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ARE WE NEGLECTING CHILDREN'S EDUCATION?

Crises in education are multi-faceted and have spread from the primary level to the highest level of the universities. At the primary level, we do not have enough schools, enough teachers and whatever the number of them that we have not enough seriousness with the work they are entrusted with.

To start with, let us look at the number of schools. We have less than 50,000 primary schools in the country while the number of the children of the age of attending primary schools (6-11 years) is about 23 million (a fifth of the total population). That would mean an average of a little less than 500 students per school. In spite of the claim of our statistical bureau that more than 90 per cent of the children of primary school going age do actually attend school, in reality the number of children attending school does not seem to be more than two-thirds. Even then, no less than 300 students have to be allowed to attend a school. That is how the average number of students per teacher at that level stands at about 64—a number too large for proper education at the primary level.

The need for increasing the numbers of both schools and teachers at the primary level is thus obvious. These numbers are increasing, especially in the urban areas. The rural areas have something of a dormant society and are particularly backward in education. Hence the urgent need of an action programme like Food for Education. Our urban areas are undergoing a proliferation of schools for children. Their parents are, in most cases, conscious of the need for children's education. Urban areas are rich in information, and even low-income people there are generally aware of the benefits of education. They are more likely than not to work out a kind of cost-benefit analysis of sending their children to school, and are likely to send most of their children there.

The more well-to-do people in our urban areas are, however, pay for the running of many schools for the children of the primary education level. The quality of education does certainly vary from school to school. What demands the attention of the government is

the quality of education as related to the quality of the teaching staff. In the cases of many schools in urban areas no information on the quality—that is, educational qualifications—of the teaching staff is published. Some of these schools publicise their buildings (mostly rented), sites and certain other eye-catching features, but not the qualifications of the teaching staff. One benefit that some of these schools derive from this practice is to pay teachers low salaries and thus make money.

Our question is whether this practice is to be allowed to continue. One dangerous result of it is the poor quality of teaching that students may thus be subjected to. The fees charged from the guardians of children in the urban areas are, however, high. When primary education in government-run primary schools is imparted to children free of cost this practice seems to deserve close scrutiny.

One argument that is advanced sometimes for protecting this practice is that the government has no business to look into how these schools are run when the government does not provide any financial aid to them. This seems to evade the basic issue that the government has the responsibility of ensuring that children get the education of the proper quality.

It seems that governmental administrative control is to be affected in this matter. A matter like children's education cannot be left uncared for in the hands of school authorities operating with the motive of making money, although they may not openly recognise it.

The so-called 'pre-cadet' schools and 'KG' schools, it seems, have to be subjected to effective governmental surveillance in order that the children attending those institutions get the quality education which the owners thereof claim to provide.

In many of these schools well qualified teachers are almost as ill-paid as the poorly qualified ones. As a result, well qualified teachers are discouraged to work there. If this is not the desired state of affairs, we would expect the government to come forward and provide the surveillance in order that the children attending those institutions get the proper and quality of education.