

The Provision Of Continuing Education In Rural Bangladesh - II

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When new literates were surveyed in the Joyramkura programme, participants of 28 of the 33 groups said that they had read something other than the FE primers. Most of them, however mentioned children's school books, while a few said they had read newspapers, handbills in the bazar, posters and sign posts. In a Friends workshop with former FE participants, 18% report that they had read nothing at all since completing the FE course, and another 18% claimed to have read only Friends monthly news sheet for new literates and several others had read only other materials provided by the organization. There is an obvious lack in rural Bangladesh not just of reading matter suitable for new literates but of all types of books and periodicals.

I have drawn my examples from adult education programmes because I have firsthand experience in this area. However, as Gustavasson's (1990) research illustrates, there is also a great need for developing the literacy skills of drop-outs from the formal school system. Although a large number do not achieve a sustainable literacy level, the skills of a large number could be maintained and extended through continuing education opportunities.

If literacy skills are to be utilized fully, there is need to create an "environment of literacy". This may well be beyond the capacity of NGOs other than in their limited areas of work and even there to a limited extent, but it is a field where the Government could take the lead. By promoting the production and distribution of materials and the development of continuing education activities, several groups are helped. The adult new literates and the formal school dropouts are able to practice and develop their reading skills, and those who have not yet gained literacy may see its value and be motivated to join literacy programmes in the future. As Ryan (1985:377) points out, "it is true that literacy makes post-literacy possible, but it is also true that post-literacy makes literacy meaningful and motivating for the learner." Even for those organization that are too small or limited in resources to make a major impact on the "Literacy environment" of the general area of their work, they can interact with small groups and former learners to promote and reinforce the reading habit. A range of opportunities for learning and for advancing literacy skill needs to be provide (Ahmed, 1989:412).

Creating Structures for Continuing Education

The concept of continuing education as an organized activity is rare in Bangladesh even for those well educated in the formal sector. For rural people with limited literacy skills, the opportunities are even less. Because

of the scarcity of reading matter in the rural situation, villages have few structures for getting even what is available to the readers, and most of the graduates of adult literacy courses as well as drop-outs from the formal system lack the financial resources to buy what there is on the open market. Thus, NGOs have fund that they must help create structures whereby new literates can obtain reading materials and take part in continuing education. In the Bangladesh situation the materials are usually provided free or at a highly subsidised rate. There is always the tension of how much to provide in order to keep the new literates reading and when to encourage to them to look for their own reading materials. At Friends and Joyramkura in the early days of the programmes, there was a tendency to provide very few materials, partly because of limited resources but also because it was felt that the new literates should develop their skills on their own. However, it was soon realized that the obstacles to obtaining appropriate materials were too great to realistically expect the new literates to overcome on their own. Thus, over the years structures were created to ensure that the newly literate readers could continue to develop their skills. As much as possible, these were made a part of other development activities and according to the expressed needs of the participants. Other organizations have followed similar patterns. Looking at these structures, it can be seen that many of them are appropriate for drop-outs (both children and adults) from the formal system as well as for newly literate adults, that they are much broader than simply 'follow-up programmes and that they can form an important part of a continuing education programme.

Adult Literacy Courses: Many drop-outs from the formal system are keen to join adult literacy classes because they realise that their skills are weak and they are keen to make them more usable. Although there may be some problems with integrating semi-literates with new learners in the same class, the literacy lessons can prove of enormous benefit to the drop-out. Depending on how successful they were in the formal system and how long they attended, they are often able to build on their limited skills and fairly quickly advance to more difficult materials. Thus, as well as being an introduction to literacy for new learners, adult literacy courses can be the means of entry into continuing education for formal school drop-outs.

Follow-up Courses: As has been noted, at the end of a six-month adult literacy course, although most of the participants have progressed from illiteracy to the level of fluent reading of basic materials designed for them, they are still quite limited in their skills. They are a long way from most of the literature of the country. A series of lessons or booklets is often used at this stage to help the learners progressively move to more difficult materials. After several years of trying various methods of follow-up. Friends recently introduced a follow-up course utilising lessons of this type. Although it meant that the new readers were dependent on the programme and the facilitators for a longer period, the organized classes provided the forum for progressive consolidation of not only reading skills, but equally important for the functioning of savings groups, writing and numeracy as well. These are two areas that are often neglected in book-orientated post-literacy work. In Joyramkura too a six-month post-literacy course has been developed. The first group of follow-up classes was used to field test the materials, and they were observed carefully. At the end of the six-month course, the participants were tested to help ascertain what they had gained through the additional studies. A test similar to the one they had sat at the end of the FE course was used along with additional tests of their reading ability. The overall performance of the learners improved considerably in the areas of writing and numeracy as well as in reading. To help ascertain how much the follow-up course had helped the participants improve their reading skills, their scores were compared with two other groups who sat the same tests those who had just completed an FE course and those who had completed the course one to two years previously but had not participated in the follow-up course. Because the number of learners receiving the various ratings at the end of the FE course varied for each group, only those with 'good' or 'fair' ratings on the reading section of the FE post tests were included in the samples.

News Sheets and Newspapers: One of the most effective ways to ensure that the new readers of an area have regular reading opportunities is through periodical publications such as news sheets, or newspapers, for new literates. At Friends, even before the Functional Education programme had developed its own materials and approach, the project was producing fortnightly (later changed to monthly) news sheet for the village people, particularly new literates, called Gram Bandhob (The

Village Friend). This became an increasingly important part of the programme's post-literacy activities. Field level staff helped to gather news for the paper, and over time new literates began to write letters and occasionally articles for the paper. In 1986 a survey was conducted among savings group members to help assess Gram Bandhob's effectiveness. It was found that about 50% of those surveyed read the news sheet regularly, that 74% of the readers passed it on to others and 93% of them discussed the articles with other people in the village (Hoque et al. 1986:7-8). In a workshop held at Friends in 1989 involving former FE learners, it was found that the Gram Bandhob regular readers scored consistently higher on reading tests than those who did not read it. For instance, 77% of the regular readers could read the national newspaper compared to only 38% of those who did not read Gram Bandhob at all.

Several other organizations in recent years have followed started printing news sheets. At least eight major NGOs print papers for the new literates in their areas on a regular basis, most of them monthly, and a few smaller organizations produce mimeographed sheets. The Joyramkura programme distributes one copy each of three of the news sheets produced by other organizations to savings groups on a regular basis. Although some of the news is not relevant to the area, many of the articles are interesting to the readers. The papers provide a regular source of reading materials for the new readers.

Wherever news sheets are produced for new literates, it is found that other villagers, many of them with limited reading skills, find the papers interesting and valuable. Their popularity points to the need for periodic reading materials to be produced for rural areas using a simplified format and vocabulary in order to make them accessible to the general public, most of whom have gained only limited literacy skills. The production of a low-cost, simplified national newspaper is a matter that perhaps the Government of Bangladesh could consider doing itself or subsidising other organizations to do it. Regional and local newspapers would also be valuable.

Village Libraries: A system which has been used throughout the world to make books accessible to new readers is the village library. Almost from the inception of its post-literacy work, Friends has used some form of the system. The first 'libraries' were wooden boxes with about 50 books from the Bangladesh Academy for Rural Development (BARD) in them. Later in boxes were found to be cheaper, more durable and easier to handle. (To be continued)