

The Issue Of Literacy

Each year, as the International Literacy Day—and it was yesterday—comes around, we stare bleakly at the statistics which have barely changed over the years. With hardly 65 per cent of children enrolling in class one of primary school and most of them failing to stay there, we are hardly an example for the world to follow in combating illiteracy. This is, in fact, the problem for it is only when we can successfully get the small children into school—and keep them there—that we can hope to have an educated workforce. With the on-going problem of drop-outs, possibly our biggest bugbear, there seems little we can do to change the course of our own history at least in respect of literacy rates, for the rate for those over the age of the seven seem to remain so permanently fixed that adolescents are today no better educated than were their predecessors.

In fact, even as we make the run-up to the 21st century, one of the biggest aspects of rural life inside Bangladesh is its persistent and widespread illiteracy. Illiteracy should not be taken to mean ignorance, however, simply because it is neither lineal nor written for traditional wisdom also has a place in our society but to be able to compete in the modern world, this is the definition we must abide by. Accordingly, any nation unable to eradicate illiteracy can be counted among the most unfortunate of nations forever caught in a web of misery and poverty.

If taken in this light, combating illiteracy is one of the biggest crosses we still bear and the biggest reason for the gap between rural and urban to grow wider day by day. But, as most of us forget how ideas of what constitutes literacy can differ from place to place or between rural and urban people we are sometimes at a loss to decide which method will be best, whether to opt for adult literacy programmes or begin with the children which is why we appear to be muddling through while the world around us catches up and passes us by.

In as much new technology is dependent on at least a rudimentary foundation and understanding, we are coming under increased pressure to adopt the western concept of literacy. But formal education is not really a part of rural culture that, no matter how pragmatic the programme for combating illiteracy may be it is not very successful. Often questions are raised as to whether it is really necessary for country-folk to learn the three-“r’s” which is a question difficult to answer and one of the reasons why sporadic efforts at literacy programmes have remained sporadic and have not become a part of the formal programme.

With the need now to review our efforts to date if only to know where we are headed and where we go wrong it may be well to remember an important cliché, “educate the women and you educate a nation”. Perhaps if we concentrate on educating the women under the guise of adult literacy we might achieve something. To continue to ignore these worldly wisdom as though they have no relevance for us is to continue to wallow in illiteracy which can only hamper growth.

The schools run by NGOs, good as they are, have often run into trouble because they sometimes ignore the sentiment of local people particularly in relation to the girl-child. However, we do not recommend they give up but that they tread more carefully lest they step on someone’s cultural toes. Some of course can be counted among the success although, strange to say, this does not seem to have had an impact on national literacy levels. However it is important for this type of school to be encouraged because they attract funds from the international donors which can be put to good use in the field of education.