

## PRIMARY EDUCATION

The Dhaka Metropolitan Police has invited applications for the position of apprentice women constables from those who have passed the Secondary School Certificate examination. If we juxtapose this against the situation obtaining in the country till the other day when the policemen were mainly illiterate, an encouraging picture emerges. The police force then used to have an insignificant fraction of 'literate constables'. The history of woman police in Bangladesh does not date back even two decades and this is because of the fact that women are far behind men in education. The leap in the educational level of the constables thus speaks of substantial progress achieved in the education sector.

But the picture is not all that rosy. More than three quarters of our population of nearly 115 million are still illiterate and a number of indicators are dismaying. The rate of enrolment in primary schools declined from 62 per cent of the children of a given age group in 1984 to 59 per cent in 1987. The ratio of teachers to students also dropped from one teacher to 53 students to one teacher to 60 students over the same period. The deterioration in the quality of teaching and learning, particularly in educational institutions located in rural areas, is known to all. According to an expert, nearly 9,000 secondary schools of the country suffered from total failure to very poor successes in the secondary school certificate examinations held in 1989 while only 53 schools, all located in cities, bagged the first twenty positions (held by 142 candidates) of the four boards.

There is a growing realisation that the nation cannot reach the desired level of economic progress keeping a large segment of the population illiterate. Therefore, it is time the realisation was backed by appropriate corrective policy measures.

The government is committed to the objective of "Education for all by the year 2000". President Ershad reiterated the commitment while speaking at the first meeting of the newly set up National Education Advisory Council (NEAC) on Sunday last. He emphasised that the nation should accomplish the task of half a century within the span of a decade and this would be possible only if all the educated people were associated with the process. The President also made some pragmatic suggestions like introduction of extra shifts in the existing schools and voluntary services by the already serving teachers besides utilising the educated unemployed youth.

The NEAC has been set up with representatives from different walks of life to review the present educational environment and its problems and recommend remedial measures besides suggesting ways of better implementation of compulsory primary education programme.

It is accepted on all hands that a planned strategy, backed by national consensus, was necessary for bringing about basic and qualitative change in the education system. The budget allocation for education sector has been increased from Taka 304 crore in 1981-82 to Taka 1,328 crore for the current financial year. The allocation for development of education would be further increased during the next five-year plan.

A legislation has been adopted for making education compulsory upto Class V and free for girls upto Class VIII outside the municipal areas. The NEAC would identify flaws, if any, either in the education system or in these programmes.

In the context of the endemic poverty in the country the educational objectives could not be achieved by legislation alone. We could not bring all the children to schools by declaring primary education compulsory. Possibly incentives like free books, uniform and tiffin, in addition to free tuition, may encourage more parents and their children to attend schools. Besides, the programme has to be supplemented by mass literacy campaign for the adult population.