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Adding Substance To Schools

Much has been said about education in the country, and that too over a period of a good many years. In the recent past, the country has been reminded, many times over, of the need to ensure education for all by the turn of the new century. That is cause for worry, for the year 2000 is only five years away. More precisely, the worry stems from the fact that at this point in time, the nation has precious little to show in terms of concrete developments where the fulfilment of the goal for 2000 AD is concerned. It is a reality the truth of which is to be noticed in the rural interior, for that is where the greater mass of our people happen to reside.

All talk about education must therefore begin with an observation of objective conditions in the innumerable villages of Bangladesh. The one positive aspect of this rather academic side of socio-political life is the frequency with which new schools, especially at the primary level, have come up in the rural regions. Perhaps it is all a fall-out of the emphasis on primary education the authorities have been careful to paint over the months and years. But while the rise in the number of schools is remarkable, what cannot escape notice is that many of these schools are in a state that defeats the very purpose of education.

Abandoned? That would be too sweeping a statement to make in the circumstances. But the truth is that these schools, or many of them, have consistently suffered from an inadequacy of teachers, qualitatively as well as quantitatively. Now, if education in the countryside takes a beating that is pretty unjustified in present conditions, one can only suggest that there is something seriously wrong with the whole system as devised by the authorities.

It is not merely an issue of teachers being absent, or failing to come up to the desired level of expectation. There is the particularly disturbing trend (and this is a matter which emerges out of the frequent complaints seeping in from the villages) of teachers not being able, through sheer lethargy, of carrying out their responsibilities. Without doubt, a clearly negative example is being set here by people whose contributions to society are the premise upon which a stable as well as intellectual order of life is shaped.

Teachers in the primary schools, at this time, are the recipients of pay and other benefits the extent of which cannot be dismissed as insignificant. In many instances, conditions are rendered favourable through appointments of teachers from among educated young men and women in the neighbourhood. The boon here is that these young teachers, coming from the area in question, are in a position to interact in easy manner with the children they are expected to train in the primary academic arena.

Unfortunately, the situation, at least of the sort the country has experienced so far, is one that does not allow the nation the privilege of resting back in comfort in the knowledge that the teachers are doing their jobs well. The truth is, the entire process is at fault. When one takes teachers to task for their failures, one realises too that there are other factors at work behind the inability of a society to reach the goals it has set for itself.

An important underpinning of the primary education system is the provision of free textbooks. The sad bit is that here