

Women's education

The post-liberation period has seen some modest expansion in the literacy situation of the country. Expenditure on education has also steadily risen from 3.3 per cent of the total First Five-Year Plan to 3.7 per cent in the Second Five-Year Plan (1980-85) to a projected 5.5 per cent in the third (1985-90).

Although this increase still falls short of the requirements—primary school operating expenses per enrolled student came to Tk 186 or about US \$ 7.50, which is one of the lowest rates in the world—government development efforts register an unprecedented urgency. Recognizing the potential benefits of reaching universal primary education to all children, girls have specifically been singled out as the most legitimate medium through which a gradual but lasting transformation can come to the people of Bangladesh.

In the present state of the country's development, with the absolute number of illiterates speedily increasing, the most realistic goal for a substantial percentage of the population should be to complete primary school. Without this essential base, no amount of expenditure at the secondary and tertiary levels of education can change the lot of the nation for the better.

The Prime Minister has reiterated the government's pledge to spread primary education, specially for girls, through the upazila administration. The dividends which investments in human resource development can yield have been well documented in China and Sri Lanka, where enhancement in the status and well-being of women has proved to be directly instrumental in reducing the infant mortality rates, as well as in spontaneous family planning for most post-school mothers. This important contribution of basic education stands out in relief when compared to other developing countries which have not been wise in spending on education.

Development experts today recommend that socio-economic and population problems be tackled with more expenditure in the education and health sectors. Trying to cope with the population bomb without basic education and health care, is like putting the cart before the horse, they say.

Happily, our government's programmes and policies reflect this positive trend. In 1986 the national Universal Primary Education programme began a joint venture with UNESCO, UNDP, World Bank and UNICEF, aimed at a long-term process of curriculum renewal to improve the teaching-learning situation in primary schools, and thus the rate of enrolment and continuity in learning.

In order to make primary education viable it is not only necessary to bring the curriculum nearer to immediate realities but also to ensure that schools have the minimum physical amenities. A government "school-mapping" project in 1983 gave a dreary picture. It showed that only 22 per cent of the schools could be used year round, and 70 per cent only during the dry season; only 20 per cent had working tubewells during school days and under six per cent had working toilets. Together with the forbidding teaching methods—exam-oriented, rote-learning and corporal punishment practices—unattractive school houses certainly contribute to the high drop out