

PRIMARY EDUCATION

The government on Thursday reiterated its pledge to implement the programme of compulsory universal primary education. Speaking in Parliament Prime Minister Kazi Zafar Ahmed declared that the law which had been earlier adopted by the House on the introduction of compulsory primary education would be implemented from January next year. The enormity of the task requires that the process of implementation is completed in phases. There is need for injection of massive funds into the programme. It is evident that the government has the political commitment to go for such investments in basic education.

The task is complicated by the fact that the primary education infrastructure is not well developed in all parts of the country. There are areas where facilities like classrooms and other educational aids are not available. The government is apparently prepared to provide these facilities where these are not present. The World Bank is ready to finance the programme to the extent of 110 million taka in the new financial year. This will defray a part of the costs of building classrooms in remote rural areas and repair schools which had been badly devastated by the last two great floods. The remaining expenditure has to be met from domestic resources for which the people should be ready to share the burden of this expenditure.

One positive aspect of the primary education sector is that there is a national consensus on the merits of introducing compulsory and free primary education in the country. Both the government and the opposition parties are agreed to the issue of increasing literacy rate and enhancing the scope for children's education. In such a strong political opinion in favour of primary education, the government should not find it difficult to mobilise domestic resources for funding free education schemes. Inside Parliament, members from the Opposition spoke strongly in favour of bolstering the primary education programme and lauded the government's efforts at raising national literacy levels.

The benefits from investments in basic education is manifold. It has been proved in both developed and developing countries that the return from these investments can be seen in higher economic productivity, better health conditions and lower birth rates. There is a co-relation between high population growth rate of a country and its literacy level. So, in fact, investments in primary education should be considered as investments for higher GDP and lower population growth. It is advocated sometimes that funds meant directly for population programmes can be diverted to basic education programmes because they have a direct bearing on birth rates.

Because of an already existing high illiteracy rate, there is no other alternative but to go for non-formal education. Such a system can draw within its net those who have been out of the primary education system. Several Bangladeshi models of non-formal education have been successful at home and are being copied abroad. It proves that Bangladeshi innovation can be used for tackling development problems which are common in many Third World countries.

A major problem in primary education is the high dropout rate. This is an area where development planners and specialists have to concentrate their efforts. While it is difficult to bring all the school-going children within the educational network, the dropout rate deprived the nation from the benefits of the programme. A package of incentives may be considered for keeping more students on the register. These may include in the rural areas access to bank credits and agricultural inputs for parents of school-children in rural areas. Another incentive can be free medical care for the entire family.

Primary education can be redesigned to make it appropriate to the problems of life in the rural areas. This should make primary education more attractive to the students and keep more of them in the school.