

9

DHAKA SATURDAY SEPTEMBER 19 1992

The War On Illiteracy

It is only through education a person can develop his mind and mental awareness to a level which will take him much further than mere existence. Only when he begins to understand his own relationship with his social and physical environment can he adapt to his own situation. To reach this state of development he, therefore, needs to be able to do more than just read and write, he must also be able to fully comprehend what it is he is reading. In other words, he must be able to use his skills to the fullest extent so as to become functional and, to be functional he must be literate in every sense of the term. The importance of literacy, therefore, must be adequately underscored by both the state and society. It is to this end that World Literacy Day is observed each year.

When a poor man is deprived of the basic right of learning to read and write he is truly doubly cursed for he is unable to guide either his own destiny or the destinies of his children. Neither can he delve into that magic world of books and literature which is his birthright or draw upon man's recorded collective knowledge. The need to awaken in people the right of literacy must, therefore, remain the ultimate aim of governments and must not be permitted in any manner to give way to merely the mouthing of platitudes.

The state of illiteracy which continues to dog this land is, to a very large extent, responsible for perpetuating the continued state of poverty and deprivation we find ourselves to be in. By the inability to eradicate this curse from society we have also been unable to reduce the incidence of malnutrition, to significantly reduce increases in population and to expand peoples' choices. The latter is perhaps the most significant of all the aspects, for it opens up horizons to make people aware of all possibilities and prospects which can improve the quality of life for themselves.

In Bangladesh today we have about 80 million people unable to read and write and, if projections prove to be accurate, by the turn of the century these will have increased to more than 125 million, unless we can do something effective to turn trends around. Formal education, if begun at an early enough age, generally benefits those who attend school for education. It increases a man's future worthiness as a producer and consumer of goods. Being educated, he will naturally be better informed and will then, in all likelihood, make correct decisions regarding his future life.

The system of education followed by a country is usually the outcome of the prevailing socio-economic and cultural conditions. Changing set ideas and concepts, therefore, quite naturally takes time, time which governments sometimes feel they cannot afford to give but, changing entrenched ideas and concepts is a slow process. If the nation tries to run before it can safely walk, it will be asking for trouble in the form of large scale unemployment of newly educated youth, frustrated social elements with rising expectations and the inability to satisfy their wants in a legitimate way with obvious results. Therefore, any plan for widespread education must take into consideration all factors.

Although formal education obviously has a firm place in society for the development of human resources, and must remain the final goal of nations, for the majority of our present "illiterates" this approach will not work and greater emphasis must be placed on informal and public education specially designed for people in developing countries.

For the children of poor parents any attempt to penetrate those invisible barriers to upper mobility meets with resistance, a resistance often incomprehensible like the resistance of peers or those who consider themselves socially superior. Changing these attitudes will take society if not two, at least one generation to obliterate, if one takes the experiences of other countries as the yardstick. In countries like Bangladesh, where social distinctions are strong, stronger than what is found in countries where compulsory education was introduced much earlier, the task is doubly difficult. The continuing perpetuation of the established elitist form of education handed down from colonial days has helped to reinforce and exacerbate existing social divisions rather than eliminate them.

With 10% of the world's illiterates living within our borders we must not ignore the implication this has for the future. To be held hostage, as a nation, to this awful burden will render us impotent contenders in a world where technology has brought it to hitherto unimaginable heights. If, as a nation, we remain content to stay on the outside, dreaming only of what might have been, then we can be content to carry on the way we have so far but, if not, then the war on illiteracy must be carried into every home.