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Universalisation Of Education

One factor to which the relative prosperity level between Afro-Asian third world countries is attributable is education or literacy. It is a fact, though, of which some of these countries (LDCs in particular) are yet to be as sensitively aware as they ought to be. This for the simple reason that there is no other way either to build a country on modern lines or to find an answer to the problems that are bound to arise in a society with the masses so steeped in ignorance that they cannot tell white from black, let alone good from bad. Other means of making them do so have been seen failing with disastrous consequences for the society concerned. Even so obvious a lesson as a rule gets lost on the very society that has been paying the price for illiteracy and ignorance on such an unconsciously large scale.

This sounds like a cliché—that education is the mainstay of a people's wellbeing. But clichés are often the grim truths worth serious attention by those who lead a nation. As for ourselves, the government appears to have risen to the need for education for the largest number of children, judging by its plans to implement plans and projects aimed at achieving it. Mention may be made of the Universal Primary Education and Eradication of Illiteracy (U.P.E.) programme aimed at achieving the twin objectives by the year 2000.

But reports of progress made since 1985, the year it was launched, do not seem to suggest that by 2000 we will be anywhere near the promised land. Even claiming 46% of the education budget and enrolment increasing from 63% to 66% over the past four years primary education seems to have made scant headway: whatever is gained in terms of numerical statistics is offset by the drop-out (65% as reported) rate, keeping society somehow in the same tunnel of ignorance. Which is aggravated by the annual increase of the population at 2.4% or more.

The very decade into which the country is heading promises to be a much tougher demographic problem making the literacy question more a wildgoose chase with the economy yet to get off the ground and taking long to do so. The fact is as long as education stays where it is now (21-22%), it will remain the main spoke in the economic wheel. Problems from joblessness to law and order, unrest in the labour sector, slowing production and other uncertainties, of which ignorance and illiteracy is a fertile breeding ground will be legion.

Though these are well-known fall-outs of a state of mass illiteracy continuing unredeemed for such a long time in society, examples set by other countries, near or far, rising to levels of prosperity only through education treated as the first national priority are well worth emulation. It is in this context that the need for serious rethinking, replanning, and reordering national priorities arises for the leadership. Waiting till 2000 will make things far worse. And the nation cannot afford to do that considering the visible and invisible consequences flowing from ignorance and illiteracy.

If education is at the heart of nearly everything that society lives on, and off, universalisation of it should start here and now. This would mean shelving for the time being development programme relatively of little national importance. Friendly countries and international institutions (W.B., I.M.F. and UN e.g.) helping Bangladesh out in many a sector have also to take into account this crucial need of a country like Bangladesh. They have been generous enough to Bangladesh in many a time of need and are expected to respond as generously in the matter of a thing on which success in any sphere is critically dependent.