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## Right To Education

With every passing day we are falling behind in the race for socio-economic emancipation. The gap between realities and targets are getting wider and wider. The issues that seem urgent by some considerations attract our attention rather than the intrinsically important ones. Thus we talk more about mosquito bites, inconveniences of loadshedding, detention in traffic jam and the like. Even leakage of public examination question papers are deliberated upon but not the daily routine of the schools which is by far the most important exercise in the life of a nation.

About half a century ago the United Nations adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights embodying the right of everyone to education and that "education shall be free, at least in the elementary stages". The state parties to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) adopted on November 20, 1989 recognised the right of the child to education and with a view to achieving this right progressively and on the basis of equal opportunity they shall, in particular, make primary education compulsory and available to all "...and take appropriate measures such as the introduction of free education and offering financial assistance in case of need".

The issues have received importance in Bangladesh right from the beginning. The Constitution of Bangladesh under the Fundamental Principles of State Policy lays down in Article 17: The state shall adopt effective measures for the purpose of (a) establishing a uniform mass-oriented and universal system of education and extending free and compulsory education to all children... (b) relating education to the needs of society and producing properly trained and motivated citizens to serve those needs; and (c) removing illiteracy within a specified time.

The most important step taken by the Government of Bangladesh in the light of the UNCRC is the formulation of the National Policy on Children. The main objectives of the policy are to harmonise all child development activities in the country with the provision of UNCRC.

There has undoubtedly been progress over the decades and literacy both in absolute numbers and percentage-wise has substantially increased. But the number of the illiterates continues to be daunting and we are nowhere near our target of removing illiteracy.

By one of the latest estimates, there are some 17.3 million school age (6-10 years) children in Bangladesh of whom 2.1 million are not enrolled in schools. About 30 per cent of the children who are enrolled in primary schools do not complete the five-year primary course.

Though public expenditure on education has been rising steadily over the years,—and currently it is at about five per cent of total allocation with primary education consuming more than half of the education budget—the allocation needs to be further enhanced urgently. A World Bank report says: Bangladesh will need to increase its annual expenditure at an average rate of seven per cent until the year 2000 in order to create adequate educational facilities for 80 per cent of its primary school-age children.

The situation on the ground is reflected in reports in a contemporary—one from Khulna and the other from Rajshahi division—and there are no reasons to presume that the picture in the other divisions are any different. The Khulna report says that the compulsory Primary Education in the 10 districts of the division is facing a setback and that the number of drop-outs is increasing despite good response to the Food for Education Programme. Another report from Rajshahi division says despite attractive provision of stipends for the girl students, the drop-outs are increasing. Apart from drop-outs and poor enrolment, attendance of girl students is also poor, the report says.

The causes of drop-outs are identified in the press reports as socio-economic. The World Bank mentions crowded class rooms, unrelated curriculum, poorly motivated teachers and the cost of keeping the child in school.

Whatever the causes, urgent attention and effective measures are warranted. It needs to be appreciated that the stake in primary education is basic.