

The Primary Problem

The drop-out problem at the primary school level came up for discussion at a five-day national seminar recently concluded in Dhaka. Among the findings is a 67% drop-out in primary schools, by far the largest proportion of it happening as early as class one. The average annual enrolment over the years since 1981 through 1986 has been around one crore. This is a far cry from the total need of primary education for a population of about 100 million. Both in concept and performance this is also nowhere near universal primary education.

Against such a background of overall inadequacy, with its direct effect on the national literacy rate (23%); the drop-out rate of 67% poses a problem of basic education, to be examined from two points: first, what is, or are the reasons for such a collapse right at the beginning of a child's career at school; second, national resources, their public investment and the return they bring as well as the way it accounts for the level of development staying more or less at the same level over the past decade or so.

Experts at the seminar blamed the decline, among other factors, on poverty and the need of a family for the child to be taken off school and employed to earn for the family. But the heart of the problem lies elsewhere: To start with, the parent's priorities are at variance with the administration's. And the paradox is: the poverty itself could be a stronger incentive for the parent to keep his child at school if he could hope that the latter would soon be fitted out as an earning member for the family. As it is, he has to wait long enough for his ward to complete at least his S.S.C. or graduation to obtain a certificate to be eligible for a job. And the prospect of getting one remains as uncertain as ever under present dispensations.

General education as distinct from technical or vocational education has compounded not only the problem of unemployment but also acts as a discouragement, particularly for the marginally-living rural population, to go in for an education that holds out little or no prospect of removing his poverty. More. Spread over at least a decade, the burden of expenses runs him into debt. Give him a plan of education that will equip the child with technical and vocational training soon enough for finding a job or to do something on his own to earn.

So the need is for recasting the present system of education, form and content,—and to introduce at the end, of the primary stage (from class I to class VIII) if not earlier curricula based on vocational education and technical training in the various skills and trades from catering to motor mechanics; and to provide schools and institutions for the same. This would relieve not only the pressure laid by the drop-outs on the socio-economic fabric. It will also open up a cheerful prospect of employment or self-employment.

The other question is that of resources and their use in achieving the objectives outlined: It is of course necessary that the present average of 3.5% of the total development expenditure, devoted to education has to be upped enough to finance literacy as the first national priority. But complementary resources could come—and ought to come—from private sources. The industries and technical firms as well as other private sources can be a big element in this task of initiating and spreading vocational education for the left-overs from education. This is what most advanced countries in the East and West are doing—a public-private collaboration in the promotion of education with a thrust on training in vocational and technical skills.

The fact is we have to get our priorities right, keeping in view the fact that the rate of growth is always in exact proportion to the rate of education in any society. Japan with its 99% literacy or China with its 70% (in Asia) are a direct illustration of this literacy-growth ratio.