



The Bangladesh Times

EFFECTIVE LEARNING FOR ALL

Countries with high illiteracy rates rank low in terms of socio-economic indicators. Development experts have amassed enough evidence to show that effective learning for all people in developing countries can work wonders. Education, even if it is primary or functional and non-traditional, is an active agent of major change in all fields of human activity. Birth and mortality rates fall as people, specially women, use their basic learning skills to gather information that enhances life. The good effects begin to register on the problems of over-population and poverty, both of which have been defeating all our efforts at development. It is high time we started our offensive against the vicious enemies at the right end. Mass education is the weapon that can help us achieve our objective of slowing down population growth and sustaining human life at a reasonable standard by the year 2000.

Addressing a grand conference of primary school teachers President Hussain Muhammad Ershad voiced his commitment to establish Bangladesh as a nation of literates by the turn of the century. Clearly, the President sees in the mass literacy crusade a nation in the future better equipped to cope with life's demands. He announced a number of measures to boost primary teachers into more dedicated service so that by the end of the century our literacy rate could be raised to at least sixty per cent from the present twenty-four per cent. There are also plans to make universal primary education compulsory by the next decade.



It may be mentioned here that universal primary education was first adopted as a goal for Asian countries in the 1960 "Karachi plan" which proposed "that every country should provide a system of universal, compulsory, and free primary education of seven years or more within a period of not more than 20 years (1963-83)." The Bangladesh constitution also has universal primary education enshrined in it as a basic human right. Obviously there are gaps between the will and the ways taken to realise the goal.

President Ershad has promised increasing the annual allocation for primary education but it would be irrational to suppose that we can achieve near-total literacy merely by increasing funds. The content, the methods and the philosophy of imparting life-enhancing basic education to the nation need to be worked out first by the best minds. National educational planners, curriculum developers, innovatory institutions and researchers must be able to identify the specific problems that hound the primary education sector. This needs both qualitative renewal and expansion to have the desired effects on society. The very low standards at the primary level, specially of rural schools, are exposed by the shocking conceptual inadequacies, linguistic shortcomings and lack of common knowledge demonstrated by a majority of advanced degree holders in the country.

Let us learn from the successes in other developing countries. Malaysia, for example, hopes to achieve full literacy by 1990. Today it has an impressive 75 per cent literacy rate, thanks to its adoption of the UNESCO Asia-Pacific Programme of Education for All (APPEAL) which was officially launched in 1987. Among the three components of the programme are Universalisation of primary education, eradication of illiteracy and continuing education for development. Our primary education sector needs a shake-up to improve and make it yield better dividends. We should take the best help to supplement government efforts.