

The State Of Primary Education

There are some 37,000 government primary schools that employ about 1.8 lakh teachers. About one crore students attend these schools and, as such, they should be the backbone of the education system but the recent strike by primary school teachers has hampered education in this sector. Apart from general strikes (hartals) there are so many other reasons for keeping the schools closed but as this sector is dependent on foreign donations, which in turn is dependent on the results of primary scholarships, if schools remain closed for any long period of time, the students will suffer. But one problem still persists - the salary paid to a primary school teacher. As this is less than that of an upper division clerk or a driver of a government officer and much below that of a teacher of a secondary school despite having the same rank and academic qualifications, it is bound to cause discontent.

Moreover when the primary education ministry is reported to be in such a disarray, as the officials are not accountable to anyone, as the secretary to the ministry AKM Shamsuddin, reportedly said, it is now an "all in all" situation, whatever that may mean. Yet another official said, 'There are piles of files on every desk, waiting to be cleared by the boss, but the overburdened boss has no time to look into the files. We deal with the affairs of more than three lakh teachers of about 80,000 primary and equivalent institutions - both government and non-government. Finding no other means, we do what we think to be better, which is absolutely unhealthy for any office.'

The position of the director general of the Compulsory Primary Education Implementation and Monitoring Unit has, meanwhile, remained vacant for more than two months. The unit is entrusted to oversee the salary, job confirmation, retirement benefits, promotion and other affairs of more than one lakh teachers of some 23,000 registered and community primary schools across the country. 'An additional secretary to the Ministry of Primary and Mass Education was given the charge of the directorate but he does not attend office regularly,' an official told New Age in the past week. 'File work of salaries of about one lakh teachers has been halted, which will lead to a delay in the payment of the salaries of such teachers,' he said. 'As the director general is not a permanent official, he is unwilling to clear the files.'

If the primary sector and the schools are to be saved, the government is to take effective measures to improve the standard of primary education. This calls for increased people's participation to help their functioning. If children are being deprived of quality education due to the drawbacks in the system, the drawbacks must be identified before the standard of education can be improved. The government however thinks that the well-being of primary schools should be looked after by the local people. In this they have a point but the mind-set of the people is that this is the responsibility of the government. They too have a point. However the development budget in the education sector should be aimed at increasing the quality of primary education. In addition, more funds should be allocated for the training of primary school teachers and the number of teachers increased if the teacher student ratio - currently 1:61 - is to be improved. Many primary schools across the country also suffer from a shortage of classrooms.

If we are to meet the UN goal of providing primary education to all the world's children by 2015 - one of the main global development goals set by a UN Millennium Summit in New York in 2000 - we have got to pull our socks up! We must first overhaul the system from top to bottom but unfortunately, poor countries like ours may have no choice but to turn to untrained instructors and parents to meet our teaching needs as