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The content and context of education policy

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To widen the literacy base from the existing 22 per cent to 50 per cent of the population in five years' time beginning 1982 is one of the major goals of the much publicized education policy the present government has, for some time, been trying to introduce.

For some of its contents, especially the question of teaching foreign languages, the policy became controversial and an issue for hot debates. Because of the government's handling of the delicate issues in a rather naive fashion some of the good aspects of the policy remained beyond notice.

As a result whatever had to happen has already happened. And of late, on the face of bitter criticism, the government had to suspend its implementation, at least partially, which was scheduled to begin from the very start of the current academic year.

Not only that the government had to go for eliciting public opinion on its already much controversial education policy by circulating a questionnaire. Methodwise, nothing could be worse and more unscientific. Ironically the government is all the time speaking of making the system of education scientific.

The government's declared objective behind its stammering efforts to introduce the policy is to reform, both structurally and contentwise, the existing system of education.

The questionnaire recently circulated by the ministry of education for assessing public opinion on the proposed educational reforms frankly admits some of the failures, notably the fact that the rate of literacy increased by a meager two per cent while that of population by more than 100 per cent during the last three decades and a half.

PRIMARY ENROLMENT

Of the eight million school-age children, it admits, only 56 per cent are enrolled each year in the beginner's class in the primary schools. For the rest there is not even the required class room facilities and they also need to be motivated for attending the schools.

What's more shocking is that sixty per cent of those enrolled drop out in the very second year and before completing the primary education their number swells to 80 per cent.

Worse still, the questionnaire says, the enrolment in the primary schools declined by 12 per cent in 1981 compared to that of 1978. During the years in between, the enrolment in the primary level remained alarmingly static while the population continued to grow at a pace much faster than in the past.

NATIONALIZATION

The declining order in the rate of literacy in the country began in 1974, for what, many believe, the nationalization of nearly 56 thousand primary schools with more than 150 thousand teachers by Sheikh Mujib's government. The nationalization in the education sector, like the industrial and commercial sectors, proved to be unproductive.

Before the mass national-

ization of the schools, particularly, during the pre-independence days, the performance of the primary schools was far better. The standard of education started to fall sharply with the nationalization of the schools.

The teachers, in most cases, lost their earlier zeal and devotion to educate the future generation. The whole system turned into just another extension of the governmental bureaucracy.

The main thrust of the proposed education policy remains expansion of the literacy base in the country, without which, the planners believe, no development program, whether economic or social, industrial or agricultural, could be properly implemented.

DEVELOPMENT FAILURE

Failures of the past development programs can safely be attributed to the widespread illiteracy in the country, they opine. They strongly believe that creation of a "meaningful" literacy environment is a sine qua non for ensuring effective implementation of nation-building programs. And they consider investment in educational sector is much more productive than in industrial or commercial sectors.

The overall education sector received a significant part of national budget as it was not considered to be a basic area for investment. Of the rather limited allocation, primary education-meant for improving the literacy situation--however, always got the major share.

100 CRORE TAKAS PER ANNUM

Since 1974, the government has been spending more than 100 crore takas annually for recurring expenditures of primary education. Separate amounts are spent for the development of primary education. For the current fiscal year a fund of more than 150 crore takas has been allocated for recurring expenditures of primary education.

Since 1980 the government has been distributing free of cost all books to the students of classes one and two. From this year the program has also covered class three. It aims at encouraging primary education for as many school-age children as possible, the majority of whom, because of poverty cannot afford to buy the books.

To foster female education, the government has made it a point to provide the uniforms to the students of class two. Then, if it is possible, the boys would also get their dresses for attending the schools.

PRESENT SITUATION

The present government feels that efforts are on to torpedo its programs "for raising the rate of literacy." The bureaucracy has many ways to do it. This time, the government feels, it has been done by providing misleading statistics. Under a decision of the government, the students of classes one and two were scheduled to have their text books at the state expense and much earlier. The students of class three were to get them at half the price.

The first month of the academic year has already passed. What is the situation now? It may sound unbelievable, but the books distributed were, according to both official sources and newspaper reports, much less than required. As a result many of the students have just no option but to attend their classes without the text books.

A faction of the primary school teachers has claimed that not more than one-third of the books required were distributed by the government while the education ministry officials try to say feebly that 60 per cent of the students have been covered.

The government then tried to clarify that the books distributed were far less than required. It held out a fresh assurance that the students who have been left out would be given the books by April next, when the first four months of the academic year would just be over.

The controversy of the percentage of distribution is clearly unnecessary. What is more important is the anxiety and concern that the situation has caused to the students, who were yet to get the books, and their guardians.

NO BOOKS FOR 10 LAKH STUDENTS

The government had asked the concerned officials to get the actual the number of the students in the classes one and two all over the country. And accordingly it printed 17 lakh copies of the books, so that all the students in the two classes could get them. But the number of the students, as it turned out, are far more. Wherefrom the remaining students, numbering not less than 10 lakhs, will get their books, the authorities now ponder, unless and until they were printed afresh.

The stand of the authorities is that if they could print 17 lakh copies, they could as well print ten lakh more. Why then the wrong statistics were supplied? Clearly the government is in trouble. It has to arrange the books for the rest of the students. And if printing of the books starts a fresh right now it will take at least three months' time. But the session began in January last.

The government, is now planning to hold a conference of all thana and district level educational officers in Dhaka to find out the actual reasons for book shortage.

The government's program to increase the rate of literacy by 28 per cent over a period of five years ending in 1987, appears to be rather unrealistic, considering the fact the in last thirty-five years the rate could be increased by two per cent only.

The new education policy of the government proposes to set up a primary school for every two thousand people or in an area of two kilometers. Under the community learning program, the proposed policy demonstrated an

awareness of the need for motivating the guardians, especially in the rural areas, to send their wards to the schools. The question of the dedication of the teachers and incentives to the students were also touched by the program.

The ideas for organizing teacher-student-guardian associations under the program seem to be nice. But how far such associations in the given levels, especially in the rural areas with the present socio-economic conditions, would be really useful, is open to question.

A realistic program, taking all past mistakes, failures and prevailing socio-economic conditions into account, is needed to change the situation. The need to raise the literacy rate is undeniable for progress of the society. But that would need creation of a conducive atmosphere.

No government could ever think of imposing its ideas to obtain desired results. If rate of literacy is to be improved, a thorough study of primary curriculum to make it more easier and less controversial, should be of immediate concern. And the need for creating a happy teaching community devoted with a missionary zeal for educating future generation should also be taken into account.