

## Primary school dropouts in CHT must be arrested

PRIMARY school dropouts in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, reported 59 per cent in 2012, being higher than the national rate, calculated at 26 per cent by primary education officials, is a pointer to the government's negligence towards one of the fundamental principles of the state policy, as laid out in the constitution, of having measures in place to extend compulsory education to all children and to relate education to the needs of society. Educationalists and educationists, as a New Age report published on Sunday said, put down this disproportionate primary school dropout among the national minorities to the fact that a majority of the schools in the three hill districts do not use the student's first language as the medium of instruction. Less than 10 per cent of the 1,561 government primary schools, which have 2.17 lakh students enrolled, have multilingual education system; in addition, 132 pre-primary schools, which receive UNDP support, offer multi-lingual education with texts prepared in 12 national minority languages. Other reasons blamed, by rights activists, for the high dropouts are the distance of schools, communications problems and unfavourable social environment.

All this shows that the government has not straightened the issues that have so far constrained education of the national minorities in the hill districts. In addition to struggling to reach schools regularly on time, mostly because of the distance of schools and communications problems, the students continue to struggle with understanding texts, in Bangla, and classroom teaching, mostly imparted by teachers from the Bengali community. The government has already missed an early 2014 deadline for printing primary textbooks in six languages for national minority students, with plans to gradually print textbooks for students up to Class III in the languages. After missing the deadline, set in 2012, the government has now extended the deadline till 2016, for five of the languages earlier decided, that too at a slow pace caused, as the officials involved said, by a controversy regarding the option of Roman or Bangla letters to be used in writing Santali, the language used by the Santals who are said to number more than 1,50,000 in Bangladesh. It is time that the government understood that, as education research suggests, students taught in the language used at home and within the community for the initial years of their lives, are more likely to succeed in school and tend to develop better thinking skills while such a situation helps parents to participate in their children's learning, thus, stopping much of the dropouts caused by language barrier.

Under the circumstances, it is an immediate imperative for the government to seriously attend to the schooling of national minority children, by removing all the obstacles, primarily education in the first languages. The government needs to do this to live up to its constitutional obligations and to its commitment to Ekushey February, now International Mother Language Day which means to promote linguistic diversity and multilingualism, and to remain true to the aspirations for linguistic pluralism that has guided the nation from the language movement to the emergence of Bangladesh.