

অবিধ 02 FEB 1993

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FIGHTING ILLITERACY

It is long since education has been recognised as a fundamental right and a key element of development. With the spread of the democratic concepts of government around the world, the realisation of the need for education also increased. A statement of James Madison who was President of the United States early last century appropriately emphasises the idea that the people of a democratic society must be educated. He said: "A popular government without popular information or the means of acquiring it, is but a prologue to a Farce or a Tragedy or perhaps both. Knowledge will forever govern ignorance. And a people who mean to be their own governors, must arm themselves with the power which knowledge gives."

The concept of development also gradually widened and the Twenty-fifth session of the UN General Assembly resolved "as the ultimate purpose of development is to provide increasing opportunities to all people for a better life, it is essential to expand and improve facilities for education, health, nutrition, housing, and social welfare, and to safeguard the environment."

No wonder with Education acknowledged as a fundamental human right and as a means of meeting other basic needs as well as an activity that sustains and accelerates overall development, the world has been moving towards compulsory primary education. Bangladesh is no exception to this world trend. In conformity with global goal, the government here has set the target of "education for all by the year 2000", compulsory primary education has been introduced and mass education programme activated. A high-powered task force has been busy identifying problems standing on the way to eradication of illiteracy.

A separate division—Primary and Mass Education Division—under the direct control of the Prime Minister is supervising the activities in the field. The Action Programme taken in hand under the current plan envisages repair and reconstruction of 30,000 primary schools all over the country; double-shifts have been introduced in many of the urban schools and teachers are being recruited on priority basis.

Education planning experts, administrators and representatives of different local and international agencies put their heads together at the just concluded two-day conference on "Primary and Mass Education: Problems and Remedies" in the metropolis to put greater vigour into the programme.

Referring to the slow progress in the education sphere Prime Minister Khaleda Zia who inaugurated the conference said that at the present rate it would take some 700 years to achieve universal literacy. Even some of the SAARC countries like Sri Lanka had achieved 90 per cent literacy rate. Widespread illiteracy in the country was the root cause of our poverty and backwardness, she maintained and felt the answer to resource constraint also lies in educating the masses.

Begum Zia said the government had put stress on education which was her party's "political commitment". She appreciated that the problems of education posed formidable challenges. "However difficult the challenges may be, we shall have to overcome it." There is no alternative if we want to be identified as a self-respecting nation.

The government has set up committees at different levels with people's representative to carry forward the educational objectives. It has generated enthusiasm throughout the country and the Compulsory Primary Education Programme has taken the form of a social movement. She however felt the need for further coordination through concerted efforts of all sections of the people. There can be no two opinions on the need for education, Begum Zia contended and called upon all irrespective of political persuasions and party affiliations to contribute their mite in the spread of education.

The Prime Minister put her finger correctly on wastage in education. The wastage are both quantitative and qualitative. Our wastage rate in primary education is as high as 65 per cent. This need to be curbed through better planning and administration.

We hope the problems identified and remedies suggested by the participants in the conference would receive serious consideration and help us in the march towards universal literacy.