

Text of Zia's speech at C'wealth seminar on primary education

Following is the full text of President Ziaur Rahman's speech at the inaugural session of the Commonwealth regional seminar on universal primary education in Asia and Pacific, reports RSS.

Mr. Chairman, distinguished delegates, excellencies ladies and gentlemen.

I am happy to learn that the Commonwealth Secretariat has chosen Bangladesh to host the Commonwealth regional seminar on universal primary education in Asia and the Pacific and it is my particular pleasure to welcome you all to our country. I am gratified to note that although the majority of the delegates come from fellow Asian nations, there are also representatives from other parts of the Commonwealth who will, I am sure, add the wisdom of their own experience to your deliberations.

During the period of its existence the Commonwealth Secretariat has held numerous conferences at ministerial and official levels which have done so much to analyse common problems and put forward solutions amongst these conferences the Commonwealth education conferences have been of particular value.

But by their very nature they have tended to deal with global issues and it is gratifying therefore to see the emergence of regional conferences such as this one which can get to grips with more specific matters of regional concern.

UNIVERSAL

It is particularly appropriate that this seminar, whose theme is universal primary education, should be taking place in Dacca. The government of Bangladesh is currently giving its attention to the preparation of its second Five-Year Plan 1980-85 and its perspective plan 1980-2000. In considering the education sector of these plans we have come to the conclusion that primary education must receive the utmost priority.

It is now realised that the policies pursued in the 1950s and 1960s, which placed particular faith in the expansion of secondary and higher education, have mostly proved costly in terms of expenditure and less than effective in terms of investment. Remarkable changes which have taken place in the present decade have upset many of the comfortable theories and assumptions on which our former plans were based.

It is not only the poorer countries which are now anxiously reviewing their educational systems.

WEALTHY NATIONS

Even the wealthy nations have had their confidence undermined and are painfully re-appraising their policies in the light of diminishing natural resources, uncontrolled inflation and mounting unemployment.

Recent advances in industrial technology have brought within reach the prospect of transferring most of the repetitive and dull tasks of production from the hands of human beings to automated machinery.

The effects of this new technological revolution on people's lives have yet to be assessed but will certainly be profound and educational policies will be profoundly altered.

EQUITABLE ECONOMIC SYSTEM

Meanwhile the less advantaged nations are looking for a more equitable world economic system to emerge from the present state of chaotic inequa-

lity, it has also become evident that foreign aid is not an effective substitute for self-help it can facilitate the implementation of indigenous development but it cannot provide long-term solutions.

This need then to mobilise our own resources is the basis for our present political endeavours. The educational system plays a vital role in political change hence our present concern with shaping a system to meet the challenges of the future.

In this respect we in Bangladesh see primary education as a crucial factor in the development of democracy at the village level and the encouragement of the spirit of self-reliance.

It is interesting to note that international and bilateral agencies are beginning to shift their emphasis in the education sector from prestige institution-building projects to the more mundane but more important field of primary schooling.

The World Bank for example during the period 1970-74 devoted only 4.5 per cent of its educational expenditure to primary education. During the period 1975-83 it proposes to increase this allocation to 24 per cent.

SOCIAL RESOLUTION

As I mentioned earlier Bangladesh is in the process of a social revolution. This can only be achieved if there is also a major change in the direction of education. Our system must be adapted to produce the attitude of mind and skills which are needed to make the best of our own resources and to attain the maximum benefit from the foreign assistance which is offered to us.

None of these objectives can be realised unless our basic education is broad in scope and sound in content. We therefore look forward eagerly to the outcome of this conference in the anticipation that it will give us both guidance and inspiration in our forthcoming efforts to expand and improve our primary education.

Over the past few years, at conference like this and in the writings of many distinguished people the economic managerial training and curricular problems of education have been exhaustively identified and examined.

Many valuable solutions have been put forward to these problems. But as we all know, the real difficulty arises when we attempt to apply these remedies. For ultimately we are dealing with human beings and a remote authority cannot impose solutions on a reluctant populace however good and well intentioned these solutions may be.

For a reform (a revolution if you like) to be successful it must have the active support and co-operation of the bulk of the population. How we set about this task of education for educational changes is a topic which this seminar may perhaps consider. Educational systems are notoriously slow to change. And even educationists are not entirely exempt from the charge that yesterday's revolutionaries become today's conservatives.

VESTED INTERESTS

The channel of educational reform is blocked by huge boulders of vested interests which must be shifted before the flood waters of progress can be released. So it appears to me that a massive re-appraisal of our attitudes is necessary beginning with our academic and educational theoreticians and filtering down through the whole of society.

The cry 'what was good enough for our grandfathers is good enough for our sons and daughters' is no longer appropriate and is patently untrue. But let us not delude ourselves that the present system can be radically changed overnight although this seems to be the assumption behind many programmes in education.

Even in the wealthiest countries educational innovation has taken decades to achieve general acceptance. What we set out to begin today is unlikely to be fulfilled until the next generation. But that is no excuse for not making a start.

And the sooner we start the sooner our young people and our country will benefit.

In conclusion I would like to refer to some matters that concern us in Bangladesh but which I feel sure have wider implications. First there is the content of the primary school curriculum. In many countries the curriculum is little more than a pious hope impossible of implementation either because the teachers or facilities do not exist or because it is so comprehensive that there are insufficient school hours to cover it.

BASIC SKILLS

Bearing in mind that primary education will be terminal for the majority of people for years to come the curriculum must provide two essentials. First it must inculcate those basic skills—the ability to read to write to calculate to measure—on which all subsequent personal and national development depends. Secondly the school must actively encourage good social attitudes moral values, if you like—which are the cement of a stable society.

My second point arises from the first. Our responsibilities cannot stop short at the primary stage. We must also provide opportunities for young men and women to acquire productive skills. Some of this training will occur in an institutional setting but this is a costly method which cannot meet more than a small proportion of the country's needs.

So it seems to me that we have to get away from the formal course and examination oriented system and to devise other cheaper and more popular means of vocational education.

In other words, the primary school must not be seen in isolation but must be reinforced by a non-formal system which provides people with a means to increase their own productivity as well as that of society at large.

My third consideration is how we can get the local community more closely involved in the organization content and control of the education system.

It is a tragedy that in many villages the primary school remains at best an alien from the daily life of the inhabitants instead of being a source of pride and a centre of community activity. If we can overcome this problem we shall be well on the way to a democratic relevant and dynamic educational order.

Finally, May I wish you all a happy and enjoyable stay in Bangladesh. I hope you will make use of every opportunity to see something of our countryside while you are here and also to savour some of its culture. I feel confident that the results of this seminar will be of great benefit to all of us. It is now my great pleasure to declare this seminar open.