

School Environment And Books

Commentator

THE rate of enrolment at the primary level records little increase on the one hand, and the rate of school drop-outs continues to remain high on the other. The very future of the country's education sector under the circumstances, appears to be bleak irrespective of the lofty objectives behind the programmes and schemes drawn up by the policy-makers.

One of the factors that stand in the way of the spread of education in our society is poverty, no doubt. But the situation can hardly be explained by poverty alone. Unless the very system of education is recast bringing it closer to the needs of the people and unless the conditions prevailing in the education sector are made to improve significantly neither the rate of dropping out will show any fall nor the enrolment will go up fulfilling the expectations of the policy-makers. Guardians must feel that it is in their interest that they will have to send their children to school even if it may mean economic hardship. And a child once enrolled must be made interested in education to ensure that he remains at school for a minimum period to get the basic education if not to complete the SSC level.

NEGATIVE FACTORS

It is a tragedy indeed that as many as sixty per cent of the children enrolled in class one every year drop out of school before reaching class three. While we must bring more and more children within the fold of formal education through strengthening the educational infrastructure our immediate objective should therefore be to create conditions for those enrolled to be retained. This can be brought about only if certain negative factors that now prevail in the education sector are removed. It is time the policy-makers identified these negative factors and drew-up pragmatic

programmes to tackle them.

School Environment: Two of the negative factors that now bedevil education at the lower level are the uncongenial school environment and unrealistic curriculum and ill-conceived curricula. The schools, particularly in the rural areas, lack basic amenities. Most schools housed in dilapidated structures do not have proper seating arrangements and library facilities worth the name. Worn-out blackboards, chairs and benches with one or two legs missing, a shed which may be leaking during the monsoon and some teachers and students are what go by the name of a school. But certainly a school means more than an assembly of teachers and students. If an environment conducive to education is absent it is not a school in a real sense. That the standard of teaching has recorded a sharp fall in recent years is an open secret. Keeping the existing school environment as it is and without proper supervision by inspection authorities it will prove an uphill task to bring about any significant improvement in the teaching standard. Coupled with the negative school environment and lack of supervision is the problem that arises from a largely unrealistic curriculum and all that it means.

Difficult books containing hitherto unknown elements which prove a problem for both teachers and students, on the one hand, and non-availability of books in time on the other, leads to a situation which acts as a discouraging factor particularly in the rural areas. And naturally, it is in the rural areas that the rate of drop-outs is higher—and disproportionately so. Books being a puzzle most students find little interest in education and few teachers feel confident in discharging their educational responsibilities. The recently introduced books writ-

ten in accordance with the changed curriculum are admittedly difficult and help-books stand outlawed. A student failing to understand the contents of a book expects the teacher to explain them to him but in most cases the teacher also is often at a loss to confidently interpret the meaning of the text concerned. All this gives rise to even an increased demand for help-books. But getting hold of a help-book also proves to be of little help. For, with the ban imposed on them the standard of help-books has suffered a serious decline. But inferior help-books continue to be published and sold at a high price—in spite of the ban. The restriction has only pushed a trade that was legal into the blackmarket and relatively good help-books have disappeared because of the risk involved in the illegal trade. Only some dare-devils who have no reputation to protect thrive on the persistent demand for help-books.

The situation vis-a-vis difficult text-books is so desperate that some teachers do not feel like discouraging their students from using help-books. They feel it is better for a student to somehow pass an examination by reading help-books than to fail altogether by reading but not understanding the text-books. The books that the students find particularly difficult are those of mathematics, social studies, science and Arabic. The difficulty with English is, of course, nothing new. Much of mathematics is entirely new science books are heavily experiment-oriented social studies appears to have been written for an educated audience and Arabic books are generally badly printed with 'Harkats' mostly missing and the grammar portions inadequately explained. Since the text-books of Arabic give the meanings of only key-words and expressions, without the help of a key-book a student

will hardly learn the language unless he is sufficiently aided by an Arabic-knowing guardian or a private tutor at home. Science books have been written with the presumption that the students will find out answers to various questions by undertaking experiments in the class room and at home. But the fact is: neither are there laboratory facilities in the schools nor the teachers will find enough time to demonstrate all those experiments. The result: half the books concerned will remain beyond comprehension. And, of course the science books have been unnecessarily crowded with too many details which could have been easily avoided without affecting the standard of education.

According to some experienced teachers the nature of the books is enough to induce students of average merit to discontinue attending classes. While the dropping out of schools had always been a phenomenon of our education sector these educationists wonder if the difficult nature of the newly introduced books and the ban on help-books are going to act as a boost to the process.

The authorities can easily trim the books rendering them less difficult and lift the ban on help-books and ensure the availability of standard help-books. If this is not done education in the coming years may come to be a luxury of the rich who can afford to send their children to better schools staffed by better equipped teachers or can engage qualified private tutors.

Incidentally, a scrutiny of the merit list of the SSC examinations of the recent years will show that mostly students from the urban schools find a position of honour. The authorities, the educationists and the social leaders must ponder over the situation. Is there any reason to presume that merit has an urban bias?