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Accountability In Education

For a country with an illiteracy rate of about 80%—a second revolution that was due, next to the political one that won the country its independence, was that in education. But this did not happen, chiefly because of confusion in perception of the nation's priorities. Among other barriers to a timely positive approach to the problem of literacy and education has been the long-drawn-out struggle for power among the leaders, particularly the blighting phenomenon of rule by decree under authoritarian governments.

In fact, if examples for guidance in matters of dealing with the country's education were sought, they were on hand in the region itself, from China to Japan to S. Korea. These societies made no mistakes about the first-thing-first principle for a society needing to rebuild it socially and economically. It was education from the lowest to the highest tier.

And it was no work done slapdash. Promotion of national literacy was taken up under a neatly laid out policy and programme keeping in view the development needs of the countries in question. Even a dictatorial regime (before its democratic transition) like S. Korea got its educational priority absolutely right.

For Bangladesh, however, it took nearly two decades of inattention and neglect to wake up to this fundamental problem of the country. The present regime has been on record to launch a compulsory primary education programme which reflects more a realisation of a primary need of society than an adequate answer to it for quite obvious reasons of the extraordinary dimension of the problem and the lack of resources compounded by management gaps, in carrying out this programme of national literacy.

Besides, in a budget allocation of 11 or so crore taka for about the same size of illiterates in the country the per capita expenditure on literacy will be in the region of barely taka one or so with which to pay for a programme whose intrinsic demand in money is nearly ten times the allocation.

These are simple arithmetic of the country's educational prospects and a reality that cannot be covered up by any amount of publicity or official enthusiasm which one does appreciate. Not that education experts, academics and intellectuals are not aware of the problem and not doing the thinking about how to direct the nation educationally. Seminars, workshops on education, including a recent one in Dhaka, have held learned discussions with suggestions for reforms to be carried out. They include not only reorientation of education to science and technology but to the practical needs of life and what they should mean for a poor country like Bangladesh.

But these deliberations are mostly academic exercises not necessarily to be an integral part of a state policy on education, or its reforms. One thing missing in this or even in the state's interest in education is accountability. The fact is reforms, however overdue, and indispensable for a growing society like Bangladesh, do not look like being implemented as expeditiously as they require to be. Even if they were undertaken piecemeal, rather than under a national crash (revolutionary) programme they will take time—and money. For the latter to be in short supply there will be no dearth of excuses, although the matter is one of overdue national needs. The system inherited from colonial days stays put, to produce a white collar army of educated youths who are more square pegs in round holes so far as the national development needs are concerned.

Under such circumstances, partly of state insufficiency in many respects as well as the daunting dimension of the problem itself, the state has to make a virtue of necessity—that is, until the needed reforms, at all, start happening, work the existing system to get out of it the results it is meant to produce. That it is, from the lowest to the highest stage, in a bind, is common knowledge. The greatest single factor accounting for this disappointing education scene in the country, is, among other familiars, the lack of accountability. Certainly the accountability gap is a very general fact in socio-administrative management as a whole.

But when it affects a thing like education on the scale it does today it can be the worst calamity for society. It is self-evident and needs no explaining. Institutional (involving inspectorates, education officials, teachers, students) or individual performance have now arrived at a proverbial stage of deficiency and inefficiency in the education sector. Many, including state authorities, talk about and lament over it. But the buck stops there, and education, so beloved of all, slips increasingly into a state past all redemption. So please make a start, and do so with accountability as the first positive step in education.