

অন্তর্বর্ত 08 JUN 1992

Primary Versus University Education

Children in the age groups of 5-10 years ought to have been at school instead of at large if what the administration has been saying about compulsory free primary education started translating from word into deed, from rhetoric into reality. Neither in villages nor in cities there is any sign of change in the crusted landscape of illiteracy. The same scenario of urchins in their scores crowding in urban slums and around the villages persists.

Indeed with the first announcement by this government of its plan to introduce compulsory primary education and its reiteration since in public gatherings we have been thinking in terms of a revolution in national literacy. Even a time schedule—around 2025 or so—by which this goal will be achieved is said to have been set. But there is yet little sign of anything in the primary education sector starting on the implied scale or schedule. May be, the authorities are busy doing the spade work before launching a thing as big as universal compulsory free primary education.

Meanwhile, a government news-release says that the government has decided to set up an affiliating university called Jatya Bishya Bidyalay at Gazipur at a cost of Tk 13 crore. This is purported to take care of the 'tertiary' level of education more efficiently, overseeing the progress of education in colleges now controlled by the four universities of Dhaka, Jahangir Nagar, Rajshahi and Chittagong, and awarding B.A and M.A/M.Sc degrees. On the face of it is a good-looking—and ambitious project—rather too ambitious. One question raised by it is: what will be the function of the existing universities? The scheme risks being a duplication in that the existing universities are performing the function which the proposed Jatya Bishwa Bidyalay at Gazipur is set apart to.

Certainly the question would not have been raised were it not for the economic constraints we have to take into account whenever undertaking a new project let alone a decorative or duplicate or triplicate one. Education from primary to secondary to tertiary i.e university level has in principle become national priority No. 1 if the country is to develop properly. And it is heartening that the present administration has taken it more seriously than its predecessors have done. All that is now looked forward to is when and how this goal is to be achieved in practice.

But there is a priority within this priority and that is not university but primary education free and compulsory primary education at least upto a stage with an enrolment almost as extensive as the population itself—such as Iran in its time and China and S/N Korea in theirs aimed for and achieved. Our sense of revolution in education is derived more from such stories of transformation of a nation through a crash literacy programme. Which is easier said than achieved. And even a relatively humble beginning will entail a colossal cost. That is one crowning reason we have to count our pennies while proposing to spend on education—or on anything.

Besides, problems besetting tertiary (or university) education is neither procedural or functional or academic but acknowledgedly political. By a necessary amount of reorganisation or expansion of their functions the existing universities can certainly be made to perform as affiliating universities more spaciously and efficiently. Looked at from this prospective the proposed University at Gazipur is a luxury.

Besides, government has already allowed the private sector to set up universities, which is, to be sure, a fairly imaginative step and is necessary to help improve university management in the country. This is a thing worth encouraging with the private sector making a bold response and emerging as a competitor to help improve standards.

Funds allocated for the new university project will be best spent on compulsory free primary education. The question, therefore, again is one of ordering or re-ordering priorities and avoiding duplication, institutional or financial.

A more workable and, in our circumstances, very necessary idea is either turning the residential universities into affiliating ones, wholly or in part, or at least turning them into institutions serving as nuclei for research on a much broader and varied basis, which is a top national need.

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