

অসমি ... 29 MAY 1989
পৃষ্ঠা ... 53

95

(15)

Compulsory Primary Education

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THE Ministry of Education in collaboration with UNICEF and SIDA recently organized a seminar at BARD, Comilla on the theme: Universal Primary Education (UPE) during 90's. The Seminar was inaugurated by the Minister for Education, presided over the inauguration as well as the first business session. The seminar was attended by 90 participants including educationists, planners, administrators, specialists of primary education, journalists, teachers and representatives of teachers' association, donors' representatives and some eminent personalities of the country. The seminar, among others, recommended enacting compulsory laws for attaining the goals of UPE as it thought useful to pave the way for attaining UPE in the country.

Compulsory primary education is a long debated and much politicised issue. Ever since the British rule in the sub-continent there has been a persistent demand for the introduction of compulsory education. Various commissions and committees rationalized the issue. At times apologetics were put up for not introducing it. Excellent enactments were made to provide for compulsory primary education. But there was lack of stability of policy in the implementation of the programme resulting in non-fulfillment of the demand of UPE.

The validity of the foregoing assumptions may be tested by examining the major educational documents of successive period: the British period, the Pakistan period and the Bangladesh period. The article will make an endeavour to put up the findings of the major documents in a bid to test the validity of the assumptions in the preceding paragraph.

British period

The Auxiliary Committee of the Indian Statutory Commission in their review of the growth of Education in India stated in 1929 that with the exception of Burma, all the provinces of India have, by legislation, indicated their acceptance of the principle of compulsory primary education. The provincial enactments have varied in their scope and character but it is clear that India as a whole realized that the goal of UPE cannot be attained without the adoption of the principle of compulsion. Since the late Mr. Gokhale's bill in the Imperial Council in 1911, the leaders of public opinion have constantly urged the need of compulsion. The evidence furnished to the Committee by different provinces indicated no hostility to the proposal

except on the ground of finance, mentioned the committee.

As to the state of compulsion in the then India, the committee stated that the majority of the legislative enactments left the adoption of compulsion to local option. Experiences in Bengal and to a lesser extent in other provinces showed that local option might result in almost complete inaction on the part of the local authorities for a considerable period of time to come, commented the commission. It seemed clear to the committee that a mere enabling statute would not provide any guarantee for the speedy and widespread application of compulsion. The committee opined that the responsibility for mass education rested primarily with the state and the provision of education facilities for all classes of community and for all areas should not be left entirely to the mercy of local authorities who might be unwilling either for political or other reasons to initiate schemes by which compulsion might be financed or because of backwardness of the area or the people they might be unwilling to devise suitable measures for compulsion on their own initiative.

Following the statutory committee's report, provinces of India made enactments for compulsory primary education in their respective areas. The notable enactment in this part of the subcontinent was the Bengal (Rural) Primary Education Act of 1930. The Act provided to make primary education "compulsory within ten years". The Act also provided for the constitution of the District School Board in each district consisting of officials and non-officials and with a majority of non-official members. The main duty of this body was to survey educational needs of the district concerned and to adopt a programme of expansion and improvement of Primary Education. Article 56 of the Act enunciated as follows: "If the (provincial government), after consulting the Board concerned is satisfied that there is adequate provision for primary education in any area for which a union Board, union committee has been constituted, it may be notification shall be compulsory within such area". For the purpose of carrying out its function, the Act gave the Board authority to introduce compulsory education and to finance it with the help of educational cess and grants which the government undertook to pay. The Bengal (Rural) Primary Education Act of 1930 was a comprehensive document providing for, among other things, responsibil-

ity of the guardians in matters of compulsory attendance of his wards to schools, conditions exempting attendance, constitution of the committee to enforce attendance. During the period upto 1947 in which year the British rule in India came to an end with the creation of two independent states India and Pakistan, the progress of compulsion in this part of the subcontinent was disappointing. Compulsory for operation at all. In 1944, the Report of the Central Advisory Board of Education recommended as follows: "A system of universal compulsory and free education for all boys and girls between the age of six and fourteen should be introduced as speedily as possible though in view of the demand for recruiting large number of trained teachers it might not be possible to complete it in less than forty years".

Pakistan Period

Pakistan came into being in 1947. East Bengal constituted one of the provinces of Pakistan. Enactments were made in various provinces for introducing compulsion in primary education.

The East Bengal Educational system reconstruction committee of 1949 in its Report recommended as follows: "In our opinion, primary education the this province should be universal and free Compulsory Primary Education should have the highest priority in the province's nation building programme".

The Educational Reforms Commission East Pakistan 1957 recommend, interalia, as follows: A system of universal and free education for all boys and girls between the ages of 6 to 14 years should be introduced within the course of next 15 years, if not earlier.

The National Education Commission of 1959 opined that compulsory education at the elementary stage was indispensable for skilled manpower and educated citizenry. For this at least eight year's of compulsory schooling was required and the target should be to achieve five years of compulsory schooling within a period of ten years and eight years of schooling within a total period of 15 years.

Two important enactments of this period in this part of the country were the Bengal (Rural) Primary Education (East Bengal Amendment) Act 1951 and compulsory Primary Education (Sylhet) Act 1951. The purpose of these Acts was to make better provision for introducing, under the direct administra-

tion of the provincial government, compulsory Primary Education in East Bengal including the district of Sylhet. On the basis of the Acts, a scheme providing for introducing compulsory primary education named as "Compulsory Primary Education scheme East Bengal" was prepared. The scheme provided that the age group 6-11 years would be introduced in a ten-year period. Under the scheme, every year one union of each thana would be taken up by government for introduction of compulsory primary education in the provinces. Such unions would then come out from the District School Board and come under direct management of the Government. Detailed provisions were made for implementation of compulsory primary education programme. It may be mentioned here that out of a total of 3945 unions, a total of 792 union (including 64 primary education circles in Sylhet) were taken up under the scheme. In these unions there were 5000 primary schools with 15000 teachers. The scheme was dropped after two years.

Bangladesh Period

Bangladesh emerged as an independent country on 16th December 1971 and the first Commission on National Education (Kudret-E-Khuda Commission) recommended as follows: The education of the children from grade I to VIII should be taken as primary stage which may be made compulsory in two phases, upto grade V by 1980 and upto grade VIII by 1983.

The importance to compulsory primary education need not be over-emphasized. In those countries where a marked progress in national wealth had taken place, this progress could be dated from the time when schooling was made compulsory. Such education is known to be the only certain means by which universal literacy can be attained within community and the only way through which talents of the gifted children can be located so that they may be guided into further courses of study.

Compulsory primary education also concomitant of democracy. Democracy requires that its citizen can distinguish between the claims of rival political parties, can interpret news intelligently and critically. Contribution of compulsory primary education to the creation of educated citizenry may be enormous. In view of the ensuing 4th plan (1990-95), question now arises as to whether our country primary education be made compulsory.