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Illiteracy In Bangladesh

Along with all other developing countries, Bangladesh will be observing the International Literacy Day today, renewing her commitment to the concept of "Education for all" by the year 2000. It can be either a case of tokenism or an occasion for a critical self-evaluation. We trust, it will be the latter.

Such an evaluation would reveal that the overall literacy situation in Bangladesh remains just as dismal as in most other poorest countries of the world, if not more. According to the 1989 Almanac, a US publication, allocation by the Ministry of Education in 1985 represented only 1.9 per cent of the Gross National Product, one of the lowest in the world. Since then the allocation has risen substantially. Figures compiled by the Bureau of Statistics show that total government expenditure on education (revenue and development) increased from 515 crore taka in 1985 to 697 crore in 1986 and finally to 858 crore in 1987. Unfortunately, this impressive rise in financial allocation has produced only marginal effect on the enrolment of students at various levels or, for that matter, in the increase of the number of primary and secondary schools throughout the country. Official statistics reveal that the number of primary and secondary schools increased from 43588 and 8649 in 1985 to 43992 and 8983 respectively. What is particularly disappointing, the number of full time students in various universities in the country actually decreased between 1985-86 and 1986-87, from 35558 to 31066. Finally, the 1981 census figures show that the literacy rate then stood at 23.8 per cent for both sexes, with 31 per cent for the male population and 16 per cent for female. These are some of the lowest literacy figures among the Third World countries.

Several factors have contributed to this situation. With some justification, the government can attribute it to the legacy of the past or, more specifically, to the situation in the pre-liberation period. Again, the increased financial allocation for education from 1985 to 1987 has been partly eaten up by the population growth as well as by the rise in the overhead expenses of educational institutions. Last but not the least, the disruption of the education system and the destruction of school buildings during natural calamities, especially during the devastating floods of 1988, further slowed down the country's literacy campaign last year, for which official statistics are not yet available.

We are in a difficult situation, almost an impossible one. To be realistic, Bangladesh cannot reach the target, set by the "Education for All" campaign, by the year 2000. If we are lucky, we can perhaps make a significant headway by 2050. But such an achievement would still call for enormous efforts on the part of all concerned.

Here, the primary responsibility certainly lies with the government. It is the Ministry of Education that must take a careful second look at all its plans and decide for itself how other ministries, non-governmental agencies and the private sector can help. In other words, the challenge facing the country is too big for just one ministry to handle with success.

There are no reasons why organisations and agencies, in public and private sectors, responsible for health care or family planning activities cannot have a built-in literacy campaign in their programmes. There are also no reasons why every factory, industrial plant and even business houses cannot set up an hour's programme, perhaps every other day, to teach their workers, many of whom can barely sign their names, to read and write. Again, regardless of their fields of activities, all non-governmental organisations (NGOs) both local and foreign, should be obliged to join the literacy campaign. In an African country, no college or university graduate is awarded the degree unless and until he or she has freed at least ten persons from the shackles of illiteracy. Can Bangladesh learn from this innovative example?

In short, we need a broad national approach, involving all sectors, to tackle this problem of immense magnitude.

The International Literacy Day which is being observed today marks the beginning of a long journey for every developing country. In March next year, some 1,000 education experts will meet in Bangkok at a UN-sponsored conference to hammer out a global action plan against illiteracy. The conference will declare 1990 as the International Literacy year.

The best contribution Bangladesh can make to the deliberation of the Bangkok conference should be more than just an impressive statement. Instead, through her own action-oriented programme, she should show what a developing country can do, mainly through self-help, to open the doors of knowledge to its people.