

Education Right of the Disabled Children in Bangladesh: A Sociological Review

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Abstract

The disabled children are the most deprived of education right in Bangladesh. When quality education is a critical component of child development and a means of self-empowerment, independence and social integration— disabled children are disintegrated of this component as well. In order to investigate the status of education rights of the disabled children, it is an imperative to analyze merits of the national education policy and planning. This sociological review reveals that deprivation of education rights results in disabled children's social dependence and vulnerability to long-term poverty. Evidences show that absence of education rights constrains disabled children social and economic adaptation. One of the reasons the physically challenged segment of the society suffer from education right-deprivation is disintegration between the Education Ministry and the Social Welfare Ministry in Bangladesh. An effective and efficient coordination between these two national administrative wings would considerably escalate education-right drive of the disabled children.

Keywords: disability, impairment, education rights, education policy, awareness, adaptation, vulnerability, constitution, rehabilitation.

Introduction

Every human being expects a healthy life. But sometimes natural and man made factors put barrier to their expectations. People are sometimes born disabled or they get disabled in the later stages of life due to accidents or illnesses. These kinds of obstacles make their life unnatural and difficult. These difficulties could be overcome by the help of their family members, neighborhood and state. Otherwise these hardships move to the worse to face every kind of deprivation and discrimination in the society. They are denied many rights enjoyed by the normal people (Nargis, 2003).

The 3rd of December is a very significant day for every disabled person. In 1982 the United Nations declared this day as the International Day for the Disabled People. From that year most of the countries of the world are observing this day as an important day. The main theme of the remains - "Together for a better world for all: Including persons with disabilities in development (www.un.org/disabilities)." This day aims at ensuring equal right and opportunity to the disabled persons. In this regard the specific aim is to facilitate their safety and opportunity in the various domains of the society. Considering the disabled in the architectural designs, living independent

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life, enjoying equal right in the house and the workplace, ensuring the right as a patient fighting reluctance of the state and society are some of the issues emphasized on.

The human being is fighting for the survival from the very beginning of his existence. This struggle for the existence generates the thought of right in his mind. But if the disabled persons are not included in this thought related to the right, than it would be unfair and even inhuman. But the fact is that what happens in reality is not what the society expects for them. People are deprived of their fundamental rights when they are disabled. At the same time it is also true that in the recent decades we have witnessed some progresses in procuring the disabled their due rights. To expedite this progress we can take education as the best means. It could be a bridge between the normal people and the disabled from the early childhood when they develop their concept related to life and society (Akthar, 1996).

Bangladesh is one of the poorest countries of the world. The yearly per capita income is 21470 taka (BBS, 2002). It's a country of higher infant mortality as well. Moreover those who survive a fraction of them become, mentally or physically handicapped. These are caused mainly by utter poverty, unhygienic delivery system, trauma due to natural disaster, lack of vitamin A and iron, etc.

This article is a sociological review using secondary data relating to the education right of the disabled children in Bangladesh. There is no reliable data on the disabled persons in Bangladesh till now. Yet we can say that according to the record of the Statistics Bureau of Bangladesh, 6.04 persons are disabled out of each thousand people (BBS, 2002). According to the WHO record, the number of disabled persons in Bangladesh is about 17 million. Today the ratio of the disabled persons in Bangladesh is 52:48. Among them 4 million people are physically handicapped and 3.8 million mentally. The number of blind persons is 3.3 million and other kinds of disabled persons number 2.5 million (UNICEF, 2005). This number is obviously increasing day after day. Hence this phenomenon can not be ignored any more. It has indeed become a national and burning issue. It becomes worse when we find that these great number of people are looked as a burden of the society as in any other third world country. To our great regret they are also ignored by the state itself whereas if they are ever provided with better opportunities and training they could be easily incorporated in the mainstream society and thus could contribute to development of the state and society.

Types of disability

Disability is classified into 5 categories according to their nature. (i) Physical disability, (ii) sensory disability, (iii) visual disability, (iv) hearing disability, and (v) intellectual disability. According to the UN report disabled people in Bangladesh comprises of nearly 3% of the total population and according to the report, of the Bureau of Statistics in Bangladesh there are 0.44 mentally disabled persons among each 1000 persons (BBS, 2002). Apart from that there are myriad types of physically handicapped persons in this country. The Bureau of Statistics in Bangladesh says that each population of 1000 persons contains 0.16 physically impaired persons 1.02 persons are lame and another 0.84 persons are disabled because of strokes.

When it comes for the blind persons the number is 1.25 whereas according to the report of the WHO 1% of total population blind. According to the survey report commissioned by the Helen

Keller International, each year 30,000 children lose their eye sight due to the lack of vitamin "A". Other reports say that each 1000 people contain 0.99 and 0.72 dumb and deaf persons respectively.

Theories of disability

There are two types of disability model, such as: (i) Medical model of disability and (ii) Social model of disability. The medical model of disability sees the disabled person as the problem, to be adapted to fit into the world as it is. The social model of disability sees that the disabled people do not face disadvantage because of physical or mental impairments but experience discrimination in the way society is organized. This happens if society fails to make education, work, leisure and public services accessible, fails to remove barriers of assumption, stereotype and prejudice and fails to outlaw unfair treatment in our daily lives (Equality and Human Rights Commission, 2009).

Social barriers and antagonism

In Bangladesh a great number of disabled persons are children. Their number is relatively higher in the rural areas where they are deprived of many health facilities which are available in the cities. As for education this is the same. Due to the city centered policy of the government, the disabled persons of the rural areas remain ever deprived of their right to education (Islam, 1994). The disabled persons are the ignored community in each and every sector of the society. They also long for love and care from their surroundings. But when the disabled people are deprived of receiving education with the normal children from the early childhood, they feel segregated and stranded aloof. Gradually they become deviated from the mainstream society. Adding to the misery their relatives also feel stigmatized due to their disabled family members. More often they are ridiculed and humiliated by the majority of the normal people. Considering all these miseries they become introvert and self cornered day by day. They become to feel that they are the burdens of their society and family. Due to the lack of proper education and training they become helpless for themselves, let alone the society and the state. The state in turn denies them their rights. The society holds them in contempt and irritation due to the reigning superstitions and stereotyped ways of thought.

To fight the prevailing superstitions and stereotyped thoughts, we have to think of making them self sufficient and independent. We have to ensure their proper education and access to the social and structural facilities. They should be given equal opportunities in the workplace if they are able to practice any profession (CDD, 1997). Special education system should be introduced to provide the blind and deaf children. But it is best for us to try to incorporate them in the mainstream education system (Rahman, and Lipi, 1997).

The disabled children should be given chance to receive education in the normal schools to enable them interact with the normal people. Otherwise they will be denied access to the workplace when they become adult taking it granted that they will lack the adaptation attitude afresh. On the contrary if they are allowed to adapt themselves in the mainstream society, they will have a good chance of selecting their spouses after establishing a proper exchange of understanding (Begum, 1996).

Nowadays the developed western countries have witnessed notable success in incorporating the disabled children in the normal education system. The developing ones like Bangladesh could adopt their policies too. It could utilize its limited sources to help the disabled stand on their own introducing realistic policies. The government should address the disability issue at the earliest starting with the needs of the disabled children. Private sectors could also come forward to help building the future of the disabled ones (Akthar, 1989).

International and Bangladesh initiatives to uphold the rights of the disabled

The first humanitarian declaration issued by the United Nations related to the disability rights was launched in 1984 (Ali, 1997). After that the UN addresses the interests of the disabled persons internationally every year. According to the declaration the disabled persons should procure equal access to education. They should be provided with free education at least till the secondary level. They should have equal access to higher education according to their merits. They should be treated equal as any other normal citizens of the same country.

Apart from that the UN has issued many declarations to uphold the right and dignity of the disabled. It has addressed the issues of the mentally handicapped first. In 1971 Declaration on the Rights of Mentally Retarded Person was passed (Ali, 1997). They were given right to the mainstream education system. Finally in 1975 the resolution related to the disabled persons in general were passed (Ali, 1997).

After that year the UN took several steps to upgrade the life standards of the disabled. In 1976 it introduced "International Year of Disabled Persons". Later it was reintroduced as "International Year for Disabled Persons". Later it took several steps during the time between 1983-1993. This period of time was declared as the Decade of the Disabled persons (SARPV, 1993-2003). During this time it has spent much effort to uphold the right and equal opportunity worldwide (UN Decade of Disabled Persons, 1983-1992). In 1989 Frank Bowe was the only disabled person to represent his country in the UN convention. Today there are many disabled persons who represent their respective country in such type of conventions. It was winded up by a general assembly of the disabled persons initiated by Robert Davila. Frank Bowe and Robert Davila both were hearing impaired persons. In 1994 the UNESCO has declared the sign language as the medium of education for the hearing impaired children and youth (ESCAP, 1994). It held a general assembly in Salamanca of Spain to incorporate the disabled children in the mainstream education system. 92 countries along with 25 international organizations participated in the assembly. All the participating countries were urged to implement the declaration (Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education, 1996). While addressing the children rights in the general assembly of the UN, the right of the disabled children to the education was also included. Their equal right to education was emphasized (UN, 1996), too.

On the 13th of December, 2006 the United Nations organized Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. It was the first humanitarian convention which addressed the interests of the 650 million disabled persons of the earth. In 2011, 147 countries of the world attested the convention (www.un.org). Those countries which signed the pact are obliged to introduce the regulations for the disabled persons amending the old ones. The disabled persons' equal right to inheritance and possession was ensured by virtue of the pact signed.

In spite of signing the pact Bangladesh did nothing to make the clauses effective. As a matter of fact it was one of the first 22 countries to sign the pact. Implementing the clauses was made compulsory on the 2nd of December. Therefore it is recommended that the government should take immediate steps to implement the signed clauses.

In the second clause of the charter it is mentioned that the government should held the rights of the children in respect. These rights are also ensured in the 23rd clause. In this article proper care of the disabled children was given importance. In its 1st section it was admitted that the state should facilitate the satisfactory lifestyle for the disabled children. They should have equal opportunities to gain self confidence. Their participation in social activities should be ensured. While in the 2nd it is mentioned that they should be provided with special care according to the type of their disability and should be encouraged in every sector of the society. According to 3rd section of the article, they should be given equal access to workplace, recreation centers. Their cultural and spiritual development should be secured through proper training, healthcare and rehabilitation (Akthar, 1996, p. 2.).

In the 48th UN general assembly every member state was called to implement 22 models to uphold the equal opportunity of the disabled persons. The proposed 6th model calls the state to ensure equal access for the disabled persons to the mainstream education system (Bangladesh Mental Disability Welfare and Education Association, p. 2). Bangladesh supports all the initiatives taken by the international organizations to secure and uphold the rights of the disabled.

National regulations and initiatives to realize the education policy

In the national Constitution of Bangladesh there is no mention of the rights of the disabled in any of its articles or sections. In the 15th and 16th sections of the Constitution it is mentioned that ensuring the right of the citizens to the education is the obligation of the state. Henceforth the state was given the necessary directives to realize its obligations related to the education of the citizens. Apart from that the 27th, 28th and 29th articles made the equal opportunity for every citizen a basic rule (Constitution of the People's Republic of Bangladesh, 1996).

As we know the Bangladesh constitution makes the equal right and opportunity for each and every citizen a basic rule, yet there is no equal opportunity for the disabled persons in the education domain. There was no specific act after the Lunacy Act and Eye Donation Act to secure the right of the disabled persons (Ali, 1997, p. 7). Long after that only in 2001 the Disabled Person's Welfare Act was enacted. This act has proven effective in upholding the disabled children's right and opportunities. This act encouraged various quarters to set up special education system for the disabled children. Special education systems were introduced according to their disability types. We could see special arrangements were made for their examinations. In addition to that free education was ensured for those under 18. They were also provided with their necessary special study materials. Special efforts were given to facilitate their education with the normal children. They were encouraged by scholarships and stipends from the government fund. Initiatives were taken to eliminate the commoner's misunderstandings towards them in order to incorporate them in the mainstream society (Ministry of Social welfare, 1995).

The 1990 Act of Compulsory Primary Education seems to remain unimplemented since it did not take the disabled children into consideration. We think that a specific act should be enacted for them. Realistic measures should be taken to fully incorporate them in the mainstream education system. To make these more effective their presence in the normal schools should be monitored. Their participations in the social and cultural activities should be encouraged from the very beginning (Akthar, 1996, pp. 4-6). We can not expect a successful implementation of Education Act ignoring the disabled children.

To secure the education right of the disabled children in addition to their human rights several initiatives were taken in the early fifties. But they were scanty compared to the dire needs. Moreover these initiatives were confined very much in small areas of basic needs. It was only in 1995 when the Social Welfare Ministry of Bangladesh introduced a national regulation for the disabled persons containing 14 articles. One of these articles recommended for the implementation of the education rights of the disabled persons (Ministry of Social welfare, 1995). The 1997 National Education Policy recommended for the special education for the disabled persons again (Ministry of Education, 1997). But in reality we are lagging far behind from implementing the national or UN policies related to disabled children's education.

To implement all the above mentioned policies and UN declarations, Bangladesh Ministry of Primary and Mass Education has launched a project named "Effective Schools through Enhanced Management (ESTEEM)" Under this project the non-government organization –Centre for Services and Information on Disability (CSID) organized a workshop on "Giving Education to the Children in adverse situations and the disabled children." It is indeed one of the effective workshops launched by the government to facilitate education for the disabled children. It was said in the workshop that among the disabled children who were able to attend the normal schools, most of them were not encouraged to do so. As a result only 11% of them could reach the schools.

Incorporating all the disabled children in the mainstream education system is an impossibility, if those with special needs are ignored. They need special attention, facilities and materials. Thus we can see success in incorporating all of them in the mainstream education system. Special allocations should be made for their education. Special vocational training could be arranged for them to facilitate their access to the workplace in the later stages of their life. This will also enable them to be independent. Mass media could play an effective role to eradicate the stereotyped attitudes of the laity towards the disabled persons (Directorate of Primary Education, July, 2002). Thanks to the Bangladesh Government as it declared its initiative to provide the disabled persons with jobs according to their disability type. But to execute this declaration it must take proper steps to train the disabled persons. The building structures of the workplaces and the government installations should take the access of the disabled persons in consideration. Private sectors should also follow these directives. To achieve all these goals we have to facilitate the education of the disabled children according to the types of their disabilities.

Recently Bangladesh Government along with some NGOs is running some schools for the disabled children especially for the hearing impaired, mentally and visually disabled ones. The Welfare Ministry is enlisting the private organizations that run such programs and allocating funds for them. In a joint venture between Bangladesh Ministry of Welfare and three Norwegian private organizations, a special learning centre for the disabled children (NCSE) was set up in Mirpur area. It was in the form of a residential laboratory school where the hearing impaired, visually and mentally disabled children can avail their education. In addition, a training college was set up to train teachers for the special education system for the disabled persons. This could be taken as the only public school funded by the government in this country of 170 million people. This indicates that the disabled persons in Bangladesh are far away from enjoying the equal rights and opportunities. Their equal access to various sectors of the state is denied with greater reluctance (Molla, 1997).

In the South Asian countries like Bangladesh, Pakistan, India and Nepal, there is no coordinated plan to uphold the rights and opportunities of the mentally disabled persons. They seem to be denied proper justice of law, although these countries are obliged to ensure equal justice and opportunities for the disabled persons as per their own national constitutions. In these matters the South Asian countries are relatively well advanced. They seem to be more sympathetic to the mentally disabled persons and are implementing many projects for their well being. Bangladesh could follow their rules and regulations related to their rights. The educationists, health experts, cytologists, parents and even the disabled persons themselves can form the Asian Federation for the Mentally Retarded (AFMR). They can discuss a coordinated policy for the Asian disabled community and forward their recommendations to their respective governments (Ali, 1997, pp. 22-25).

To uphold the equal education rights of the disabled children, several steps could be taken. They should be encouraged to attend the normal schools with special education arrangements for them. This will pave the way to adapt themselves within the mainstream society and establish familiarity with the normal people from the early childhood (Ingvald, Mobilisation, 1997). The local governments should be instructed to provide them equal access to the workplaces and provide them with proper social care (Kanji, 1997).

Apart from making the primary education of children compulsory, we should think of other problems they usually face in that arena. Measures should be taken to include them in the mainstream education system. Special education system should be arranged for them where it will seem necessary. Their days of vacations should be reduced as much as possible. Parents should be consulted before diagnosing their types of abnormality to provide them with necessary special education materials and select their schools. If they reside with their family members, regular home visit by experts should be made compulsory (Rahman, 1994).

There is no special and independent education institute for the disabled persons in Bangladesh. But there is a rehabilitation centre under the Ministry of Welfare for the disabled persons where they are provided with vocational training. If any of the disabled persons can ever complete a

normal education level, he is destined to face discriminations in the job market. He can not find any dignified job to live an independent life by virtue of his degree, lamenting over the success of the normal peers with the same degree.

The situation is unfavorable for the visually impaired children. Their education scope is very limited and mostly confined to the greater and costly cities. A very small number of NGOs are working for them in the rural areas (Monsur, 1993). Lack of special study materials and underdeveloped public transportation make it more difficult.

When it comes for the disabled minor girls the matter is worse. It is difficult for them to reach the distant schools with facilities for the disabled children. So the discouraged girls usually remain confined in their houses in this conservative and insecure society. The poor parents exploit blindness of their children to send them out to the streets for begging. Separate boarding schools could be established for them to assure their security and dignity. Braille system should be made available for all the visually impaired children (Rahman, 1997).

There are five government run schools for the visually impaired children in the major cities of Bangladesh, namely in Dhaka, Chittagong, Barisal, Rajshahi and Khulna. But they can avail their education up to the primary level only. After that they have to attend the sole training centre for them in their respective districts to pass the SSC Level with the normal students. There is no separate high school or college for them as it is in the United States. Nationwide initiative should be taken in this regard (Khan, 1995).

The scope of education for the dumb and deaf children is much more limited in Bangladesh. There are seven special schools for them in Dhaka, Chittagong, Chandpur, Sylhet, Rajshahi, Faridpur and Khulna. These are run by the Ministry of Welfare. But to meet the actual need at least one separate school in each district needed to be established soon. Vocational training school should also be founded for them to ensure their equal right to enter the job market (Mitra, 1990). There is no different or special education system for the disabled children in Bangladesh. They have to cope up with the general education system which is harder for them. Lenient education system could be introduced for the mentally disabled ones, sign language for the hearing impaired children and Braille system for the visually disabled ones. Teachers training for the special education system should also be given importance. Peripatetic teachers should be provided for those who reside with their family members to visit them regularly (Michael and Tucker, 1983, pp.195, 196).

Concluding remarks and recommendations

The disabled children of Bangladesh have to face myriad types of problems. As we have seen the constitution is nearly devoid of any thing about them. The government failed to enact comprehensive rules and regulations to ensure their rights and opportunities. There are several private organizations to help the disabled children but they are dependent on foreign aid. When the foreign fund comes to end they become helpless and to often done their project (Rahman, 1994). To make matters worse the parents themselves seem to be reluctant towards the

development of their disabled child. If the child is a male, he may have the lucky chance to go to the school but the girls are most often kept confined to their house (Liton, Begum and Samad, 1993).

The government here looks into the affairs of the disabled person's through the Ministry of Welfare. It is concerned with the education, rehabilitation and development of the disabled persons. Since their education is left to the Ministry of Welfare, instead of ministry of primary education, the development of their education system has become inactive or a matter of mercy. Their education system should be handed over to the Ministry of Primary Education as soon as possible. A special cell for special education should be set up.

The private sectors could come forward to ameliorate the conditions of the disabled children. The rich could contribute for their overall development. There should be coordinated development program concerning the betterment of the disabled children. Discrimination against them in the domain of education should be uprooted. New education policy could be introduced in this regard. Each area should contain one normal school that has the facilities to provide education to the disabled children. They should be provided with vocational training to facilitate their access to the job market. There should be special annual program to distribute their education materials. Teachers should be trained to make them capable of transmitting knowledge to the disabled children. A board of experts could be formed to monitor their progress (Ahmed, 1998).

There is no separate data indicating the percentage of literacy among the disabled children. Today in the most part of the world, inclusive education is being introduced to ensure the disabled children's right to education. It is very important for a poor country like Bangladesh as it is the basic right of the disabled children. It is inhuman to keep them segregated due to their disability. They should be encouraged to be included in the mainstream education system to enjoy the interaction with the mainstream society and culture. Inclusive education is matter related to the human rights. It aims at building a humane social consciousness of harmony among all. It postulates that there should be no segregation between the normal children and those with disabilities in any stage of the life. Inclusion is the only way to uproot fear and loneliness from the heart of the disabled children. It could help us eradicating contempt and discrimination against the disabled children who are deprived of so many rights and opportunities so long in the known history (Walter, 1997).

Inclusion doesn't only mean to incorporate the disabled children in the normal classrooms. Their overall development needs not only enough financial allocations and bunch of policymakers only, but it also needs change of attitudes towards them and eradicating superstitions related to the disability (Raymond, 1995).

The implementation of the disability development programs is unfortunately confined to words in form of seminars, research and pacts signed with the UN member countries. The Government along with private organizations should initiate immediate realistic actions. The education system and facilities should be upgraded to deter their usual turnout to ensure their much emphasized right to education.

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