

Compulsory Primary Education: Points To Ponder

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WITH the change of government national policies on different issues also change. On coming to power a new government, in most cases, adopts new programmes to bring remarkable change for the welfare of the people. Prior to taking such ambitious programmes fields of reforms are to be identified first. Interestingly, all governments starting from the first day of Liberation to the present day, in spite of many differences in thoughts and plans, have similarity on one point i.e. identification of fields of reforms.

All the previous governments kept most of their reforms attempts limited in three major fields. They are land, education and civil service. In this article we shall look at the educational reforms programmes of the present government.

Education, as a sector of reform, is very sensitive and also very risky to make experiments with, specially, if it is with secondary, higher secondary or higher education. Any proposed change, good or bad, almost always create repercussion among the students and sometimes among the teachers.

In comparison with these three levels the primary level of our education system is calm and safe to implement peacefully any reform programme of the government.

The present government has declared primary education compulsory. Education, is one of the fundamental needs and rights of human being is universally recognised as well as emphasised by all the past government. Still the present government had to declare in compulsory.

Imposition of compulsion is necessitated by the fact that a good number of children of school-going age do not go to school to have primary education. The purpose of the imposition of compulsion is to bring these children to school and thus gradually reduce the rate of illiteracy towards complete eradication of the same. Dozens of reasons for the ignorance and reluctance of those guardians who do not send their children to school may be mentioned. An attempt, in this writing, has been made not to explain in details, those reasons but to analyse some decisions of the government towards the elimination of obstacles standing in the way to make this compulsory primary education programme a success.

To make the programme successful the first and foremost requirement is to establish new schools. Without making the facility of school easily available in each village imposition of compulsion in meaningless. The government has taken some positive steps towards establishment of new schools. Let a glance be had on the present procedure in this regard.

At present two systems of primary education are in practice, namely (a) free primary education and (b) kindergarten system of education. The government has made primary education compulsory—not either of the two. In urban areas both types of schools exist and are being established in number there. But in rural areas kindergarten schools are seldom available. Free primary schools are the only means there to translate the noble programme of the government into reality. To run a kindergarten the government has nothing to spend. It is a hundred per cent private organisation having just a registration with the government.

Income of such school is not deposited to the government exchequer nor the school gets any financial help from the government either.

Moreover, the government does not control the administration or the academic curricula of the schools. So such a school may easily be established and run by private sector—rather private entrepreneurs according to their own policies. Children of well-off people can only attend this school as the rate of tuition fees charged there is very high. Imposition of compulsion on this system of primary education brings no good to common man and the government's most liberal policy regarding this system is very much appropriate to keep pace with the global policy of privatization in all respect.

But in the case of free primary education things are quite different. Establishment, administration, academic curricula etc. of a free primary school is under the direct control of the government. Since no tuition fee is charge here, the entire financial burden is borne by the government. Teachers of these schools are servants of the Republic and are responsible not to any private authority but to the government itself. Children of common people, specially in our villages, are the students of these schools. Since the rate of illiteracy in rural area is higher than that in townships, the success of compulsory primary education programme largely depends on bringing in increased number the children of unwilling and ignorant guardians of the rural area of schools. Hence the establishment of more new free primary schools is essential. But existing policy and procedure in this regard can hardly be called encouraging. A separate directorate headed by a Director General absolutely for primary education has been set up. Recently a division under the Prime Minister's secretariat for compulsory primary

and mass education has been created. But all these exercises have contributed very little to eliminate the obstacles towards simplification of formalities of establishing new schools. A brief description of the lengthy procedure required for establishing a new school will help to have a clear idea. Primary schools set up on the initiative of social workers of the country are taken by the government by phases.

Before applying for registration of financial help from the government the school house has to be built and the required number of students have to be admitted. On submission all other necessary papers the government will give registration to the school and sanction monthly consolidated pay of taka 500/- only for each of the four teachers for a period of four years. If the school is not fully taken over by the government within this time, it will have to wait for another term of equal length, sometimes, even more than that.

The problems and procedure in case of establishing new school in an urban area are still more complicated. Scarcity of land, needless to say, is much acute in townships than in rural areas. Earlier a primary school attached to a secondary school was recognised by the government as single unit institution. After the creation of two separate directorates for the two levels of education this system has been ceased. Now separate buildings, premises, committees and sets of teachers are required for these two school.

So establishment of primary and secondary schools on a particular piece of land has become impossible. Same size of land in both rural and urban areas is demanded for this purpose ignoring the idea that multi-storied buildings, even sky-scrapers, can be built on a piece of land that lies in the latter area. Besides, in case of school established on a government land, specially in residential colonies of government employees, mutation of the plot allotted for this purpose is demanded. Allotment of a plot in favour of a proposed school does not mean the transfer of entitlement of the plot for which mutation of the same is denied by the respective office. But the condition of mutation of the land is a rigid prerequisite condition to have registration of a school. Such rigid conditions contribute a lot to frustrate the initiatives.

Teachers are treated to be the lifeblood of education system. But a poorly paid man having little blood in his own body can hardly make any positive contribution to this system.

Besides, academic curricula of free primary education system do not seem to be responsive to the requirement of the guardians reluctant to send their children to school. English has been made compulsory in primary level without giving much thought on the utility of the little English taught as a second language at this level.

A student of primary level is being taught literature, history and such other subjects. These are essential for an educated man, no doubt, but in most cases a guardian of a rural area expects a boy with primary education its be more helpful to cultivate his land, look after his cattle and fowls, use his pond more profitably through fish farming and yard through planting trees.

It goes without saying that the boy would have proved his worth to fulfil the expectation of his father had he been taught the elementary lessons of the said subjects. But, unfortunately present curricula contain very little of these subjects. Lack of such practical education at primary level, specially, in case of drop-outs often makes the guardians think in a negative way and treat the three, four or five years spent in the school a waste of time for the boys.

So, simplification of the formalities and procedures for establishing new schools, enhancement of adhoc pay of teachers, making their service permanent within a short time, and recasting of the present curricula are the crying needs to make the compulsory primary education programme a success. Keeping these needs in view, following suggestions may be considered.

(a) A school set up a piece of land donated through registered deed and having required minimum number of students be immediately taken up by the government, condition of submission of mutation document in case of school set up on piece of land allotted by any government department be waived.

(b) Youngmen and women having good academic career be appointed as teachers on national scale of pay. Their service, if necessary, may be confirmed after probation of one or two years as done in case of other government employees.

(c) The present curricula be immediately recast. Emphasis be given not on language learning but on acquisition of practical knowledge about the use of high yielding seeds and fertilizer, fish farming, nutrition, first-aid, poultry and dairy farms etc.

(d) Incentive-giving programme like exemption of Union Council tax, long term loan sanction for the guardians be taken to encourage them to send their children to school.

Imposition of compulsion, aggressive motivation or any other exercise in this regard will not, probably, produce the expected result unless such positive measures are taken.