

Illiteracy : Making Of The Volatile Politics

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IT is a common feature of our society that educated politicians, intellectuals and leaders of the society alike bear the same vision in mind—that the nation becomes educated. But the gap between their vision and the reality is too wide to bridge.

The government, for that matter the political party in power, formulate the policies of the country. But the policies are often deformed because of the narrowed down political outlook of the governments which try to influence the policies in their way. For this reason, policies change every time there is a change in the government.

The much emphasised programme for Compulsory Primary Education (CPE) was in fact initiated soon after the liberation in 1971. But in last 20 years it failed to take off because of political instabilities, change of education policy with the intermittent change of political power, the creeping poverty. These, acting together, in fact inflated the rate of illiteracy in the country.

The first Education Commission in Bangladesh was formed in 1974. Although, this Commission recommended making education compulsory at all levels, it is now being implemented in 1993, about some 19 years later.

The Commission in 1974 said that primary education should be made compulsory up to class eight. By 1980, education up to class five should be made compulsory. While by 1983, it should be stretched over to class eight. But these recommendations never found any outlet because of the political change overs.

The next government in power published its interim education policy in 1978. This also felt the need for making primary education compulsory and free for students up to class five. The deadline for achieving this was set in 1983. But the wheel of power turned again and the policy remained a mere paper work.

In 1988, the second Education Commission report was published which recommended universal primary education up to class five has to

be made tuition free by 1995. By the year 2000, it would be further raised to class eight. The same recommendations was, in fact, made in the 1974 Commission report. The new report said that compulsory education programme should begin from 1991.

But the change in politics occurred again in '90 and the programme could not be started. As a result, the compulsory primary education programme which was to be started from 1991, began in 1992 in 68 thana's. One year later it started throughout the country.

Other than the political ups and downs, a study of Primary Education Directorate has identified fund crises of the government, lack of commitment, curriculum with no practical application, lack of good relationship between teachers and students, school environment not attractive for children, financial crisis of the parents etc as other reasons which acted in way of making primary education universal.

The currently undertaken primary education programme has addressed these problems and the policy has also been reformed accordingly. Different sub-committees have also been formed to combat the obstacles to education.

The government has set some targets for achieving education for all by 2000. Some of these are: motivation, awareness building, increasing capacity of the schools, ensuring people's participation etc. Three strategies have been chalked out to ensure these: social mobilisation, public policy advocacy, media communication and forming alliances.

A massive social initiative and its sustenance one now the keys to ensuring education for all. Different seminars, workshop and symposiums are being held throughout the country for the coveted social mobilisation programme.

Some key persons and organisations which can play a significant role in expediting social mobilisation has also been identified. They include people's representatives, social welfare, women and health depart-

ments, NGO's, Rotary Clubs, Lions Clubs etc. Village leaders, religious leaders, intellectuals and writers are also included in the list.

Steps have also been taken to use the mass media in the motivational programme. Popular actors and actresses are acting in dramas and play which aim at persuading the people.

The newspapers have also come forward in this regard by printing features on education.

Other than these, rallies of parents had been held in the north region schools where the admission and attendance rates of students are very low. A total of 68 such rallies in 17 districts were held in 1992 in which 27,600 mothers took part. They were briefed about the importance of education. Interestingly, after the rallies were held the same schools experienced increased flow of students.

To encourage the educational institutions, the best primary schools are being identified as model schools. In 1991, 500 schools in Rajshahi and in 1992, 427 schools were given this recognition. Other forms of motivational works include distribution of stickers carrying slogans for education.

Considering all these, achieving the target of education for all is now only a matter of time. But the gap between the reality and the paper policies is still wide. In this country, a lot of planning and policies had never been implemented. Policies alone can not ensure education for all. An official of the Ministry of Education, Dr. Muhammad Delwar Hossain, has rightly pointed out that it would still take another 40 years to achieve education for all if everything goes on at this pace. England took 30 years to make education compulsory.

Although the leaders of the country sound high about making education for all by 2000 a success, they are also in doubt about it. Former President H.M. Ershad announced compulsory primary education from 1990 as a step towards education for all. But he told the meeting of the National Education Advisory Coun-

cil in 1990 that it would need to work five times to make education for all a success within the next ten years.

One can not expect a proper implementation of the programme alone by the Mass Education and Primary Education Departments. There can not be any alternatives to a social movement to make it a success. According to statistics, the number of eligible school going children would stand at two crores. To meet their demand, it would need to increase social investment on primary education by 15 per cent. At present, the spending in this sector is Taka 1360.42 crores. This stands for half of the total amount for education. Other than this, 2,800 new schools will have to be built each year and 14,250 new teachers will have to be recruited. All these figures today appear to be too Herculean to be met so quickly, especially when only seven years remain to be the year 2000.

Free primary education started in Bangladesh in 1812. But still there are 7.40 crore people uneducated in the country. Every day 5,000 new entries are made to this uneducated class. In the last 30 years, the literacy rate increased by only 7.8 per cent. In the last 10 years, the pace was at 5 per cent.

To steer education out of this alarming situation, the first thing to be done is to keep education policy clear of politicisation. So that the education programmes do not trip every time there is a change in government.

Emphasis has to be laid on poverty elimination and health related programmes.

The rich section of the society has to be convinced about the need for child education. Because, a large section of disadvantaged children works in the rich people's houses or offices. If given a chance, these children can become educated. At the same time, efforts have to be made in making people feel the need for educating the girls.

— Development Features