

Education—Putting Policy Into Perspective

Bangladesh has spent a quarter of a century agonising over its education policy. In the attempt to do justice to everybody, governments in succession, have ended doing justice to nobody. They have been battling variously with education for all, with a strong bias toward social justice and equity, or the need to sustain an educated class to produce future leadership that would lead the nation out from its morass. But providing people with education of international standard that also gives the underprivileged classes opportunity for upper mobility has remained elusive.

Bangladesh's uneven development in which mass poverty co-exists with advanced technology is reflected in its education. We are yet to produce a comprehensive policy able to change the status quo. If the new policy can arrive at this distinction we are, perhaps, finally on the right path. But the fact that education is a constitutional right has created the idea that people need not do anything for themselves to attain their goal and all is up to the government. The result is they have sat back and waited too long, with the exception of the middle classes who have, long since, taken education into their own hands and marked out for themselves an arena of their own.

Whether or not this has been good for them or for the nation is quite beside the point but it is surely an indication of the trend education has taken in past years. The result is that education today is looked on as a means to an end rather than the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake. Education should be available to all — irrespective of cast, creed or religion. In countries like ours this deal, however noble, is arguably difficult to achieve although not impossible.

The modern view treats education as any other commodity that is on sale — no longer a right doled out by the government of the day, but an item of choice bought and sold in the market place.

The 56-member committee entrusted with the task of formulating the National Education Policy has completed the report and has handed it over to those who matter. Whether or not the things to which we refer have been included or even kept in mind remains to be seen especially in view of the fact that education is now generally viewed as an unacceptable burden on the state. If this is to be the path we must follow it will be incumbent on the state to play a stronger role than it has to date for regularising this sector so that the interest of the common man is protected.

Higher levels of education calls for a science-based education scheme and it will almost certainly call for an overhaul of the current text books, no small task in itself besides being costly. We can but hope this enormous undertaking does not go the way of other proposals of the type because they proved to be too costly. If constraints to wider learning can be overcome, the result will be a more balanced development that will no longer be only the prerogative of the rich.

The gap between the educated elite and the struggling poor and illiterate must be bridged. Apart from creating a willingness to learn and granting greater access to schools, there is also a need for linking a nutrition programme to education of the kind that was undertaken in many of the advanced countries from the start of their compulsory education programmes. In other words, alongside education, maintaining a sustained nutritional status for the children and providing the right atmosphere for their development are essential parts of the whole.

56