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### Looking at Universal Primary Education

UNIVERSAL Primary Education is a concept to which the present administration and all previous governments were fully committed. The scheme, designed at removing the scourge of illiteracy, has not made much headway.

Weak management and lack of institutional support have been identified as the cause of the poor progress. The UPE scheme was launched in 1980. The scheme has never been able to reach its given targets. The governments were therefore forced to revise the scheme thrice. The date of the implementation period has also been extended a number of times.

It is natural therefore that the scheme was hit by price escalation. The current phase of the programme, at a cost of Tk. 860 crore, aims at

improving the admission rate of the primary school going children to 70 per cent and reducing the figure of drop-outs.

The failure to reach the target during the first and second five-year plan periods has led to the decline in the admission rate at the primary schools from targeted ninety to seventy per cent.

The Planning Commission, after an evaluation of the scheme, has suggested that the implementing agencies address themselves to the task of correcting the abuses.

The implementing agencies are paying attention to primary schools under government control leaving the primary schools under private management to fend for themselves. There are about 7,353 primary schools under private management out of a total of 44,569 primary schools throughout the country.

The principal weakness of the scheme is the absence of reliable data on the number of school going children of primary age. No survey was conducted before the launching of the scheme in 1980. It has therefore become a difficult task to assess the exact number of school going children of the primary age. The present assessment is based on conjecture and not on facts.

The claim of the Education Ministry that the current enrolment figure at the primary level is 71 per cent is open to dispute.

The Planning Commission report revealed a depressing picture. The report said neither the Education Ministry nor the Directorate of Primary Education has any well laid down policy for the construction and repairs of the primary schools. Political consideration is given more weightage in the selection of schools for Government grants and other benefits.

The Planning Commission report said about fifty per cent of the primary schools in the rural areas are in dilapidated condition making regular holding of classes an impossible task. It was surprising to find in the report that in urban areas new school buildings are being raised to replace buildings which are in perfect condition.

The Planning Commission evaluation report has made critical references to the wastage and negligence in the construction works of the primary schools. The cost escalation has been shown to have risen from eleven per cent to 79 which has not been acceptable to the Planning Commission.

The prevailing situation is a measure of the incompetence of the executing agencies. Widespread concern has been echoed at the deplorable state of primary education. This calls for exposing the corrupt and indolent officials so that the much vaunted UPE programme reaches its desired level of implementation.

### Schools For Working Children

Dholaikhal Shishu Kallyan Prathamik Biddalaya in Dholaikhal and Fatullah Shishu Kallyan Prathamik Biddalaya in Fatullah built in the industrial areas of the city will provide educational facilities for children who work in different factories and workshops in Dholaikhal and break bricks in Fatullah. These working children who have to earn a living because of poverty will now be able to attend school for one hour each day before they go to work.

Built by the Ministry of Education Dholaikhal Shishu Kallyan Prathamik Biddalaya was constructed at a cost of Taka twelve lakh and Fatullah Shishu Kallyan Prathamik Biddalaya was constructed at a cost of Taka fourteen lakh and fifty thousand. This is money well-spent. Both the schools can accommodate two hundred and fifty children.

In a society which is yet to be egalitarian and democratic education is confined to a limited few. Bringing education within reach of a wider spectrum of people is indeed a laudable step.

In Bangladesh unfortunately by far the largest section of the population do not have the opportunity for education mainly because of poverty. Due to it many children have to start earning a living at a very early age. Their parents with their meagre incomes cannot maintain them and as such they have to seek employment. At an age when most middle-class children go to school these economically deprived children have to earn their living.

Opening the doors of education to all sections of people is part and parcel of a democratic society. Without education for all no society can be democratic. It is indeed a good sign that the government has at last been conscious of providing education for all. But the opening of only two primary schools for working children is like a drop in the ocean. More schools for working children is needed and not only in Dhaka.