TK250 per month, mostly paid by the mothers themselves. The community could not raise the other half. But what was nevertheless encouraging is the fact that all the teachers continued to attend to their duties even with this paltry remuneration.

The reasons why teachers are willing to teach at such a low remuneration are many. The most important is the fact that teaching is a very prestigious profession in our society. All the Kajoli teachers are proud of their work and often talk about the pleasure they get in running the Kajoli curriculum which is full of fun and tension-free. They also talk about the love and respect they receive from the children. There is the story of two young teachers who insisted, when marriage proposals came to their parents, that they would only marry when Kajoli centers were opened in their future husband's villages so that they could continue to teach there. Needless to add, both the in-laws and RIB were happy to oblige in this regard. It has also been found that parents and parent-in-laws are proud to see their daughters or daughter-in-laws as teachers. This explains why the teachers continue to teach even when they get so little remuneration.

Everyone involved with the Kajoli process, however, felt that this state of affairs was unfair to the teachers and something should be done about it. As a result several meetings were held with the "champions" and teachers from centers throughout the country. It was subsequently agreed that some adjustment was necessary to the earlier policy of total independence from external support. The adjustment that was agreed upon was that contributions would be accepted from the society at large to help pay for the Tk 250 shortfall. [It was also agreed that this would apply only for those centers that have proven their resilience by surviving at least for two years.] It would thus still be a community-supported effort, since everything else, except for half the teacher's salary, would come from the local community and the other half would come from the community at large. It is encouraging that since this was made known, some support

has begun to come in. As a result most of the teachers are now getting the full remuneration. One area where astonishing success was achieved by the Kajoli experiment is in the provision of cooked midday meals to the children. As mentioned earlier, the model requires all the mothers to take turn to cook and feed all the children at a center once a month. In this way, the children are fed midday meals throughout the month provided by one mother or another. It is to make the once a month regime easy to remember, that the decision was taken in consultation with the mothers to limit only 26 children at a center since there are only 26 class days a month. Some lapses in feeding are reported from time to time at some of the centers but in the overwhelming number of centers the midday meal is served regularly. One reason for this is the fact that within a couple of months after the children enroll at a center mothers observe clear improvements in their health. This is simply because they are fed reasonably nutritious food at a regular hour every day. The other reason for success is the pressure from the child of the mother who has to feed the children on a particular day, since on that day the child serves as the host and as class captain. This latter practice is a good personality-building experience for the children. The children also appear to feel "empowered" by experiencing their mothers feeding all the children even though they come from very depressed families.

Another encouraging development is community support at many places in building thatched or tin-roofed huts as permanent premises for the centers. In a few places people have donated the land for this purpose and at others they have been built upon private land lent for such use. In some places the money to buy the CI sheets for roofing came from the society at large while the bamboo, labour and other costs were provided by the local community. In many places the centers are located in some ones' unused room or at the residence of the teacher. At other places Mothers' Organizations, set up to help run the centers, have contributed the money from income derived from economic activities built upon their own savings. In some communities, Mothers' Organizations have even leased land to grow rice and other cereals for their own consumption and for income to pay for the teachers' remunerations. In a few places, Mothers' Organizations have obtained VGF cards from local Union Councils and used the ration to feed the children. [To take advantage of the cohesion (social capital) thus developed by the mothers, RIB is exploring the possibility of setting up adult literacy programmes for the mothers and the local population on the premises of Kajoli centers.]

Another interesting development is that at many of the centers local school or college teachers are supplying the chalks for use of the children which they bring from their respective institutions. The growing sense of local ownership is also demonstrated when members from the community at many places serve special meals to the children on special occasions. Local ownership is also apparent in the composition of the children representing all the religious and ethnic groups. There are many heart-warming stories of communal harmony from different centers.

### **Conclusion:**

The above developments are extremely propitious for education in Bangladesh. They represent the true tradition of collective self-help in Bangladesh. It seems to me that given the opportunity, people are still eager to do something useful for the society. I think there are latent feelings in all of us that we need to pay back some of our debt to the society that has given so much to us. Over a hundred communities in Bangladesh have done that by helping, over the years, at least

13000 children from most disadvantaged families to go to school. Some of these children are now studying in Class Seven. Another 2600 are being added to the number of graduates every year. As more such centers come up regularly (over 70 new centers are in the pipeline), there will be many more children who would thus be helped. This way they will complement the efforts of the Government and the NGOs, to meet Bangladesh's Millennium Developmental Goals (MDGs) in education by the year 2015.

But, as we have seen, even the limited objective of preparing children from disadvantaged communities to go to school is a difficult task to be achieved by the local communities alone. They need the support and encouragement from the community at large. Such support can be, as has been said before, in the form of providing half the teacher's salary, paying for CI sheets for roofing of permanent premises for the centers, sinking tube wells where needed, building toilets, providing toys and winter clothing for the children etc. Occasional visits to the centers by well-wishers to encourage the efforts of the local communities have also been found very useful. The idea is to offer encouragement and a helping hand without affecting community ownership of the centers. The Kajoli Website ( <http://rib-kajolimodel.org> ) mentions some other ways to help.

RIB is grateful to the Royal Dutch Government and the people of the Netherlands for their financial support in facilitating the research on the development of the Kajoli Model for early childhood learning. It feels gratified that the model is helping the revival of the age-old tradition of collective self-help to promote education in Bangladesh. It is now up to the people of Bangladesh to take it forward.

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