

Basic Education—A Fundamental Right

A child's right to receive an education has never been in question by responsible government but for him to be able to attain this right, the child is in need of a great deal of assistance, assistance given without any form of compromise or delay. Basic education must, therefore, become a tool for social transformation, guiding people towards a pursuit of lost human values by adopting an ancient concept, that of simple living and more harmonious life-styles such as was common to this part of the world in the past. To achieve this ideal, there must be a more organised effort by the community itself to strengthen the early development of children on a culturally acceptable basis but without turning it into a part of the formal education system.

To be able to attain all these ends primary education must necessarily be compulsory. Therefore, finding the necessary resources and working out effective ways to reduce costs have to be high on the agenda. Planning for primary education must, therefore, be undertaken on a more sensitive scale than it has to date and if we build it up based on our own experiences, it is certainly possible to achieve a more sensitive approach and, in the process, reduce the incidence of child exploitation in the form of labour—or worse.

But the lack of a truly reliable professional cadre at policy and management levels has served to handicap the best of intentions and such discrepancies must be rectified as soon as possible. For, if the goals we have set for ourselves for achieving universal primary education are to be reached, a significantly higher percentage of national income needs to be earmarked for the education sector and must be utilised more effectively than at present. But the government cannot be expected to carry this burden alone. Therefore, it is the responsibility of every citizen to participate in any way he can in what must be a national venture.

For a start, local communities can be properly motivated and mobilised into playing their part in this mammoth undertaking and the community must, as a result, show a greater interest in the education of their children and learn how to translate this into action. But with teachers poorly prepared for implementing the curriculum, especially a new or revolutionary one, much less supplementing it with classroom activities needed to promote values linking basic education with the culturally-based vision of development we hold dear to our hearts, more attention will have to be given to the training of teachers which, we believe, will automatically result in an improvement in school efficiency.

Although the non-formal mode of learning does serve a purpose in bringing children within some form of literacy programme this can only be a stop-gap arrangement until all children are brought under the regular programme. Therefore, this form of schooling must not be permitted to evolve into a parallel, second rate, system, and even then, only those schools who prepare their students and channel them back into the formal system should be permitted to operate, as is the case with the highly successful BRAC institutions.

Further to this and in keeping with SAARC agreements on primary education, political manipulation of the education system, especially at local level, must not be permitted and has, therefore, to be resisted and under no circumstances can the curricula be permitted to be manipulated for political ends. But, while concentrating on attaining the fundamental right to education for all children, no matter their economic or social status, the rights of the educationally advanced must not be ignored especially as today's tendency is among parents and guardians to pressurise their children to work even harder in mindless competition which can end only in lost childhood, the childhood which should, by rights, be carefree.