

Eradicating Illiteracy

Now that Bangladesh has become a member of the world of hi-tech, the fact that the major portion of the nation must remain outside this remarkable global phenomena is more poignant than ever. Despite the topmost priority given to literacy programmes, the outcome is far from encouraging notwithstanding advances in some areas. The rate of literacy is still far too insignificant to guarantee a place for ourselves in the coming century with its obvious focus on the application of hi-tech.

However, although it is a far cry from the world of hi-tech, literacy programmes sponsored or supported by the government, such as, the Integrated Non-Formal Education Project (INFEP), have been successful in imparting literacy to 34 million people believed to be in need of these services. Records show that 2.34 million people have already been reached under the programme. This may be taken as proof of success but the real test will come later when several years from now, their performance in life is evaluated. In other words, until it can be confirmed that students have retained the skills they learned in schools or adult education centres, we shall not know the measure of our success.

In 1996, when the government decided to establish a Directorate of Non-Formal Education (DNFE), it handed over the responsibility of giving us an educated nation by the year 2005, but reaching a target of more than 34 million people is by no means easy as they soon found out. However, all is not failure for under programmes supported by the Directorate known as the Centrally-Based Approach, there are now around 44,000 centres that serve about 1.42 million people and by the end of December 1997, a reported 0.83 million people had been given a "certificate" of literacy. This programme, run by NGOs in collaboration with local Thana Administrations, has made such good progress it is reasonable to expect an expansion of this programme.

Even more spectacular have been the programmes run by the local philanthropists whose dedication to the service of the nation is legendary. They have brought literacy to more than half a million people already which is no mean feat. But, as we tend to forget that education is an on-going process and literacy programmes must not be tied to the tight definition we have of it, there must also be provision for "continuing education" and any underdevelopment in this area could have far reaching consequences for the nation. Defects in the system, if allowed to co-exist with highly developed technologies, will widen the gap between the privileged and the masses.

Our major problem is the perennial one of how to find the resources we need, to do all we want to do. We must also be mindful of the fact that the nation cannot go forward if we ignore the needs of the majority. But as the dream of a literate, and educated, nation becomes more and more elusive with each passing year, we must ask ourselves which way we are heading and which way we want to be heading—for there could be a difference. With so many people deprived of the ability to read and write, unless we can find solutions, the nation will find it harder than ever to keep its place in world markets.

We learn from surveys that our schools are dispensing below-standard education. This is the main reason we have failed to reach our goals and it is obvious that reform must start here. In this regard we could heed the words of President Justice Shahabuddin Ahmed who not so long ago said that education must be re-organised and that re-organisation of education should ensure that every branch of learning be work-oriented. In this we could not agree more. There is a lot to be said for programmes based on the needs of both nation and the individual and unless industry learns to take responsibility for this task too, the nation will remain handicapped by its illiterate population.

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