

A 8

Free Books

The State Minister for Education has inaugurated in Patuakhali a programme for distribution of books free of charge to the students of primary schools. The ceremony was simple and the event small. But it has implications that are far-reaching.

Primary education in this country has for long been offered free. This means that the students are exempted from paying tuition fees. Other expenses in connection with their education continued to be borne by the parents, who, in many cases and more often than not found it difficult to do so. The support that the recently launched programme hopes to provide to the students would prevent, to an extent, the emergence of circumstances under which parents either find it impossible to send their children to school or are forced to withdraw them at a premature stage.

It is not immediately clear from the press report if books would be made available free of charge to all primary students. If the plan is to keep the programme confined to a group of students or to some selected areas of the country to the exclusion of others, its impact would be less than expected. If this is the case, we hope it is so only temporarily. Finding out an acceptable criterion for selection of either students or areas or both would not be an easy job. If, on the other hand, books are to be handed over to all students un-

der the system, a huge amount of money would be needed. But that would be money well spent.

The State Minister has spoken of the importance of primary education, which is well known, and of that of maintaining an adequate standard, which is not always fully appreciated. Books of a new kind have been written and introduced at the primary level on the recommendation of the National Curriculum and Syllabus Committee, but not many teachers have been freshly trained in the new method. The Primary Training Institutes, admittedly, are too few in number and far too busy with the implementation of their normal programme to meet the challenge. It is nonetheless possible to conceive of a crash programme which would take competent people to villages for providing training of a short duration, but of an intensive kind, to teachers in small batches.

Dropout at the primary level, which used to be nearly seventy per cent of the total enrolment in the recent past, must be prevented as largely as possible. The programme now initiated would be of considerable help in that direction. But then there are other steps to be taken too, and these must be initiated soon. If the attack is not total, partial efforts may not succeed in solving the problem and may even give rise to complications of a different kind.