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Non-formal Education

Breaking The Psychological Barrier

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A cynical perception of any enviable achievement on the literacy front is not likely to be removed soon. The reasons are quite simple: first, this is a daunting task. Then one lingering suspicion, as people are accustomed to viewing the system of administration in the Third World countries, is that this is too lofty a job to be performed by the government employees and staff.

This general mistrust however may be dispelled ultimately, thanks to the diligence and devotion displayed by an army of DNFE (Directorate of Non-Formal Education) salaried men and women. But before that happens, the DNFE created solely to take literacy to hard-to-reach and working children and adults' doorsteps as part of the government's commitment to total literacy will have to go a long way. The good news is that quite a few NGO's have been working in this area with distinction for a long time. So, the government agency will find in those organisations a most competent and helpful co-traveller.

The reason why such a disbelief of the public sector's ability to deliver persists is the fact that this is one area that calls for a missionary zeal beyond the performance of routine duty for accomplishment of the task. So far most, if not all, of the men and women working for an illiteracy-free Bangladesh have luckily taken up the challenge with a missionary spirit. They have been going through the process, as they come in close contact with the target population at the field level, of turning the routine duty of a profession into a vocation. It is this simple but rare quality that lies behind the spectacular gain in literacy in such a short time. Currently, the country boasts a literacy rate of 56 per cent. By another couple of years, the target is expected to reach an 80 plus mark. If that is achieved, it will be no mean an achievement for the na-

tion because it will then be away from the magical mark by only 15 or so percentage.

It is exactly at this point the task will look a lot more difficult than it proves now for the threat to the performance will be posed by the natural mathematical rule of saturation on the one hand and the process of unlearning on the other. One must not forget that the exercise is in a hostile environment where the neo-literate will expect

dation for the nation's future education. As the formal primary education and DNFE programmes now stand, the latter is playing a complementary role but no less important than the former. In case of primary education, the comparatively privileged learners have the opportunity to continue studies at the next stages. The non-formal education programme does not only seek to make the more unfortunate and elusive ones literate

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some practical benefits for them to enjoy. Disillusion will set in at certain point if they find that the newly acquired skill does not make them readily any gainer. So far, it has remained more or less a top-down exercise, in which the free will of the participants has not been on the full flight.

Also worth remembering is the fact that the emphasis is solely on quantity or numbers rather than on quality. Admittedly, it is a slow process spanning over generations to comprehend the full import of education. Literacy functions as the first stepping stone. A crash programme can definitely make quantitative gain but the real challenge lies in transforming that gain into a qualitative one. In our situation we certainly must go for quantity—100 per cent literacy first. But at the same time, it would be unwise to ignore quality altogether. But mere literacy stands little chance of acquiring qualitative gain when formal education itself is going downhill. This is however a simplistic conclusion.

After all, the requirement for whetting the appetite for quality education has been recognised everywhere. Through total literacy we will be only laying the foun-

but also has the difficult task of motivating them sufficiently.

So the total exercise boils down to something more abstract than the elementary knowledge. It is to instil in the learners a sense of urgency—perhaps a sense of dissatisfaction too, a kindling of a latent faculty that helps them appreciate education and work for translating their unrealised dreams through their next generation. In the official and political parlance or jargon this is called motivation but it is more than that—a sense of conviction that takes its root slowly within an individual and grows from strength to strength until it reaches out to the outermost boundary of human capacity.

A nation comes of age when the individual excellence inspires the collective psyche to explore the limits of human mind and spirit in all possible forms and areas. Now a core group has been convinced of the merit of non-formal education, there is a need to share the conviction with the nation at large. That is the greatest challenge of all. If the programme undertaken by the DNFE can set this ultimate goal for realisation, it would have done the country

proud. Involved here is nothing less than a crusade for overcoming several layers of psychological barrier built over the ages. So the apparently innocuous programme has the potential to awaken the national psyche for its reinvention or a renaissance. Let our goal be no less loftier when we think of and work for total literacy.

Even the immediate gains can be quite significant. Literacy—functional literacy at that—should be incorporated with primary health care, environment and life science for practical reasons. This can be done through inclusion of such subjects in the simplest of language in the books meant for the non-formal and primary learners. The aim ought to be the improvement of the quality of life. Once people can appreciate this most instinctive and self-preserving principle, they will take their own initiative to make their lives better and work for an environment congenial to such a living. The question of breaking mental barrier arises once again. People must feel an inner urge to improve their living condition. If they get the first-hand idea of how they can acquire the tools for achieving what they wish to do, they will work out their own agenda. The difference between ignorance and knowledge is such that when in the former state they even do not know what their miseries are and knowledge helps them identify their plight as well as their path to fight poverty and ignorance. So the literacy campaign—informal type of it in particular—has to be tuned to this fundamental objective of human aspiration. Obviously, there is a need for further activating the post-literacy programme. The introduction of scholarships for the best performers among the non-formal learners is going to help the cause. More such programmes aimed to encourage learners have to be worked out.

We publish this article on the occasion of the world Literacy Day.