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## THE BANGLADESH OBSERVER

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### Mass Literacy

In our country the literacy rate is, according to the 1981 census, at 23.8%. Mass literacy programmes have to date made very little impact in the country but when one speaks of literacy one must be very clear as to what one means by it. The literal definition is one who can sign his own name but, obviously, when we refer to literacy we mean more than that and everything reverts back to our own conception of what, as individuals, we expect from the literate.

In our day to day living we come across many people who can neither read nor write but what is worse from their point of view, cannot add even in simple terms, or at the very best can add only in terms of twenty. This puts these people at the mercy of those who are more numerate who sometimes cannot resist the opportunity to exploit them.

Mass literacy programmes through the visual medium of television have long been advocated as a means by which the general public can be reached but so far programmes have been inadequate. Primarily, one of the causes of an inability to reach the target audience has been the limited availability of television sets which at the moment stand at 1:450. Other difficulties are also in evidence as many people do not know how to hold a pencil correctly. Books and exercise books are also costly for a people concerned primarily with their day to day survival. The majority of the people have little or no incentive to learn and neither the will power, nor the self discipline required to achieve their ends.

The concept of the Swanirvar Programme that links loans to literacy tests may have worked well in those areas where it has been introduced but the lessons taught are ones which link learning to material reward which is detrimental to the character building of the nation.

Under the Third Five-Year Plan the literacy programme was intended to increase rates of literacy so that a rate of 60% can be obtained by the year 2000. But on the basis of experience gained during the Second Five Year-Plan it was determined that a nation-wide scheme would not be effective and an alternative approach was needed. As the final year of the Third Five-Year Plan approaches there is little to indicate an upward trend in the rate of literacy and only very limited improvement in selected villages can be put forward. Limited as this is, the prospect for the eradication of illiteracy within our lifetime is still a very far off cry.

In order to meet with some success the whole approach has to undergo transformation at the very base or we will only throw good money after bad in an unplanned effort to achieve unrealistic targets. Illiteracy can only be eradicated by sectoring the target area and reaching out to the people within their own limited field of reference.