

Universal primary education

An urgent necessity

A sine qua non of national development is education. The prosperity of a nation largely depends upon the type of education extended to its learners. Compulsory primary education is rightly regarded as an urgent necessity if illiteracy is to be eradicated from Bangladesh.

But implementing such a scheme will be a gigantic undertaking in a poor country like ours where more than seventy-five per cent of the population is still illiterate. Nevertheless, a start has to be made within the limits of our resources. Bold and speedy action is required, because, unnecessary delay may defeat the noble objective of our government of introducing universal compulsory primary education as early as possible.

A Review of the Past: An assessment of the present situation indicates that the attainment of the goal of universal primary education has receded with the lapse of time and Bangladesh today has one of the highest rates of illiteracy in the world. During the period 1951-70 the percentage of children attending primary schools increased from 33 to 50 showing an increase of 17 per cent over a period of 20 years. In the Fourth Five-Year Plan (1970-75) of Pakistan it was strongly mentioned that "the base of primary education is too inadequate either to provide facilities for universal primary education or to ensure lasting literacy. In order to provide for universal primary education upto class V by 1980, the Fourth Plan programme will be set to accelerate the growth by large expansion and qualitative improvement".

First Five-Year Plan (1973-78): The first two years of Bangladesh were spent to place all things in their original places to inaugurate a new chap-

ter in our national history. The First Five-Year Plan (1973-78) appeared as a product of the Planning Commission of the Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh in November, 1973 with the message of starting the works of all sectors of national economy in a planned manner.

The First Five-Year Plan included all sectors of national economy and interest and among these sectors education and manpower was marked as a distinct phase. Under this sector primary education formed an issue for proper planning and development. And this article will present an account of the progress that primary education achieved during the plan period, because, without a clear comprehension of the progress of primary education during the plan period, it will be well nigh impossible to say anything as regards the prospects for universal primary education during the Two-Year Plan (1978-80).

The First Five-Year Plan sought to put together a coherent and feasible programme for education in order to gear it to the national manpower requirements without undermining the fundamental aim of education which is humanisation of the society. The programme primarily envisaged to make up to the maximum extent possible the loss suffered by the educational institutions during the war of liberation, to arrest deterioration in the quality of education and relieve the pressure of admission on the existing educational institutions. The strategy covered both formal and non-formal systems in order to produce adequately skilled manpower to meet the developmental needs of the country. The plan, however, left sufficient flexibility to accommodate future policy recommendations

of the National Commission of Education.

In formulating the programmes for primary education the Planning Commission kept the following points in view:

- The total enrolment will go up by about 26.0 lakh from a base of 60.0 lakh to 85.94 lakh.
- The percentage of primary age-group students attending schools will increase from 58 per cent to 73 per cent in 1978.
- Ninety per cent of the boys of primary age-group will be given access to primary education during the plan period, compared to 76 per cent now attending the schools.
- Participation of girls will be accelerated. At present 40 per cent of the girls of primary age-group attend schools; this will be raised to 55 per cent during the Plan. This will lead to an increase in the actual enrolment of girls in the system by 11.8 lakh compared to 14.1 lakh for boys.
- The curriculum at the primary level will be revised to make it more relevant to real life obtaining in the country.
- Textbooks and instructional materials will be supplied to all children free of cost or at subsidised rates.
- Drop-out rate will be reduced from 63 per cent by undertaking supplementary and non-formal measures such as well-designed educational programmes through radio and television.
- Educated housewives will be encouraged to teach in primary schools.
- Double shift will be introduced in 5,000 primary schools, for which the existing facilities will be expanded and developed.
- The programmes of the 15,000