

How Literacy Lose Grounds

by Nilratan Halder

THE United Nations General Assembly proclaimed 1990 as the International Literacy Year (ILY). Worldwide the number of the illiterate, however, is estimated at some 900 million notwithstanding the fact that the overall illiteracy is continuing to fall. In countries like Bangladesh the picture is gloomier still with the illiteracy rate showing just the reverse trend.

The ILY considered to be a 'Summons to Action', a launching-pad for efforts specifically devoted to drastically reducing illiteracy has evidently not got off to a particularly flying start. After two years — a fifth of the total period — Bangladesh has not really much tangible to show on the literacy front, much less in education.

The hard fact is that the population growth which is at the rate of 2.18 officially (although thought to be much higher) is racing far ahead of the supporting means and measures to curb the country's illiteracy. At the present rate of population growth rate vis-a-vis the gain in literacy, the country simply requires no less than 200 new schools to maintain the status quo relation between them. But primary schools are not at all coming up.

Consequently, the number of illiterate is on the rise. The current budget has allocated a higher percentage of the GNP than before for education but not enough to tackle the gigantic problem facing the education arena. Even the problem at the primary level remains as yet the most acute. People however seem to be more concerned about developments in the higher education, particularly that of universities, than the primary education.

And it is not for nothing that primary schools have to take classes in the open, under trees or in school houses or buildings with the potential risks of tragedies involving human lives. In 1983, according to a government-sponsored 'school mapping exercise', 87 per cent of the country's school children lived within two miles of a primary school. That situation has not perhaps changed much in the intervening period.

Similarly, the absolute number of the illiterate in the population over five years old was 45 million, and in the population over fifteen 27 million. By the year 1981 these

figures went up to 56 and 33 million respectively. There is no knowing that the trend has been offset by any remarkable improvement in the primary education, rather, in all likelihood, it has gained momentum. One silver-lining however is that both literacy and school attendance for women have

one. However the overriding compulsion for them to drop-out is purely economic. They need food and clothes to meet a certain standard. And free textbooks are not an adequate answer to the problem of drop-outs. That the poor parents need their children's helping hands in household

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grown far faster than for women. In 1981 the literacy rate for men and women were 39.7 and 18.8 per cent. This gap seems to have bridged a little.

About 60 per cent of all primary school-age children were enrolled, according to 1985 enrolment figure. Another distressing figure is that at the time only 22 per cent schools could be used

chores and cultivation is not helping the cause. A 1982 study showed that only 17 per cent of children from families with less than five bighas of land (1.65 acres) attended school compared to 62 per cent of children from families with more than five bighas.

Apart from such discriminations, there are also another kind of discrimination involving some considerably standard

Infrastructure-wise facilities and quality-wise teachers in urban schools are immensely superior to those of rural ones. That disadvantage has its life-long effects on the village students. The irony is that the majority of the students come from villages. And keeping the majority at constant disadvantage, no country can expect to make much of a headway.

That precisely is the problem with us. Keeping the whole country in the dark we have set ourselves the task of lighting the houses that are already illuminated. Primary teachers have moreover developed a nagging habit of taking care of their family matters to the neglect of their duty as teachers. Even the quality of a substantial number of them are suspect. One good thing however ever to happen is the induction of more female teachers majority of whom are more caring than their male counterparts.

Coming back to the national budget allocation for primary education, it must be recorded that the paucity of fund is a major obstacle to raising the standard of primary education. Let there be a crash programme — that hopefully involves both formal and non-



Imparting basic education needs care

round the year, 70 per cent only during the dry season. Add to this the number of drop-outs and the gloomy picture just becomes gloomier.

The students stay out of school for various reasons. The poor state of schools is only one of the reasons. The education at the primary level in the primary schools and kindergarten ones. Even in villages there are still

secondary schools but the same cannot be said about the primary schools. How the students studying in those primary schools are discriminated against can hardly be imagined. But the truth is that the students so left to suffer early in life can never hope to effectively compete with their more privileged brothers and sisters.

formal education — to expand and improve the primary education. Literacy after all is divided in functional and non-functional forms. And the stress should be on the functional education. We ought to recognise that primary education is the ground-work, the base, and it certainly deserves a better deal. The question is: give it its due?