

Nationalise Primary Education

Primary school teachers have been staging a fast-until-death at Dhaka's Mukhtangan for quite some time now without much of an impact on the government. This should not have been so. Their demands are very simple and with much money remaining unutilised in the education sector should not have been a problem. The Prime Minister's commitment that the demands of the teachers will be met phase by phase is not particularly convincing.

This would indicate that the government accepts the demand, on principle. The government has not also said that there is a financial crunch. So where is the problem? Nationalised schools do not come in the way of a free market economy. Even in the heartland of capitalism, the United States, schools are the jurisdiction of the state. Just to emphasise the importance of education in the US one only has to be reminded that the last amendment to the constitution was regarding school bussing. The law made it compulsory for students to travel to school by bus. So much so that enough there was rigorous debate about whether such a move violated fundamental rights but, after thorough legal examination it was settled that racial integration was more important than any other issue. The situation in the whole of Europe is no different. There are hardly any private schools to be found. Education in modern society is accepted as the main building block of the modern state and therefore cannot be ignored or left to the vagaries of market forces.

Even in Bangladesh it is understood that the donor community, including the World Bank, had proposed nationalisation of primary schools in the early '90s as an important component in the fight against poverty. The idea was shelved temporarily to see if schools were better managed locally with financial support from the government. A very small portion of money was to be contributed locally to indicate local support. The system apparently has not worked very well. The process of nationalisation and fund release from the directorate has become more important than educating students. In retrospect it seems it is much simpler for the state to take over.

The salary structure of the teachers is extremely humiliating. It does not ensure a proper living for teachers. The discriminatory nature of the salary speaks for itself. It is being said now that a school teacher's salary is much lower than that of a government driver. This is hardly expected to attract bright people to the profession. The government should realise the importance of the "software" in its drive for universal primary education. Research should