

Education - A Tale Of Two Worlds

Although Article 26 of The Universal Declaration on Human Rights recognises education as one of the fundamental human rights and in 2000 participants from 164 countries attending the World Education Forum in Dakar pledged to provide education for all because it is a catalyst for human development. According to an UNESCO report, early childhood care and education is still a privilege for young children in the nine high population countries known as the E-9 group - Bangladesh, Brazil, China, Egypt, India, Indonesia, Mexico, Nigeria and Pakistan.

But as education can improve the quality of life by enhancing the ability of households to manage health problems, improve nutrition and childcare and plan for the future; it is a requirement and essential to our economic development. Education allows people a greater role in economic life, and gives them the ability to make choices about their future. It also gives them more job opportunities. An adult with a primary education earns twice as much as an adult without any schooling. Education also promotes political stability and democracy. According to UNESCO women in Bangladesh with a secondary education are three times more likely to attend a political meeting than are women with no education.

This is the ideal but yet again we have fallen far short of it especially in the rural areas as students appearing in the Secondary School Certificate (SSC) examination did not fare as well as their urban counterparts. Educationists say rural families lack the financial ability to educate their children. That may be true but far worse is the reported lack of facilities and quality education in rural schools. Whereas in the past, many meritorious students came out of rural schools, today the rural populace is becoming increasingly marginalised.

One reason often cited is that education has become a business where marginal sections of society have no place. Although it can be seen that people today recognise the need for education, commercialisation of this essential sector has blocked their way. The continued inability to provide elementary and secondary schooling of a recognised standard to a substantial proportion of children has had a disheartening effect on the people despite public recognition that education is the most effective route to individual mobility.

The growing hunger for education has been accompanied by a decline in public spending on education per capita and resulted in its rapid privatisation which has made private education one of the most profitable sectors of the economy. Education is a human right, but more than that it is the essential element in sustainable development and the reduction of poverty. A lack of education prevents people from realizing their potential both as individuals and as productive members of society. Education is also an investment for the future but considering the high cost of sending children to school most have to make do with third class alternatives. In other words, those who have money can send their children to a good school, but those who do not have no alternative other than a government school.

But when government schools are in such a poor condition, comparison is inevitable. This causes disparity making the education system in Bangladesh a tale of two worlds - worlds that are miles apart. In other words the result is that the children from poor families cannot compete in public examinations because they cannot afford private coaching. But the high cost of coaching that puts poor students at a disadvantage is defeating the government's policy for universal primary education despite numerous efforts and incentives, including food-for-education and stipend programmes. And though most government schools are mismanaged and offer poor lessons, the poor, who form the bulk of the country's people, cannot think of sending their children to private schools or private coaching centres because of the costs. Although there have been at least six education commissions to deal with the problems of education, progress has been slow and the education system of the country remains in limbo. But, if elimination of poverty and inequality are still the prime objective of the government, investment in children has to become a national priority and the inequalities in the system have to be ironed out.