

PRIMARY SCHOOL
DROPOUTS

A news story run by this paper Tuesday last about dropouts in primary schools in the country might make the concerned quarters uneasy. The picture it paints is based on official documents. The commitment for universal primary education has been there for quite some time and it has been getting high priority in the development plans. But resource constraints, shortage of trained teachers, inadequate physical facilities and above all lack of proper attitude have made the task too difficult.

The Education Commission headed by Dr. Kudrat-e-Khuda recommended (1974) to make education from grade I to V, then available free, as compulsory by 1980 and education up to grade VIII free and compulsory by 1983. We are today nowhere near the recommended target for 1980 what to say of 1983.

There has of course been progress meanwhile. The administration of primary education has been strengthened with the establishment of a directorate for primary education and appointment of Assistant Upazila Education Officers. The physical facilities improved with establishment of new schools, expansion of class rooms, arrangements of water supply and toilet and distribution of text books and uniform among the students. The training of teachers had also had attention.

The continuation of the high rate of dropout, however, indicate social attitude. This has more to do in the expansion of education and removal of illiteracy than mere physical facilities. Besides the utility of having older children around to help elders in the poorer farming families in desperate economic situation also saps all interest for educating children. It is difficult to make any dent in illiterate families without bringing about social changes.

The latest Ministry of Education document reveal not more than a third of the students enrolled in grade I of primary schools complete the five year course. The World Bank statistics last year said only 23 per cent of the primary students could reach the fifth grade. It said one-third of the "students" of the first grade were easily discouraged by the overcrowded class rooms and inadequate teaching. An earlier joint study conducted by Unicef and Unesco showed that the dropout rate was almost 80 per cent till 1980.

The annual dropout rate, according to official sources, was 22 per cent in 1985; it came down to 18 in 1986 and to 13.18 in 1987. A survey conducted in November however showed the dropout rate at 47 and identified poverty, illiteracy, superstition, sickness, lack of physical facilities and other social conditions among causes of high rate of dropout.

Though it has been claimed that the retention of students in primary education has risen to 35 in 1988 from 20 in 1980, it will be admitted that the goal of universal primary education cannot be achieved without tackling the high rate of dropout. The problem of dropout needs in-depth study and the plan of the Ministry for additional funds merits serious consideration. There should meanwhile be serious efforts to enlist all children of primary age group in schools, for which there is both consensus and commitment.