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Primary education in complete mess

By BORHANUDDIN AHMED

The independent MP from Barguna Nurul Islam Moni's resolution for making 5-year primary education compulsory by 1990 for all children between six to ten was as usual voted out on 25.5.89, proving once again that it was a sham Parliament.

But he has done a service by reminding the nation that the literacy rate had declined to 19.70 from 22 per cent in 1971-72. The number of the illiterates was five crore in 1979, seven crore in 1982 and nine crore in 1989. According to him the number of students who did not complete the five-year course had reached nearly eighty per cent so that every year seventy to eighty lakh people were joining the number of the illiterates.

In the circumstances he

thought it was impossible to make universal primary education compulsory by the year 2000 AD. Another independent member from Bagerhat had urged that the scope of primary education should be extended to class VII to make it meaningful.

In reply the dutiful Education Minister Sheikh Shahidul Islam referred to the political will and the determination of president H. M. Ershad to make primary education compulsory for which a bill was under contemplation.

Free and Compulsory education to all children is a constitutional requirement. But in Bangladesh the constitution is a mere scrap of paper. It can be changed, altered and mutilated. Even murderers

can be guaranteed immunity from prosecution.

Prime Minister Moudud Ahmed told a Parliamentary committee meeting on 22.2.89 that the present literacy rate of 26 per cent was to be raised to sixty per cent during the next five years by admitting seventy per cent children of school going age by 1990.

According to the ongoing second primary education project (1985-90) it was intended to increase primary school enrolment particularly of girls from 60 to 70 per cent of the 6-10 age group and to ensure that those who enrolled completed the 5-year primary cycle and to improve the internal efficiency of primary schools through better management, effective supervision and improved instruction.

To encourage increase in enrolment the scheme provided for free text books to all enrolled primary children from class I to class V at an annual cost of some thirty crore taka.

According to a leading article in a Bengali daily dated

23.5.87 it has been alleged that the paper supplied by the UNICEF for the purpose of printing textbooks for primary schools is substituted by inferior quality material resulting in loss of quality.

The World Bank, the other donor of the project is also insisting upon privatisation of the text book trade on pain of withdrawing aid altogether. However the bank did not object when contrary to its policy of financing educational software like textbook and curriculum development, funds were diverted toward the creation of an entire engineering set-up, in duplication of the public works department, the expense of primary education.

The threat of withdrawal is therefore more theatrical because the donors would not like to lose a powerful weapon of twisting our tail.

Besides foreign aid is now an industry which serves the political and financial interests of many people who accordingly join in its support and administration. The staff of member and consultants of the

U. N. and its affiliates have become a powerful lobby. Foreign aid also secures them impressive and lucrative positions.

However, to revert to our subject, out of about 2 crore children of school going age about 90 lakh students are enrolled. At the rate of 2 per cent a year, the number of children of school-going age will be 2 and a half crore by 2000 AD. To accommodate all the children of school-going age it will be necessary to build 77000 additional schools besides the 44000 in existence.

Such an expansion does not seem to be feasible in the context of the past performance of the Primary Education Project which has merely helped the foreign experts and the officials of the international agencies involved.

The universal primary education remains in the doldrums because of a lack of political will. There cannot be any development unless the effective literacy rate is raised to 70 per cent. All the talk about development that we hear about us is bullshit.

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