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What Is Literacy?

What do we really mean by literacy? Are we to continue to be content with the tired definitions of the past or the even more tired cliches from a different era, even as we are on the final lap of the countdown to a new millennium? We have now to formulate deeper meanings to the word literacy and find ways to turn them into practical applications. Only a few years ago, it was thought that only a basic understanding of the Three 'R's' was sufficient to turn an illiterate nation into a literate one. When this did not succeed, we turned enthusiastically to what came to be called "Functional Literacy," but all too soon this turned into another cliché too. This is not, however, intended as criticism, for we know well the difficulties which arise when attempting to teach illiterate people therefore, all the efforts to help, whether made by individuals, groups or organisations, or by the state, should be applauded.

Women, and by extension, girls, are today the centre of our concern. This fact alone has caused us to look a little closer at ourselves and our hopes and ambitions for our female population which we readily admit have suffered years of studied neglect. But in concentrating on our womenfolk, we should not forget that, although worldwide, women have lower rates of literacy than do men there are still a large male population in our country equally deprived.

With so many children still denied access to schooling, the task of eradicating illiteracy falls harder than ever on our shoulders for, despite our best efforts, enrolment levels remain low. With still a long way to go, as supported by statistics, Bangladesh, like most poor countries is caught up in a quagmire.

If we continue under the present conditions, most of the 19.5 million students enrolled in schools and colleges will continue to be served inefficiently and the result will be that rates of literacy will remain much the same as they have been for decades. That today's children are little better off than the children of two or three decades back gives us not just a feeling of disillusionment but a feeling of helplessness we have to conquer if there is to be breakthrough. Obviously, running an education system that satisfies the requirements of parents and state is, at best, difficult. It is nevertheless a task for the government to face, albeit supported by a conscientious private sector.

Many countries are already supplementing their educational services with private sector support and others are depending more and more on "distance learning" classes. If distance learning classes can be adapted to the needs of all levels, the state and sponsoring companies can do much to compensate people for their lack of access to schools and colleges, for in this way they can offer the eager student a learning process otherwise denied.