

ERADICATING ILLITERACY

The World Summit for children set the strategies to operationalise Education for All by the year 2000. But the progress to that end, particularly in the developing world, has been slow. The nine countries with the highest number of illiterates met at their highest level December last in New Delhi, and reviewed the strategy. These countries—Bangladesh, Brazil, China, Egypt, India, Indonesia, Mexico, Nigeria and Pakistan—reiterated the need of putting massive weight of the respective nation along with the support of the international community for eradication of illiteracy and promoting primary education.

The Constitution of Bangladesh provides that the state shall adopt effective measures for the purpose of (a) establishing a uniform mass-oriented and universal system of education and extending free and compulsory education to all children, (b) relating education to the needs of society and (c) removing illiteracy.

The number of children of school-going age and the number of adult illiterates are simply daunting. The almost 1.69 crore children in the age group and the illiteracy of three quarters of our 11 crores population indicate the dimension of the problem. The government and some of non-government organisations are, however, doing their best. Primary education has been made compulsory and free all over the country. This has made a good impact on enrolment. Almost 85 per cent of children in the age group are enrolled. But the major problem—the dropouts—remains and the government is addressing it on an experimental basis with the Food for Education Programme. If the strategies succeed then by the turn of the century there would be almost 95 per cent enrolment of the school age children with around 70 per cent completing the five-year primary school course.

This obviously would need expansion of physical facilities to a large extent and strengthening the teaching staff. An idea of the amount of capital investment necessary may be had from the fact that we have about 6.9 million children who are not enrolled and 5.9 million dropouts. By some estimation about Taka 20,000 crore would be necessary for creating physical facilities and the staff would have to be embellished by 150,000.

There are many who are of the view that these are unattainable. But there are others who cite the success of the immunization programme and insist it is quite possible. The government is committed and moving ahead. A programme for construction and repair of 1,038 government primary schools during the current fiscal year has already been taken in hand. Some 3,958 low-cost schools will also be constructed in places where there are no educational institutions at present.

A total number of 5,46,240 students of 4,215 primary schools have been given benefit under the Food for Education Programme. Under the programme, a regular primary school student of any destitute family is given 15 kilogrammes of wheat and a maximum of 30 kilogrammes for any family with more than one student.

There does not seem to be much wrong with our planning. But monitoring needs to be strengthened to ensure proper implementation. All the same there is need for readjusting the curricula and make education more work-oriented. President Abdur Rahman Biswas laid particular emphasis on this aspect in his inaugural address at the National Education Convention on Monday. "Our commitment should be to transform the huge population into manpower by providing work-oriented education," he said and stressed on evolving applied education for solving the problems of the society. A work-oriented education system would create scope for self-employment. It had been pointed out at the conference that in spite of increase in budget allocation, the standard of education had declined. The main cause of this degradation was identified as the hiatus between education and its application and work-oriented education system considered essential to 'bridge the gap'.

But to these ends it is imperative to make education a social movement, as suggested by the President, so that education becomes an integral part of the life of every citizen."