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Special schools

The opening of a school for under age workers outside Dhaka on Thursday marks the first step by any government in Bangladesh directed to the education of child labourers. President Ershad who took the initiative personally deserves plaudits for making a beginning in a vital area. The school, prototypes of which will be set up in other parts of the country, will provide basic education to these unfortunate children who had to take up jobs because of economic compulsions.

The presence of child labour cannot be denied. No matter how much we abhor the existence of underage workers in our midst, it is a grim reality and one of the products of poverty. As long as we cannot eradicate economic backwardness and the majority people continue to live below the poverty line, children would be forced to work either for earning their own livelihood or for helping the family's income. Among the child workers are many abandoned children or children who have drifted away from their families mainly due to economic reasons again. Specialised schools for such children should give them a new mooring in society and a hope for a better life in the future out of their present Dickensian drudgery and squalor.

President Ershad underscored the role of individual and community philanthropy in the setting up of schools for working children. At the opening ceremony of the newly established school on Thursday, the President called upon the affluent section of the society to help in projects aimed at the amelioration of conditions of the downtrodden and the socially disadvantaged. The government can aid the growth of such institutions by providing matching funds to all endeavours of private charities.

The employers of child labour should be at the vanguard of any social movement to help the underage workers. Some of the profits which they make from their enterprises can be utilised in institutions like schools and health clinics. Similar schools should also be set up for the woman workers in garment industries. Many of these women are unlettered but adult schools could help in eradicating this illiteracy. The employers will also benefit from these schools because a literate worker is likely to be more efficient than one who is unlettered.