

24 SEP 1988

26

26

6

15

Education For All: It Can Be Achieved

John Hastings

ANOTHER Literacy Day has come and gone. International Literacy Year 1990 is less than four months away. So more and more people are talking and writing about "Education for All by the Year 2000". That is good, even if the pessimists still outnumber the optimists.

It's thought to be impossible. About 62 million adults in Bangladesh have to given access to education in ten years. Education, not just literacy. Least of all just being able to sign your name on a document you can't understand. Education is what the slogan says. Ability to read what is printed, and what's written by hand, in your native tongue. Access to a library with books you want to study. Skill to apply what you read, to your life. Capacity to plan—your budget and your livelihood as well as the size of your family. Education to change what you want to change and to understand and enjoy what you do not. Education to be a creative person instead of a passive victim of circumstances and exploitation.

That can't be done in Bangladesh by the year 2000, say the pessimists. In METSLO, we say it can. Alright, not ALL, not 100%. But 90%, which is about the maximum anyhow for a decade or two yet. This year we have proved the way it could be done. It takes sound preparation, thorough training, good supervision, strict principles, tight organisation, carefully selected workers with dedication, and just Tk. 185/-, at this year's prices, for each illiterate person over 10 years of age to gain not just literacy but access to the educational goal I have just outlined.

Taka 185/- is not much. It is less than half the cost of a child's primary schooling for one year. And how it changes lives! I have been getting 20 or 30 letters a day from some of the 55,000 who have become functionally literate since January this year. They write with excitement. Their hopes and horizons have got bigger. Some say they are going to be teachers. One is going to be a doctor. They have had a life-time of being cheated. How their opportunities are in without limit. They will be listened to with respect. In many of our 583 villages, the number of literate people has more than doubled. The majority of the new group contribut-

ing most to village decision-making will be no longer the traditionally better-off, but the now vocal deprived.

Informal Education

Mind you, those schooled in the traditional way will still call them uneducated. But they will be more and more wrong as time goes by. All of us, save for a few rare examples of self-educated men and women, have been educated formally. We have known to other system, so education means formal education: schools, institutions, paid teachers, text-books, grading, examinations, certificates and degrees. So how can education be non-formal?

In fact, the best education can be, and ought to be, non-formal. For two reasons. One, our main education comes from the school of life: the most important thing we learned at school was how to learn, not how to pass exams. If we did not get that, our formal education has caged us in and we are basically uneducated. Whereas there are educated people who have yet to learn how to read and write.

The other reason is that we are always going to be unwilling to find enough money for formal education for ALL. We cannot afford it. Not even, it seems, primary schools for the 30% of villages which haven't yet got one. We put the maximum into primary education and still fall short. So the gap widens. Formal education for all is economically unthinkable. So we settle for education for some, which divides the nation, and spells out social disaster.

But we can afford Non-formal Education for All. We can have a 90% literate nation where the majority have become better educated by non-formal methods than the minority who were taught institutionally. In practically the whole of Asia, wherever funds for universal formal education are woefully scarce, we cannot afford to go on using them to reinforce a divided society. We cannot afford NOT to go all out for the only sort of education that could be for all-non-formal education.

The Number Increases

Nor can we afford to baulk at the date, saying, "Why the year 2000? The sun will rise and set the same on

1.1.00, and floods will come and go the same at monsoon-time. Let's take our time. 2050 will do." Illiteracy is not something we can take our time about. The number of adult illiterates in Bangladesh increases by about 1.5 million a year—and the main reason for that—too often ignored by promoters of Family Planning—is the illiteracy itself. I shall come back to that. The point is that unless at least one and a half million of the over-10s of the population who have missed or dropped early out of primary school are made properly literate—so they don't relapse into illiteracy—during the course of one year, the problem of illiteracy will be larger the next year.

So our mere 55,000, possibly another 1,50,000, new adult literates from the rest of the Government Mass Education Programme and all the NGOs put together, is nothing to boast about: it is hardly an eighth of what is needed just to be standing still. While we have been working frantically to dam one part of the stream, the river has created a bigger breach everywhere else. So you cannot talk about doing a slow steady job to eradicate illiteracy. That is a contradiction in terms. Even if we get up to the rate of two million new adult literates per year, with much improved Primary Education, it will take more than a century to achieve a literate Bangladesh.

If we can aim for six million a year, and if the proceeds, includes training in savings and economic skills and creativity, and thorough an effective advocacy of family limitation techniques, we could reach the year 2001 with a 90% literacy rate, a population smaller by up to 2 crores, an economy which has already more than paid for the cost of the programme, self-sufficiency in food and GNP, and something like an extra 4,000 crores' worth of productivity per year.

Improved Primary Education is expected, but P.E. will never become universal so long as parents are unaware of the value of literacy and so unwilling to ensure that their children get full primary education at the very least. Moreover the formal education sector has got to become far more creative in what it produces in the minds of all, not just the few, if a literate Bangladesh is also to mean

a developed Bangladesh.

In METSLO, then, we are saying six million new adult literates per year has to be the goal. We have done the field trials, the arithmetic, and the costing. We are offering to help the Bangladesh Government to achieve it. It is after all a governmental responsibility and NGOs should not pretend they can cover the whole need even by pooling all their resources—though doing more in that direction would certainly help: that mass education is the basic need for development is only slowly sinking in.

We are saying that both Government and NGOs should multiply their programmes of mass education in the next three years, developing methodology and structures, so they can then merge in a joint agency to achieve six million new functionally literate adults per year, social and economic creative skills included; along with the establishment in every village of libraries stocked with appropriate books, amongst which would be hundreds of titles of books specially written. If all this costs about Tk. 2,300 crores, it will generate much more than that amount through the outputs of a nation with a new outlook, purpose and pride.

METSLO is a contribution of NGOs to Government towards this. It stands for "Mass Education Through Small Local Organisations".

I asked a young man in a Netrokona village his name. He did not reply, but wrote on a piece of paper "Asfor Ali" in neat Bangla characters. He wrote his answers to my other enquiries. He had to, because he was dumb. Only a few months ago he was illiterate. People used to try to speak for him, and inevitably patronised him, destroying his human dignity. Now he is still dumb, but the Tk. 185/- we have spent on him has given him both a tongue, and eyes which can see beyond the horizon. He is a big part of Bangladesh.

John Hastings is Director of the METSLO Pilot Programme, funded by UNESCO as part of the Bangladesh Mass Education Programme under the Third Five-Year Plan.