

Self-reliance Through Education

The commitment to attaining universal primary education by the year 2000 has been re-affirmed time and again by each and every member state of SAARC. The goal is to ensure that, at a minimum, 80% of all children of primary school age in the region are so firmly committed to enrolment within the present school system that it is inconceivable for any of them to leave it. But, also, at the same time, there is a clear understanding by governments in the region that, unless a sustained effort for reducing the rate of adult illiteracy, particularly female illiteracy, rates, is simultaneously made, and to a level of at least half that of 1990, not very much progress will be made. That these are goals fundamental to achieving all the others we have set for ourselves in the area of child survival, protection and development, goes without saying.

Although the progress achieved in terms of educational opportunity, quality and results have, in some places, been quite substantial, nevertheless the overall progress remains uneven. Therefore, the nature and extent of the task ahead calls for a more concerted social action on a continental scale than hitherto achieved with the involvement of each country and every single community in the endeavour. For experience has shown us that it cannot be done by government alone. There is a greater chance for achieving the goal, especially if the professional classes also come forward to accept their moral and intellectual responsibility for making it happen.

It is, therefore, necessary to study more carefully the alternatives which are feasible within today's political climate and within the present socio-economic context in each state. As such there are a number of issues which have to be properly identified before they can be addressed. However, with all the countries of SAARC still in a state of flux where, among other things, governments, and, therefore, policies, are frequently changing, it is, important to know we are really moving in the right direction towards establishing an environment of more creative freedom for children in which they are able to learn.

That the child has a right to education is generally acknowledged not only by governments but more and more by people. It is good this right is gradually being extended to female children who have, for so long, been on the wrong end of the scale as far as education is concerned but there is still a long way to go to bring parity between the sexes. Much of the inequalities are, however, economic. Therefore, until this side can be fully addressed, girls are likely to be kept out of the school system, or given only limited access. But, for the middle classes, education has become a way out, literally a passport to overseas markets or even emigration which is also worrying to governments who need their best brains to stay home. Again the answer to this problem is more economic than anything else and greater opportunities for advancement must be established within the country so as to be able to contain this drift.

The primary need for the SAARC countries appears, therefore, to be an agreed vision of the future, of where South Asia is heading and for them to seek and agree on the kind of basic education which can move society, as a whole, towards that vision. Without a regional plan of action by which one country supports the other in the fields in which they are weak 'not much' progress, 'regionally,' can be expected. Student exchange programmes can be taken up at higher levels but in only those institutions capable of offering education at an international standard and recognition of each other's degrees will be a must. Although this may seem to many to be elementary it is a fact that business and commerce often reject external degrees 'out of hand' without justification or through ignorance. If education in the region can be streamlined and the basic education plan of action made effective throughout this region, SAARC can soon be at par with any other region in the world and, hopefully, see an end to want and poverty.

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