

## OPINION

### Literacy and Education

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Ekram Kabir's article on 'literacy and education' published 26 March, 1999 is in reference. The writer deserves thanks for his thoughtful article on such a vital issue as he tried to identify some of the anomalies including discrimination which are a great hindrance in education/literacy, and though his observations are very comprehensive, yet I feel like sharing my views.

Anomalies are there, because there are various forms of education programmes in vogue. The ones worth mentioning are — formal, non-formal, informal, private, government, madrasah, maktab vernacular, English medium, quasi-English medium cadet college etc. Further, there are also systems within the systems.

As regards discrimination, the glaring ones are that in the so-called good schools, children are mostly taken on a highly competitive basis where only the children of the rich and the elite are mostly the beneficiaries. This is because these people can afford to arrange pre-test coaching at high rates by employing private tutors — not one, but several. And as such even the average calibre child of this class can improve his or her efficiency and skills to pass the pre-test/admission tests defeating the poor but meritorious students who can't afford special coaching. Of course exceptional poor children at times bit the rich but they are too few to make any impact.

This is more true in case of cadet college admission test. A random survey would suggest that nearly 80 per cent of the children of the elite find their way into such sophisticated institutions. Where they normally do well, but not very well, if we take the cost benefit ratio into consideration. For example cadets secure top positions. So do the children from normal non-cadet school/colleges. But the former do good after an expenditure of around ten times more than what is done on a normal non-cadet student.

Viewed in this context, the discrimination would seem to be incredible and almost a luxury for a poor country like Bangladesh.

The other discrimination is in relation to admission of the wards of the poor class of people, particularly in private schools. There are known cases where the children of poor guardians are disallowed admission with the lame excuse that such children would pollute the school atmosphere. This is not only unfortunate but

even condemnable. But who cares? Likewise the children of drivers and peons are also not welcomed. Of course exceptions are there. But by and large the above is the practice. Further even if the admission is made open for such students, they are supposed to be eliminated/screened out at the pre-test for the reasons stated earlier.

These anomalies and discriminations are great hurdles towards expansion and proliferation of education and making it universal. These therefore have to be removed/narrowed as far as possible. The different forms of education systems should be given an integrated form at least at secondary and higher secondary levels.

The Madrasa education system should continue accommodating some of the main subjects of general education so that the gap that now exists should be down-sized and equality ensured. Conversely the general education should accommodate some of the main subjects of theology, so that when one passes out, he does not become only an economic man rather an Allah-fearing man. This will harmonise the two systems ensuring equal opportunity for all to go for higher education without discrimination.

The other way discrimination may be eliminated is to do away with all the cadet colleges and replace it by normal schools/colleges, for by doing so nearly 100 more normal schools/colleges can be run with the money and resources which are now spent on 10 cadet colleges. However, if cadet colleges are desired, it should be run by the private sector, the way the private universities are run. At least the government will be relieved of maintaining this white elephant on the one hand while opportunity for the majority will be created, on the other. The simple formula is: the more schools, the more the education will come into operation.

Non-formal education may also continue for the illiterate with adopting a system so that after some literacy lessons, they can find their way into the formal system and therefore can go for higher education. Thus a uniform system of education, if it could be designed, will cause, within the shortest possible time, the literacy rate to increase and the target of the government to ensure Education for All by the early next century may be achieved.