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FUNCTIONAL LITERACY DRIVE

Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia has sanctioned a special fund for the implementation of a literacy programme with the help of newly admitted Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology (BUET) students. So bogged down are our higher seats of learning by session jams that the graduate entrants of BUET would have to wait over a year before they can start classes. The interim period could well be used in community service with each of the 550 students undertaking the responsibility of making ten people functionally literate. The students would be trained for the purpose and the necessary educational aids supplied to join the literacy programme—a two-hour class every day for a period of six months. The spirit of the programme is to supplement the government's greater literacy drive and is a really commendable one, deserving as many replications as possible with groups of unemployed or underemployed people.

A three-year non-formal functional education programme (NEP) for some eight lakh unlettered has already been launched this May on an experimental basis in 43 thanas, as part of the government's Expanded Integrated Non-formal Education Programme (EINEP) designed to reach the majority of the population by the end of this century. We can be optimistic even if a fraction of the enthusiasm perceived during Late President Ziaur Rahman's mass education programme can be restored today.

Perhaps one of the most unfortunate actions taken by Hussain Mohammad Ershad was to axe Zia's simple but effective "each-one-teach-one" method. In a short span of time his mass education strategy had gathered a wonderful momentum, reaching literacy skills to as many unschooled girls and boys as there were SSC examinees during the period, and at virtually no cost.

A revival of that school programme would not be unjustified if we consider the participatory aspect which undeniably has a positive effect on the young school graduates. It was in effect a kind of hands-on training in community service and, when properly initiated, could have a profound influence on their relationship with the motherland.

It is reassuring that EINEP which is running the NEP, is designed to include some participatory element and involves the target community a great deal. NEP goals are to strengthen adult literacy through continuing education, bring back drop-outs and introduce a pre-primary education system in the rural areas.

The NEP experiment which started about four months ago through 1,720 literacy centres in 43 thanas is said to be getting an encouraging response from the target people. The centres are housed in schools, madrasahs, office buildings, outhouses and the like, and the teachers are from the locality—retired school teachers, the educated unemployed and trained imams—who are given a token payment every month. Paid supervisors monitor progress while a five-member Literacy Centre Management Committee (LCMC), made up of local leaders, is available for the management of the premises.

The NEP model is essentially designed like the trail blazing BRAC (Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee) schools which have proved, through 6000 non-formal primary education centres, that it is possible to reach basic education effectively and inexpensively with the minimum of facilities. But teachers' attitudes, appropriate learning materials, school timings and community participation all play very important roles.

Such an approach is not new. Akther Hamid Khan, the stalwart in development education, had given the same lesson through his feeder school concept in Comilla in the sixties. Unfortunately, with his departure the education programme lost momentum.

Informal functional education needs to be taken as a social movement. We cannot hope to achieve Universal Primary Education (UPE), which is a fundamental and constitutional right, unless non-formal adult education is intensified. Reforms in the formal primary education sector and expansion of informal adult education programme must be given equal priority. The Education Ministry should immediately start reform programmes such as re-training teachers, building new schools in deprived rural areas, enforcement of teachers' attendance, outlawing illegal charges, providing evening classes everywhere for working children, designing curriculum to meet practical needs and the like.

In the mass-literacy programme we should utilise the available manpower. While the idea of utilising the services of 'students-in-waiting' of BUET may be termed as excellent, we should explore other possibilities. For instance we may like to requisition the services of those who can spare time. Services of persons who are not engaged in day to day administration or otherwise, such as some of the defence personnels, in peace time, can be usefully utilised in this noble cause. By this we can make spectacular progress with virtually no expense. Talking of expense, our democratic govt has already proved what importance it attaches to the sector.

Expenditure on education should be seen as an investment that yields precious dividends. And the sooner we appreciate this, the better for the nation's human resource development efforts.