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Meeting The Needs Of Education

Since Independence Bangladesh has struggled with the need to meet the educational requirements of a nation steeped in poverty and with a high population growth. Despite all the efforts access to services remains low and inequitably distributed and the education provided is of poor quality. At the Primary level more than a third of the children of primary school age are not enrolled and most drop out without completing the course. It is mainly for this reason that more than two-thirds of adults today are illiterate.

Opportunities for educational attainment has been biased toward the males and town dwellers resulting in much higher literacy rates for men than women. Twice the number of men are literate than women and twice the number of town dwellers are literate compared to the rural people. Literacy among women is one of the lowest in the world. Only one girl in three enrolls in school and at the other end of the scale less than 2% of women are professionals.

The relevance of education to the social and economic needs of students is low which fails to prepare them for life. Wastage at the secondary level continues to be high. Concentration is focused on academic subjects and insufficient attention is given to basic literacy and numeracy skills. Knowledge of applied science, health, population issues and nutrition is negligible. Those who manage to survive the system and go on for higher education find their lack of knowledge of science channels them into the field of liberal arts which does not find them a place in the job market.

Up to now concentration has been on keeping down expenditure which itself has been, in the main, at the expense of the primary sector, a fact the government is now trying desperately to remedy in order to be ready for the compulsory primary education programme due to begin from January 1, 1991. Group pressure from the secondary sector where about 72% of schools are in private hands makes it difficult for the government to sustain its support to the primary sector and already government subvention of salaries to this sector has reached, an astonishing 70% and increasing nationalisation of these schools extends the financial commitment of the government further which serves to contain the growth of the primary sector and places limits to the extent they can improve.

The rapid growth in the number of children reaching primary school age alone forces the government to increase its spending in this sector by at least 7% per annum if needs are to be met. With the demands of the various sectors in education this means there must be hard choices so as to prevent any gains made so far in primary education from sliding back to ground level. The government recognises that widespread basic literacy is a prerequisite to economic and social development. They are also aware that without substantially improving the quality of education at the primary level, which forms the whole basis of the educational pyramid, no system wide improvement is possible and wastage will increase. At present only 5% of all those enrolled in Class I manage to pass through the system to Class XII and succeed in passing the HSC examination. Recent indications tend to show this figure is declining, possibly to only 3%!

In order to arrest this situation a truly pragmatic approach to primary education is needed to attract the students the present system tends to by-pass and put a halt to the huge number of drop-outs, estimated to be as high as 75% in the primary sector alone and very nearly that high in the secondary sector. Wastage is what increases the per capita cost of education for the nation without substantially increasing the quality of the human resource of the country. Unless the wastage can be taken out of the system at the primary level particularly, it will not be possible to improve either qualitatively, or quantitatively.