

পঞ্জিয় ১৫. D.E.C. 1995

গুরু কলাম

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A REVOLUTION IN EDUCATION

The Bangladesh government administered food for education programme has earned widespread international appreciation. The programme has been highly praised by representatives of different foreign governments, donor agencies, NGOs and famous personalities. Even the US First Lady, Hilary Clinton, praised the programme after witnessing it and several times referred to this hugely, successful programme being run by Bangladesh in different forums. Even President Clinton mentioned the food for education programme, along with the Grameen Bank, as the two most happy developments seen in Bangladesh. The Grameen Bank has a rather long history. By comparison the food for education programme has a fairly recent origin and is only as old as the tenure of the present government. But for its short-lived existence, this programme has been phenomenally successful.

It has been estimated that nearly 35 lakhs children of some two thousand and five hundred unions of the country have been benefited on a lasting basis from the operation of this programme. Prior to the introduction of the programme, the drop out rate among primary school children was quite high. But after the introduction of the programme a revolution of sorts was achieved in cutting down the drop out rate. In many unions of the country where the food for education scheme is operating in full gear, the drop out phenomenon has almost ceased to exist.

The reasons for the same are not hard to find. In the past, governments did not go beyond providing free text books to primary school children in the way of incentives. But the present government made a radical departure from the past and sought to find out the exact reasons for the drop out tendency and then decided to treat the malaise at the source. It was revealed, for instance, that the basic reason for the high drop out rate of children was parents' inability to sustain them in schools. The parents considered that given their poverty circumstances, it was a waste of time for

their children to be in schools. The amount of time children would be in schools could be utilised gainfully by them in earning something for family sustenance, according to the parents calculation. But such calculations changed drastically with the start of the food for education programme. Each child, now enrolled in the programme, is assured a minimum of 20 kgs of foodgrains, on a monthly basis. This amount is notably greater than what a child could expect to earn from doing labour by dropping out of the school. The monthly supplies of food thus received is proving to be not only adequate for the children beneficiaries, but in some cases helping entire families to improve their family diets or nourishment. Considering all of these factors, the parents are finding it quite rewarding to keep on sending their children to schools instead of letting them stray and work.

The programme therefore has multiple benefits. On the one hand it is helping to broaden the base of primary education through the creation of new incentives. On the other hand, it is ensuring that children who are coming to schools would keep on coming to school and completing their school education. Needless to say, the entire drive for literacy and education in the country is getting a big boost in this way. Besides, the nutritional state of the children is improving and also that of members of their families. The other spin-offs from the process are greater consciousness of rural families to modernizing influences due to education. The dissemination of vital ideas of population control, late marriage, environmental safety, health, hygiene, etc. all start flowing at a faster rate into hitherto unenlightened backward village societies through the education train. The cumulative effects of education's spread are far greater than what are apparently visible. The dividends of education are really paid in phases—in the short, medium and long terms. Bangladesh will reap the full benefits of its current revolutionary programmes in the spread and consolidation of education some years from now.

It should be realized that investment in education is always the best form of investment. This government has achieved a great deal like no other in line with this cardinal principle.