

FOR A LITERACY DRIVE

A country which is in a race to catch up with other nations in development must lay stress on a key factor for progress like literacy. In recent years Bangladesh has attached the highest priority to projects which encourage the spread of literacy of a functional nature and the nation has welcomed private initiative for boosting educational programmes. Several non-government organizations are actively engaged in mass literacy projects and their experience at the grassroots level is being utilized in designing new programmes by the Planning Commission. This cooperation between the government and the non-government sector has helped the drawing up of pragmatic, realizable projects in both primary education and in adult literacy campaigns.

Inaugurating the institute of higher Islamic learning, the Darul Ihsan, at Savar near Dhaka on Thursday last, President Ershad made a pointed reference to the need for mass literacy which is still at a regrettably low level. There is national consensus that development projects which are concerned with raising literacy level ought to receive all the support that can be mobilized. There is no negative force within the society which discourages education. Islam, to which faith the vast majority of the people in Bangladesh belong, puts the highest accent on education. Quoting from the Holy Quran, the President said mass literacy programmes should have the Holy Book as the guide because it clearly enjoins on all to help the spread of education. In this respect the Darul Ihsan, which is the result of private initiative involving foreign educational trust can play a significant role. Since it is an institute for research it may concentrate on areas like mass literacy where it can undertake studies to develop more effective methods of propagating education.

Bangladesh is aiming at functional literacy, which necessitates qualitative change in the way the challenge of raising literacy level is tackled: First, literacy campaigns have to be redesigned and made more appealing; second, they must be taken right to the doorstep of the villagers; third, education which is imparted should be related to real, practical life (This will mean that farmers can be taught, as soon as they learn how to read and write, methods for improved cultivation, storage of their products and better marketing); fourth, the literacy programmes should be part of a social campaign with the educated sections actively involved in the process. For this, there should be scope for their participation within the programmes.

In effect, a mass literacy drive cannot achieve success if the government is acting in isolation because it is a social awareness campaign and it requires participation of people at all levels. But obviously there has to be a political decision to invest in mass education and fortunately the political will for mass literacy is very strong in Bangladesh. The political party in power and those in the opposition stand on a common ground on mass literacy issues. The unanimity of views in the matter can play a pivotal role in the campaign.

What stands as a visible constraint, however, is the lack of resources. Because of the need of other competing sectors, the funds tend to be spread thin in matters of education as in other development-related sectors. The problem of resources is common to all developing countries and therefore it is important that international support is mobilized in favour of increasing literacy rates worldwide so that funds are freed from armaments and diverted to education projects in the Third World where the problem of illiteracy is the most acute. The Darul Ihsan which is going to be run along Islamic principles should act as a trailblazer in creating international opinion for speeding up literacy rates around the world.