

Banishing Illiteracy

Mr. Justice Abdus Sattar, the President, has once again expressed the concern of the government for having illiteracy banished from Bangladesh. He has referred to the Sri Lankan experience, which is certainly worth studying. But then the experience of other countries which, having embarked upon ambitious plans in the past, have so far met with less than spectacular success is worth studying too. The causes of both relative success and relative failure in other environments must be known, but before any decision is taken to either adopt or reject any particular strategy followed in any other country, the socio-economic conditions obtaining in Bangladesh at this point of time must be closely examined and efforts made to relate the policies now being followed or those proposed to be adopted to these.

The point to be remembered is that illiteracy is a big and difficult problem and that a continuing increase in population renders it even bigger and more difficult every day. Which means that if it is difficult to solve the problem to-day, it might even be impossible to do so tomorrow. Measures must therefore be taken on an urgent basis, even though resource constraints may stand in the way of either immediate or comprehensive action or both. Universalization of primary education and a total expulsion of adult illiteracy would, admittedly, be the most ideal thing to achieve. But if in view of limited available resources, both human and material, it is found that the task is far too challenging and that it can be attained fully or even satisfactorily only at the cost of other important goals of the economy, would it be worthwhile to go about it in a slightly limited and phased way, so that one selected group of persons is brought under the programme after another in accordance with a carefully devised

plan and the entire nation is eventually made literate over a period of time? It would be for the educational planners to consider this and other alternatives, but whatever be the outcome of the debate, the literacy campaign should continue to get the same priority as now, even more if possible, and the urgency of the task should never be lost sight of.

The President is right in pointing out the position of influence which the primary school teachers enjoy in the society and in suggesting that they can, by making a meaningful use of this position, act as natural leaders. Of course they can, and they should, but it is not for them alone to create the right kind of atmosphere in which the people would find it attractive and useful to send their children to school and to keep them there, arresting the current high rate of dropout. The people, both literate and illiterate, must come to realise the importance of education and to see the advantages of being educated. Though much has vaguely been said from time to time about the link between literacy and development, their precise relationship in the context of a developing country must be defined, and work must proceed for a further and continued expansion of literacy on the basis of such definition. A sample survey conducted by a research organization is reported to have shown that in 1978 only 39 per cent of the primary school age population had gone to school instead of the 48 per cent believed earlier to have done so. It has been claimed that the enrolment figures officially maintained in the schools are deliberately inflated in order to attract a more generous support from the government. All this may or may not be true, but once the people take upon themselves the primary responsibility of banishing illiteracy, there would hardly be a scope for things of this kind to take place.