

The Bangladesh Observer



Education With A Purpose

Our society needs to be put through its paces to see how steadily it is going ahead in all its sectors. But that will not happen unless one thing happens or is made to happen, first. That one thing is education. For, if education slips, everything else tends to slip; and if it slips badly, nothing goes or can go right with society. This truism sounding like a cliché must be thoroughly understood by those countries of the developing world which have made a mess of their education and yet hope or seem to claim that they are all going ahead. They are not.

We say understandingly 'those countries', for, as against them, a part of the hitherto backward third world has treated education as the highest priority in national development, and is visibly ahead of those who have not. Among them are, for instance, some oil-rich Arab countries like Iraq, Kuwait, Qatar, registering a literacy rate ranging from 40% to 71%. Some of these governments—whatever their form—have made education free up to university. The poorer Asian part takes shelter behind the facile argument that they are not rich enough to spend on education so generously. The question is not so much one of poor-or-rich equation as that of how either set of countries are using their resources, how indeed have they set their priorities. Some of the poorer countries including those heavily dependent on foreign aid (as we are) have far too strong reason to go for fundamental answers to their problems, in order to phase out their dependence and eventually emerge self-reliant. But progress in education staying as hobbled as it has for the past decades, that day of economic deliverance or independence, and consequent national pride and confidence may take depressingly long to come.

What we lack is an education with a purpose, it is two-in-one: general enlightenment and the ability acquired through education to make a living besides a farmer or industrial worker capable of understanding the latest information or know-how in his field will produce more than an illiterate one even with some technical skill. With about 80% illiteracy (and the 20% with much less than quality education) educationally—and developmentally—we are practically at a stand-still. Slogans may be politically rousing for such illiterate masses. They can never help build a country.

The easy generalisation about the Asian and African third world being backward is misleading. Divide the region into segments: South Asia, South East-Asia, East Asia, and Africa. In the East and Far-East for instance, Japan, China and South Korea or Taiwan (literacy 99%) provide examples of steadily growing economies despite—and because of revolutions (eg. China) or calamities (post-war Japan and S. Korea). This has been made possible by an education directed by policy and need to the pressing priorities. The education rate in them ranges between 60% and 99%. This is the simple arithmetic explaining the growth or progress rate achieved by them. The simple lesson is: Your progress rate is in exact proportion to your rate of education.

Our literacy rate being among the lowest in the world also explains our pace of growth. That nearly everything from politics through economies to law and order to intellectual and cultural performance to population control has been affected by this basic deficiency need hardly be emphasised. While the government's interest in education is revealed in its enhanced budget allocation and steps taking among other things, toward primary schools etc. all this will be minuscule compared with the actual national need, and by the standards of even some developing countries as we have shown. To make things worse even the existing system from the primary to the university level is yet to be run efficiently enough to yield the results the nation needs for social and economic development, on the desired scale. The twin basic purpose of. a) knowledge and enlightenment and b) capability to make a living is not what education is providing to ever growing numbers of those receiving it at present.

Most important: we have to get our development philosophy right.

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