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## Thoughts On Literacy And Development

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**W**HEN striving for development and justice and creating a new Bangladesh, we must be attentive to the means we wish to use. If only we could build a happy Bangladesh at the cost of tears of an innocent child, unjustly tortured to death! And the answer can not be generalized to a simple "yes" or "no". It means that we use means essentially contrary to the aim that can not be reached: the means eclipse the aim, turning it into idle rhetorics.

This UNO has marked this year as the International Literacy Year and the World Literacy Day is also at hand. It is very important to look at the real value of this day. Millions of dollars have been spent in the name of elimination of illiteracy. And very often it seems that all the work has been in vain. We have a big weakness: we often run away from a situation which demands full time struggle and hardship.

In Bangladesh, the percentage of literacy has not yet improved, as we have got normal data: in 1985 literacy was 33% in Bangladesh, Sri Lanka 87%, India 43%, Bhutan 24%, Nepal 26%. But it has been discovered that now the present literacy is 26% or 29%... we are never sure.

All these statistics in Third World countries never support the argument of development nor we can use them with confidence. Statistics must be correct otherwise they can be a fantasy or a strong mist. The United States has two crores of illiterate people U.K. has more or less the same number, but there illiteracy does not mean the same thing as in another country. Actually "illiteracy" is a term coined by colonial powers for the "natives", "uncivilized", "underdeveloped" "stupid people", "Third World country" and all the above refer to a country like Bangladesh, but they have forgotten that to keep someone illiterate is a crime; and a yet-worse crime is to downplay someone's gift or skill.

In our country when we talk literacy, we often forget to evaluate the inherent gift of the people, their work, their skills. To mark someone as illiterate is inhuman. Illiteracy means that one has walled the road of development because we forget the gift of each citizen in this country. Illiteracy could be a problem of reading or writing, but it never means "uncivilized" as the Western people mean this word to be.

In Bangladesh we never have any statistics on the base of skills of the people, skills of good farmers, fishermen, labourers, weavers, black-

smiths, potters, sculptors, steel workers, mechanics etc. Because, they are illiterate people. But we have the statistics for professors, teachers, doctors, engineers, specialists: we know the enumeration of intellectuals and the percentage of illiteracy but not the skills of illiterate peoples, hundreds of skills, which one finds hidden in the ashes. So, it is better to avoid the statistical explanation of illiteracy, because, we avoid the gifts and skills of the people, which are the real strength of development.

It is the modern idea, a new outlook on the poorest of the poor, let me explain this. In one country the issue of development is a very dry subject, like dry sands in the thousands of problems. The problems is so acute that human hearts cannot pass through this dryness. And it is an irony that those who call Bangladesh backward make our development work extremely complicated, confusing through their ideas, funny analytic gestures, very high philosophical grammars, geometrical dreams, statistical process, etc.

They make the work of development a 'Zero' through all these rolls of ropes, they has prepared with their ideas to cook a hotch-potch, a mixture for our poor people to drink forcibly. They want to indicate that the more incomprehensible their ideas are the more wise they are. They often speak things which the poor people never wanted to hear, because, all their work is not friendly, nor linked with the daily life of the people problems.

This the difference between the academic and the practical life. So, specialists ideas need to be changed. Otherwise, their ideas could be a disaster for the people, and they can make the normal situation more confusing. Our road and light must be discerned through our own peoples, life. Yes from 68,000 villages; not from universities for colleges or from big offices.

A few years ago some university professors wrote a book for illiterate people. Before writing the book they analysed the entire Bangladesh situation, characteristics of the poor, the psychology of the village people, the statistics of Bangladesh etc. They visited a few villages. They examined several dozens of adult literacy text books. And then they prepared a book for illiterate, spending several lakhs of taka, it took more than two years to finish this great job. But also, the book which they prepared for illiterate people was like "iron bread" uneatable to neo-process, experiment

and finance have gone to the Buriganga.

The same may be said about total development European history provides plenty of instructive lesson. Freedom, equality and fraternity, proclaimed by the French Revolution and enforced by division, finally turned into rhetorics, into a dream with which the capitalist society of the 19th century had nothing in common. Freedom cannot be gained by the separation between literate and illiterate, fraternity cannot be achieved without sharing the life of people unseparately, justice cannot be reached through ignorance of our neighbours pain and real development cannot be achieved without a deep inner motivation, as these means imprison the conscience and curtail man's moral feeling.

It does not mean that our intellectuals block the development of Bangladesh. Actually, we have a deep gulf between intellectuals, specialists and our people. So in real life development specialists often shout to the poor, "we played wedding music for

your, but you wouldn't dance! We sang funeral songs, but you wouldn't cry!" But it is sure that actually our intellectuals played wedding music for themselves and at the same time they danced for their own sake: they are the actor and they are the audience at the same time.

NGO's are receiving money from abroad, their donor partners, but it is very important that we should work according to our people's need and will. Otherwise, we will speak about development in a tongue which our people do not hear, can not understand, because it is not their own. Bangladesh will develop within her illiteracy because, our people have hundreds of skills of work, our people are the most gifted people I ever seen in the world. We have many things to be proud about. But we should speak the language of our own development, language of our own skills: literacy like poems, songs, floods, will come from the very depth of our people's sweat, their tears. We should speak through that sweat language very near to heart.