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THE BANGLADESH OBSERVER

Gains In Primary Education

That the enrolment and retention rates of primary school students in Bangladesh are higher than the South Asian average is rejoicing news. According to the Report of the State of the World's Children, South Asian children of primary-school age account for 70 per cent enrolment against a 40 per cent drop-out. The figures for Bangladeshi children are 75 per cent and 25 per cent respectively. In the case of South Asia, a gain of just 10 per cent in enrolment was possible over a period of 28 years. On both scores therefore Bangladesh has a significant lead. Although the UNICEF has noted this performance with satisfaction, we are doubtful if enough has been achieved. We have consistently maintained that any assessment on the basis of number or quantity is bound to give a wrong impression, particularly when the issue in question is education. There are no two opinions about a precipitous fall in our educational standard. A gain of a few percentage points in enrolment or retention (e.g. in primary education) is important but the gain can be negated if the quality of education takes a beating beyond recovery. After all, in education there is no place for such compromises or deception.

It is not for nothing that the present government, in response to a national concern about the falling standard of education, constituted a committee to frame a national education policy. Such a policy is awaiting the final approval. The committee's recommendations are impressive, to say the least. Whether the reorganisations it has sought to bring about in the education system will also lead to qualitative improvement is to be seen. We understand that the policy makers have strong compulsions to achieve the targets they set earlier. For example, the enrolment percentage has to be raised to certain figures within set periods. At least on paper, the targets are shown to have been achieved.

In fact, the challenges before our education are of two distinct types. In essence, though, they are one and inseparable from each other. First, it is the problem of creating the right environment where children can pursue education smoothly and peacefully. Second, bringing about the desired qualitative change at the primary level so that all students get a good start to their pursuit of knowledge. We all know that children of poor families have to drop out before long in the absence of a supportive system. Conversely, they themselves prove to be a helping hand to their parents. Until now no effective social system could be put in place so that the poor families could despense with the young ones' labour. Only a few NGOs have been experimenting with various supportive mechanisms with success of varying degrees. No such prescriptions are known to be incorporated in the government policy to attract or retain children from poor families. Without an effective support system for the socially disadvantaged groups, no education policy can indeed fulfil hundred per cent of its potential.

Then we must admit that the quality of teaching at the primary level leaves much to be desired. Unless qualified teachers take up the responsibility of guiding the young learners, there is little chance that our education will improve. To that end the teaching profession must focus more on merit rather than mere minimum qualifications. The recruitment of teachers has to be free of all kinds of bias, including the influence of money. If these criteria can be maintained, the required number of qualified teachers may still be available. In that case, two painful decisions have to be taken. The one concerns the raise in salary and the other—even if politically inexpedient—is to sack those who fail a standard test devised to judge their capability as teachers. In our kinds of democratic system it is difficult to take such decisions but if we are concerned for our future, we must opt for this painful surgery with a go-ahead signal from political parties across the divide.