

Educating The People: A Formidable Task

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THAT there is an urgent need for developing the human resource in the country is well understood. The problem is to decide the best way this can be achieved, given the persistence of the resource constraints, the poor nutritional state of the people and the extent to which compulsory primary education will be able to fulfill these needs. As primary education covers only the first years of formal schooling, the question inevitably arises whether this initial five years will be enough to raise the level of skills which will fit the average person for a lifetime of productive labour. As the answer to this is obviously not, the next question is, are we justified in demanding an extension of compulsory education, at least upto the end of class X?

So far, the formal system of education has followed a strictly academic approach which had little or no relationship to the needs of the common man. Thus, more often than not, it was rejected outright. Recently, however, there has been some attempt to introduce a more practical bias, albeit male-oriented, which will have to be assessed at a later date. In addition, the mental linking of education to the needs of the affluent sector only is still a hurdle to be overcome for universal education to gain a firm foothold in the lives of the common man. From the point of view of human resource development, this is a pre-requisite to learning.

In recent years, the allocation of funds for education, as a percentage of the GDP, has increased from its former low of 1.7% but, as expendi-

ture per student has also increased in the same period from Tk 260 to Tk 493 (1992 figure) this is obviously not enough, if primary education is to be truly fruitful for the approximate 18 million children of this age group in need of schooling.

Even with the new curriculum, it is exceedingly doubtful if teacher training has reached a level where primary school teachers can gain the experience needed for teaching the new subjects. Primary School Teacher Training is conducted in 54 Primary Teacher Institutes (PTIs), an increase of only one over the 1987 level, which turn out a little more than 5000 teachers a year, following their appointment to specific regions, which is somewhat like putting the cart before the horse. Charges persist, however, that such PTIs are out of date, woefully lacking in the required teaching aids, with the result that graduates from these institutions are poorly motivated and therefore incapable of effectively tackling the problems that arise from poorly equipped and managed primary schools. Although the intention is to raise the number of women teachers to 60 per cent, the total requirement for the primary sector, the shortage of facilities for women trainees are such as to make this target unreachable in the near future.

This apart, it is also essential to measure the impact of primary education, real and potential, on the children of the common man, for nutritional defects have created

learning problems unique to poor countries. For example, malnutrition and diseases endemic in this part of the world have left in its wake about 65 per cent of school age children incapable of concise thought which is reflected in an inability to read, write or add well which will, in later life, affect their ability to work causing a general lowering of the national level of productivity. These children are thus disadvantaged and fare poorly in comparison to those from better off families.

The present concentration on increasing the number of female students is to serve two purposes. On the one hand, it is to reduce existing disparities between the sexes and, on the other, to improve the health of the family and reduce the fertility rate. If successful in this endeavour, there will be a strong demand for increasing the job opportunities available to the poor women.

As learning requirements for different groups and sub-groups are likely to vary, making teaching more complex than usual, yet it is obviously impractical to incorporate widely differing curricula to fit the needs of each group. As for many, the normal academic pattern will be at variance with the requirements of the vast majority there is an urgent need to rationalise the approach to education, especially at the primary level, if schooling is to be at all effective. Therefore, side by side with what is known as the 'Three R's' there is a distinct requirement for practical les-

sons in home-making, child care and health and nutrition along with community improvement programmes including environmental awareness.

However, it must be remembered that education, even the most basic, will go hand in hand with increased expectations. And, if the system fails to impart the necessary skills or the country is found to be unable to support the influx of new entrants to the labour market, the whole process could be destined for failure. With that in mind it is essential to begin creating new employment opportunities, especially for those who will find themselves unsuited for the positions held by their forefathers. If self-employment schemes fail to materialise, the surplus may find a need, to migrate to the built up areas, aggravating an already aggravating situation in the towns. A few may aspire to higher learning which, in turn, will place great demands on a system already bursting at the seams. But, by and large education for the common man will be restricted to the primary. If it fails to open new doors it may be that students passing through its portals have in no way added to the nations pool of skilled labour but have, instead, become misfits in the society they once knew—of no use to themselves and others, and certainly of no use to the nation, for an unemployed, politically awakened force can be a very explosive mix to handle. Induction into the stream of education must therefore, of necessity, be such that the whole nation stands to benefit, which places a huge burden on the educationists.