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Primary School And Literacy

Shahabuddin Mahtab

THE government has declared that compulsory primary education will commence from the 1st of January, 1992. Its success will, however, depend on an effective machinery to implement it; and its accountability.

Our failures in the past have been too many and this has also been reflected in the Fourth Year-Plan.

It has often been stated, that the 'opportunity' cost for sending a child to a primary school is the reason for poor enrolment in Class I and gradual dropping out in the successive classes. Poverty cannot be said to be the reason for our illiteracy. West Bengal, Kerala, Sri Lanka and Myanmar have high literacy rates, in spite of the fact that their per capita income is similar to ours.

During the last decade huge amounts of public funds and external aid have been funneled in the primary education sector, without any visible improvements in the increase of li-

teracy. Of the one hundred crore illiterates in the world, more than 8.6 crore illiterates are in Bangladesh alone.

It is, therefore, transparently clear that both our strategy and management have failed to make any dent in our illiteracy. Some of those failures have been blatantly recognised in the Fourth Five Year Plan.

Our thrust from now on should be more in the development of the human resources, and less on the development of physical facilities. In every week we see the pictures of dilapidated primary school buildings in the news media. In the last decade we spent the major part of our resources in the construction of school buildings, and nationalising the primary schools (rather, the nationalising of the remunerations of the teachers). Our attention to these two areas have not resulted in a marked increase of school enrolment or pre-

venting the dropouts from doing so.

We do not need expensive buildings and furniture in the rural areas. It would be much better to have bamboo/mud houses with tinned roof in symmetry with village environment, and evolve a way, where we could get the maximum amount of help from the local community/union parishads. The taking over of all the responsibilities by the Government, has crippled the local/community initiative participation and responsibility. For the present, the government may withdraw itself from the repairs and maintenance of the primary school buildings, and this responsibility can be given to the local community.

We may also ponder, whether we should go ahead and also nationalise the remaining primary schools. Our objective each time is to raise the quality of the primary school teaching and the enrolment of children who

are in the school-going age.

The Fourth Five-Year Plan envisages the provision of school lunches. The expenditure may run into several hundred crores of taka on this programme. Keeping this in view, we may provide lunches in particular areas as an experimental-pilot project. It is rather painful to observe that in spite of the massive doses of grant/aid given to this sector, we have hardly attained any meaningful literacy rate in the country. We have remained rather static, as a result of which the absolute numbers of the illiterates have increased fast.

The government of Begum Khaleda Zia has to ensure that we attain a respectable rate of literacy by the turn of the century. Unless we attain a literacy rate of at least fifty per cent, both the growth of the economy, and the future course of the democratic culture will be endangered.