

Literacy Priority

It is repeating only a well-worn truism that educationally the nation's position is dismal. We have 43,992 primary schools and the annual primary school enrolment as disclosed by the Education Minister in Parliament is 1 crore 15 lakh children; and the illiteracy figure is about 8 crore out of a population of about 13 crore, which works out at a percentage of about 77%. Independent Bangladesh now about 21 years old has crawled, from around 18% before Bangladesh to somewhere between 20 and 21% in literacy and that in the elementary sense of it i.e. just the rudiments of the 3 R's. This is beneath comparison with even the most backward third world country or countries.

India, for instance, with almost the same poverty problem has moved up to around 36% but most other countries in South and South East Asia are far and away better off in education than Bangladesh. Special mention may be made of the highest among them being S. Korea (92%) North Korea (99%) Taiwan (90%), the Philipines (88%) and, in the Far East, Japan (99%) and China (70%). Pakistan, once a fellow-traveller still remains so in educational progress with 26% which gives it a respectable edge over Bangladesh. Our educational position, nationally, could have been much better had we taken literacy and education a little more seriously. What is worse is that even this modicum of national education now lies in a shambles. Primary school dropout is around 66%, HSC and SSC are no better. Universities stay jammed sessionally, apart from the continual trouble vitiating the campuses all over the country hardly with any exception.

The decline is habitually blamed on poverty by political, social and administrative leaders, government in and government out. This accusation or self-accusation has been seen articulated nearly by all the governments over the past more than two decades of our sovereign independent existence—though the plain fact is it is through education alone that the demon of poverty and ignorance can be tamed. Japan and South Korea, for instance, with their right sense of national priorities equipped their people with education (about 99% each) as speedily as possible and are now perched on the crest of South, South Asian and East Asian prosperity. We have simply muddled out priorities, to find ourselves at the lowest rung of the education ladder and in consequence, steeped in the misery and squalour inseparable from it. We have been thoughtless enough not to do the first thing first over the past 42 years including Pakistan's 24 years. It is not poverty, therefore on which to blame our plight but on the administrative, social and political leadership that has failed the people in the matter of their most vital need.

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Can the same order of leaderships say hand on heart, today, they have radically changed their attitude to the country's education and reformulated their education policy through, among other emergency means a crash programme of; say, ten-to-twenty years to educate the country, to teach up at least with the third most literate third world country or countries. The national budget for the current financial year has allotted a little more than Tk. 12 crore for education.

Even as the first positive response to the demand for education for more than 11 crore people this is a drop in the ocean. Compulsory free primary education for all cannot wait even a day longer. You can no longer turn a blind eye to the fact that practically everything—economy, social discipline, law and order, population explosion and all other means of progress—has, to all intents and purposes, is grinding to a halt. And this is the price we are paying for keeping the nation educationally static through politically quite active and dynamic.