



The Bangladesh Times

ON PRIMARY EDUCATION

THE issue of primary education was at the centre of an animated discussion during the first private members' day in the current budget session of Parliament. MPs, both independent and in the opposition, strongly argued in favour of free and compulsory education up to the standard of class eight. Their reasons included a fear that less than eight years in school would not give the nation the functional literacy which it requires for speeding up economic and social development.

The MPs said providing free primary education would be a fulfilment of a pledge in the constitution and the government had an obligation to meet the constitutional provision. Thursday's debate brought the situation in the primary education sector out in the open. Education Minister Sheikh Shahidul Islam said a major project had been taken to repair the primary schools which had been severely battered by last year's floods. More than 1500 schools have been categorized as the worst affected educational institutions. It is obvious that if these schools are not reconstructed quickly enough, many primary students will not be able to continue their studies. It is possible that many of them will join the vast multitudes of dropouts at the primary and middle school levels.

It is a known fact that poor rural parents do not feel any encouragement to keep their children, particularly daughters, in school. The Education Minister assured the House that the government was pondering various incentives so that children from poor and landless families stay in school longer.

One of these incentives which have been planned jointly by the government and the UNFPA is the arrangement of low interest agricultural loans to families who keep at least one of their female children at school. This monetary incentive should be useful. Similar incentive packages should be planned for male children in pockets of extremely low literacy rates in the country.

Non-formal education is always being promoted as a means of giving fresh blood to the literacy campaign. The extent of illiteracy and the constraints on the educational infrastructure require that some informal methods are also utilized along with formal educational systems. The informal methods have been successful in some developing countries and there are already models existing within the country which should be tested on a national scale.

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