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DEVELOPMENT AND BASIC INPUTS

More and more developing countries are taking cognizance of the scientific findings that without basic inputs like healthcare, nutrition, education and access to credit, development efforts fall far short of the achievement ideals. One of the most important of these basic inputs is primary education.

In a recent lecture session on development issues, the Prime Minister said the government would take up extensive programmes to increase the country's literacy rate to 60 percent in the next five years. At present, Bangladesh has one of the lowest literacy rates in the world, and the other indices to the quality of life—high birth and infant mortality rates and maternal deaths—all indicate that the basic inputs are not available to the overwhelmingly huge majority. Poverty's multiple ills are compounded by illiteracy which in turn perpetuate a socio-economic situation where corruption and oppression can thrive. The government is fully aware of it. Indeed universal primary education is one of our avowed state principles, though the good intentions continue to get clogged by resource constraints and other difficulties along the delivery line.

Universalisation of primary education is among the three major components of the Asia-Pacific Programme of Education for All (APPEAL), that was officially launched by UNESCO in 1987. APPEAL is designed to eradicate illiteracy and create scopes for continuing education for development. The UNESCO-recommended reading rate of a person per year in developing countries is 80 pages. Except Korea and Japan no Asian country has reached this level. It is only half a page for Malaysia which has an impressive 75 percent literacy rate and hopes to achieve full literacy by 1990. With less than 30 percent literacy we have certainly a long way to go.

This calls for an intensification of the universal primary education thrust as well as local resource mobilization to make up for the meagre budget allocation for education. Even after such persuasive evidence of the directly beneficial role that education, specially of women, plays in the enhancement of life, fall in birth rates and infant and maternal death, spending on education is still not seen as an investment that pays back high dividends.

We need to open our eyes to this priority need of the nation and set our targets at realistic levels with relevance to the amount of effort we are putting into it. Every year over half a lakh of the literates in our country degenerate into neo-literates because they soon lose their literacy skills in the absence of any scope for application in the rural areas. Education planners should give full attention not only to sharpening the basic skills of primary school students but also to ensuring that those skills are used in everyday life.

Universal primary education was first adopted as a goal for Asian countries in 1960. It proposed that every country should provide a system of universal, compulsory and free primary education within a period of not more than 20 years. It would be an understatement to say we are way behind that plan. With UPE we can hopefully get back on track to reach at least the 60 percent goal by 1995.