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Compulsory Primary Education In Bangladesh-II

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THE primary education sub-sector is propped up with heavy doses of external financing and technical assistance in the recent past. The universal primary Education (UPE) programme and related activities are not only pushed but closely monitored by the donor agencies. They also helped the Ministry of Education in organising several seminars and workshops for preparing the Fourth Five Year Plan (1990-95) document.

One such programme was the National Workshop on 'Universal Primary Education in the 1990s' held at BARD, Comilla, in April, 1989. Some of the important recommendations of the national workshop were:

(a) A compulsory Primary Education Act should be introduced. This law should make primary education compulsory from 1991 for all children 6 years old in grade I. Thereafter these children should be retained in school until completion of the primary cycle, thus ensuring primary education for all primary school age children by 1995. (b) A favourable climate for action should be created by national advocacy and awareness raising. A social mobilisation process should be initiated to create a social movement for universal primary education. All concerned, including various non-governmental organisations and women's groups should be brought into the movement. The mass media, especially radio and television, should be encouraged to support the movement. (c) The percentage of GNP spent on education should be increased from its present rate (approximately 1.7% to 2.5%). The present intrasectoral allocation of approximately 47% to primary education should be ascertained. Private sector involvement, participation encouraged. (d) Priority should be given to the employment of female teachers to encourage higher female enrolment and participation in universal primary education. (e) Special provision should be made for girls, especially from disadvantaged families. This may take the form of scholarships, subsidies etc. Trust funds, where necessary, could be established for this purpose.

In addition, a special resolution taken in the workshop stated that, "In order to supplement the Ministry of Education's efforts in policy formation and implementation, a national committee may be created to assist with the process of national advocacy and the mobilization of public opinion in favour of compulsory and universal primary education". Consequently, a national committee representing various segments of the society was constituted for the purpose stated above.

Meanwhile, preparation for a big event was taking place at international level. A 'World Conference on Education for All' sponsored by UNDP, UNESCO, UNICEF and World Bank was scheduled for March, 1990, in Bangkok. Regional Conferences preparatory to the World Conference were planned in 1989.

Bangladesh was chosen to be the host for the South and Central Asian Conference on Education for all. It was held in Dhaka in December, 1989. For the Regional Conference, like all other participating countries, Bangladesh prepared a Country Document incorporating a 'National Plan of Action for Education for All by the year 2000'. Because of the successful Regional Conference in Dhaka, the Government of Bangladesh at the highest level was invited to attend the World Conference on Education for All as a special guest. These events of considerable significance in the area of basic education at regional and world level, encouraged the Government of Bangladesh to introduce and pass the 'Compulsory Primary Education Act, 1989' in the Parliament.

The 'World Declaration on Education for All' and adoption of the 'Framework for Action to Meet Basic Learning Needs' in the world Conference on Education for All held in Jomtien, Thailand, in March, 1990, "represent a worldwide consensus on an expanded vision of basic education

and a renewed commitment to ensure that basic learning needs of all children, youth and adults are met effectively in all countries". The World Conference was indeed a great event in the sense that the world community showed genuine concern for the cause of education and committed itself to help and assist the nation states in their efforts to eradicate the curse of illiteracy in their respective countries. In other words, the world community, the UN agencies and other funding organisations have joined together, for the first time in human history, to mobilise human and financial resources for wiping out the scourge of illiteracy from the face of the earth through appropriate action programmes at national, regional and world level.

Literacy and primary education go hand in hand. In fact, illiteracy should be eliminated at its source, that is, by providing opportunities for universal access to all children of primary age group and ensuring completion of primary schooling. This can be done through a well planned compulsory primary education programme. For us, we have now in hand the Compulsory Primary Education Act, 1990. What is needed is to implement the provisions of the Act. The Draft Fourth Five Year Plan has accorded topmost priority to introduction of compulsory primary education and has earmarked Tk. 1162.27 crore (48.98%) for the purpose. In addition, the General Education Project—a five-year (1991-95) development project to be implemented by the Ministry of Education with financial assistance by a consortium of funding agencies led by World Bank provides 95% of the project cost (320 million US dollars) for primary education sub-sector. When these preparations were being taken at professional level, the whole issue was politicised by autocratic regime of Mr. Ershad who has now been thrown in the dustbin of history by people's power.

The Ministry of Education was engaged in drawing up an unrealistic programme for introduction of compulsory primary education in the country from January, 1991. Every body expressed doubt about the feasibility of such an ambitious programme hurriedly drawn up and thrust upon the ill-prepared government machinery for implementation. But rational approach and well being of the people were not the order of the day. Every thing was done either for personal or political gain.

Revision

With the fall of the hated regime, there was no doubt that Compulsory Primary Education programme to be launched from January, 1991, will go through a process of revision. The recent announcement of the Ministry of Education in this regard has confirmed that. The press note issued by the Ministry of Education has clarified that neither the Universal Primary Education (UPE) programme nor the Compulsory Primary Education (CPE) programme has been postponed. The UPE is very much on the agenda and CPE will be implemented in phases as envisaged in the relevant act (Compulsory Primary Education Act, 1990). In the present circumstances, this seems to be the only out. But we hope this is an interim arrangement. The ministry of Education would do well to give a second thought about implementing the CPE in phases. Considering the importance of CPE for improving the literacy situation in the country it should be introduced all over the country from next year, that is, from January, 1992. The relevant act does not bar us from going for it in one go. From the point of view of economy, justice and equity the whole country should be brought under the umbrella of CPE programme at the earliest opportunity. We must remember that time is a crucial factor and a programme of such a national importance should not wait for an ideal situation to come. If the Ministry of Education starts preparing from now on, there should not be any difficulty in launching the programme from January, 1992.