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PRIMARY EDUCATION

Education has long been recognised as a central element in development. Besides raising the level of training and expanding the size of skilled manpower, education upgrades political and social consciousness. The impact of both the processes is profound on maintenance of peace and harmony in the society and stimulating economic activities. The development strategy of a least developed country like Bangladesh has, therefore, to accord the highest priority to education. Incidentally, this community has been toying with the idea of universal primary education for over half a century now though progress to that end so far is most dismal. Despite all our efforts more than three quarters of the populace continue to be illiterate.

It is accepted on all hands that primary education is the key to solving the problem and primary education received due emphasis in all our development plans and has also been pursued through specific programmes. An available assessment of one such programme—the Universal Primary Education and Eradication of Illiteracy (UPE)—however, gives no cause for satisfaction.

Launched in 1985, the programme aims at achieving the twin objectives by the year 2000 but it still seems an uphill task. The enrolment rate of primary schools rose at a snail's pace from 63 per cent in 1973 to 66 per cent in 1987. The impact of that small rise was also set off by the rise in the rate of drop-out. It climbed to 61 per cent from 48 during the period. The expansion of physical facilities between 1985 and 1988 has also been meagre. And as of now about a third of the total 68,000 villages have no primary schools and most of the existing schools in rural areas are in dilapidated condition.

Education Minister Sheikh Shahidul Islam recalled, at a function in Dhaka in observance of the World Children's Day this year, that the right to education was one of the ten-point declaration made by the United Nations for children and said laws were being prepared for compulsory primary education in the country. But reports of lack of physical facilities and shortage of teachers in primary schools continue to come from different parts of the country. There are also questions of competence of the teachers already on the job and a suggestion has been made for screening and finding alternative jobs for those found unsuitable. However, the more urgent need is to fill up the vacancies with capable hands. The process of weeding, if initiated right now, would worsen the situation that is already bad enough.

A suggestion for encouraging private initiative in setting up primary schools is worth serious consideration. As an incentive, the school or the library or a class room may be named after those who donate land or substantial amounts to the school fund. The management of the schools may be entrusted with the local community and a healthy competition introduced in the neighbourhood for running the respective institutions better. Some thoughts should also be given to school feeding programmes, supply of uniforms and other necessities for attracting and retaining students from poorer families. In view of the overriding importance of primary education, every effort should be made to ensure a liberal flow of funds for the sector.

34