

Compulsory Primary Education— Its Gaps And Viability

Government seems to have got its philosophy of development right by deciding that education at the primary level has to be compulsory, free and universal, and has formally launched it since January 1993. But that much has gone wrong with how the schools are run is a thing neither the immediate public agencies presiding over primary education, nor the education ministry seem aware of, much less anxious to put right. Since primary schools were nationalised in 1973 or even after compulsory education was introduced last year in 68 thanas little has been done to improve things.

We have to start with a full awareness of the fact that both in theory and practice the country has been embarked on the task at least two decades later than it was due. Like some Asian neighbours or even some African countries (Kenya, e.g.) the country's first priority should have been education at the grass roots as the most viable infrastructure of development, and, in fact, as the primary factor in overcoming problems ranging from social stability to controlled parenthood.

If that has been the unconscionable delay accounting for the damage caused to the nation's progress the task now assumed or resumed, on the announced scale, has to make up lee-way quantitatively while striving to achieve the requisite levels of quality. Our problems in matters of literacy for the people have been made extraordinarily challenging by the magnitude of the task we have to do—increasing the quantity and improving the quality.

For one thing 90% of these schools are in the thanas or in rural or semi-rural areas i.e. far from the cities—Dhaka, Rajshahi, Chittagong or Khulna. The gap in the administrative attention given to them, caused mainly by the distance between the two sectors, has been one of the potent causes of neglect from which they have perennially suffered. This is as true of most of other state services for the rural masses, down to health and sanitation.

As a means of improving on the past inadequacies this chasm between the two areas will need to be narrowed by concrete steps taken by the administration. This has to be done both physically and administratively: In the infrastructural development under way in rural areas a new emphasis has to be placed on roads and link-roads to the advantage of the new and old network of schools. School houses, most of them in need of urgent reconstruction, need to be rebuilt, providing for enough room for the increased number of children. In this connection the administration needs to make sure that enrolment spectacularly increases to make sense of the new drive for primary education. Toilet and sanitation needs plus recreation and other facilities also cannot be lost sight of; at least a decent minimum of them compared with those enjoyed by their urban counterparts must be provided.

These relate to the sheer physical needs which have been traditionally grossly neglected. The inadequacies on the academic side—attendance by teachers and students, the number of teachers, teaching standards, inspection of schools by education officers and so on—stay as gaping as ever. As it is, most schools are hopelessly understaffed; teacher attendance in most of them is very poor. Inspection is as good as nil, which has resulted in chronic laxity and relaxation for teachers and students. There are reports also of 'salamis' from teachers for education officers to pass their salary bills (Observer January 14, Letters).

How stepmotherly has been the administration's treatment of these schools is also evident from the fact, among other instances of neglect, that stipend holders (from the results of primary scholarship examination 1991) have not yet received their stipend money, the administration's reason for it being lack of funds (Observer January 6, Letter). Fine! We withhold further comment on it.

As for the grand goal of education for all by 2000 and the beginning officially already made, two points need very close study: (1) filling the gaps we have pointed out; (2) for the administration to avoid looking to have bitten off more than it can chew—far less swallow at a mouthful.

But the task will be immensely more manageable and feasible provided it starts getting executed under a plan (not a paper, but practical, one) based on the removal of the existing snags through an overhaul of much that has gone out of kilter, including specially the inspectorate (represented by the district or thana education directorates). The last-mentioned is a key link in the chain, that calls for special and strict attention to ensure quality and discipline, and the elimination of those debilitating factors that have so far received scant attention from the administration.

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