

The Bangladesh Times

PRIMARY EDUCATION

The literacy rate in the country today is 23 per cent according to the statistics made available at a recent seminar in the city on 'compulsory primary education and mass education to achieve education for all'. That indicates a move forward though not at the desired pace. The comparable figure for 1981 and 1974 are 19.7 and 20.2 respectively. Incidentally the yardstick of literacy in 1974 census was ability to read and write any language while in 1981 a person was treated as literate if he could write a letter in any language. The fall in the overall literacy rate despite substantial progress is accounted for by the higher standard applied.

The other statistics revealed at the seminar would, however, cause concern. The absolute number of the illiterates swelled by 19.2 million during the 15 years ending 1987 against an increase of only 5.8 million in the category of literates. The number of illiterates doubled between 1951 and 1986 rising from 30.6 million to 61.8 million. This again is partly balanced by the steady increase in enrolment at the primary level. Already the number enrolled as percentage of the age group has reached 70 and that's the target for the decade. A programme for reducing the percentage of dropouts is also in hand.

It is encouraging that the expenditure on the primary education sector has been progressively increasing. The share of the primary sector was only Tk 340 million out of the total development outlay of Taka 2895 million during the period from 1973 to 1980 representing only around 12 per cent. It rose to Tk 2375 million out of a total of Tk 5397 million in the second plan period representing almost 45 per cent. The share in the current plan amounts to Tk 5380 million out of 11,700 million which is around 46 per cent.

However, the task ahead is tremendous. As of now a third of the children of the school going age are not enrolled in any school and the number will rise with increase in population. If educational facilities are not increased meanwhile, the situation will worsen. It has been estimated that Bangladesh will need 22,776 more primary schools and 1,07,443 more teachers by the turn of the century to make primary education available to all the children. Prof M Shamsul Haq, former Vice Chancellor of Dhaka University and Member, University Grants Commission in a study pointed out that a total of 70,000 schools each with an enrolment of 250 and a teaching complement of 3,50,000 would be needed to handle 175 million learners at the primary level by the year 2000. There are 57,224 primary schools at present. The construction of new school buildings needs to be speeded up and double shifts introduced wherever necessary. The suggestions for organising short vocational training courses for those who would leave studies after the primary level and introducing uniform courses abolishing 'ibtadai' system and incorporating 'diniat' as a compulsory subject for all merits serious consideration.

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