

Food For Education Or Food For Thought

The government's Food For Education programme, an innovative attempt to put some "pep" into the nation's effort to improve its human resources, is allegedly being sabotaged. Intended to encourage poor rural families to send their children to school, it seemed like a heaven-sent opportunity to many. But it still remains to be seen whether this form of incentive handed out to parents really does work. The best that can be said for it is it provides a little bit of food security (even for those who are not interested in the "education") to the most vulnerable section of rural society in times of need.

However, holes are already appearing in the programme although on paper it does appear to have increased enrolment and attendance, but like many other government-aided projects, it is already creaking under pressure from rent-seeking elements that seem to have the upper-hand in rural society. With reports reaching our ears that the FEP is not free from politics, racketeering and misappropriation, the web of corruption seems to have engulfed everybody from school teachers, managing committee members and "interested outsiders" all of whom are anxious to get their "cut". With some reports saying teachers are more interested in allocation of food-grain quotas than in teaching, it does not augur well for either the programme or for education. According to reports, issuing officers are charging Tk. 500 to Tk. 600 per quota while others involved in the allocation and distribution of the quotas, are misappropriating at least one-third of the allotted wheat or rice. A student from a poor family is supposed to get 12 kg of food-grains, and a family with more than one student is supposed to get 16 kg. per month, but in reality they get at most 6 to 9 kgs.

This in itself is bad enough but when we hear that students from the comparatively rich can obtain fake cards on payments of Tk. 200 per card, we wonder where this country is heading. And if it is true, as alleged, that corrupt headmasters, school authorities and thana education officers are all in league in this effort to deprive the poor of what is theirs by right by contriving to obtain quotas against the names of non-existent students, we may as well scrap this idea too for if this state of affairs is allowed to continue, there is no way the country can ever hope to improve the quality of its human resource. A thorough investigation into the Food For Education programme is called for and a fool-proof system, less easy to abuse, must be put in place. More, any official or teaching staff found to be abusing the system must be removed from service—for they are the enemies of the people.