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Literacy For Development

It is important for the nation to awaken public interest in the issue of literacy and to create a greater understanding of the correlation between education and development. How far we have been successful in creating such awareness among the general public is difficult to ascertain keeping in mind realities like, for instance, the belief among the poor that education, no matter how limited, will be the open sesame to profitable employment and we feel this aspect needs to be given greater attention lest our inability to provide everyone with jobs causes a backlash.

What is actually needed is a greater understanding of what we mean by literacy. In the past literacy was defined as being able to read and write and, in some instances, merely to be able to sign one's own name. But today, obviously, we mean more than that and the concept of 'functional literacy' has taken hold.

In order to simply survive in an often cruel environment the need not simply to read and write but to be able to count and do simple calculations takes on an added dimension but so far all prior attempts to get a literacy programme underway has come virtually to nought. We who are blessed with some little education are fully aware that illiteracy aggravates the conditions of poverty, malnutrition, poor healthcare and makes it difficult for one to appreciate the advantages of spacing births. We know too that it places limits on choice of employment and many are destined to struggle throughout life embroiled in what has come to be called the poverty trap. Being pre-occupied with sheer survival prohibits a person's involvement in political and economic development. We know all this— what we do not know is how to break the vicious cycle of poverty and ignorance.

Most of us are content to leave such worries in the hands of the government, feeling it to be their problem and not ours, though we are surrounded by vast numbers of illiterate, hungry masses. If they fail to advance we also cannot move ahead, no longer can two separate worlds live side by side within the same country's territory— unless this is understood, we too are doomed. Even among the illiterate people have newly acquired aspirations created from a global contact never before known to mankind through means of the electronic media and overseas travel.

In Bangladesh today if the figures are to be believed, we have almost 80 million people unable to read and write and of the rest many have only basic literacy which hardly enables them to get through life without being exploited by human predators. But the knowledge today of how other peoples live, whether real or imagined, creates a restlessness for something on the other side— the greener pasture and one which will soon be impossible to contain unless we can offer them something better.

Apart from these political aspects economic development is seriously handicapped by an expanding, inefficient workforce destined to reach the figure of 54 million by the year 2000. Mobilising the local community in a self-help programme seems to us to be the only really practical way to handle the problem of mass illiteracy.