

The Stigma Of Illiteracy

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THE survival of any modern democratic society largely depends on the existence of a literate electorate. Literacy is conceded to be the major social intervention for assuring better opportunities for the masses. Needless to say that illiteracy is a serious social stigma. This disgrace needs to be attended to with a firm determination by arousing the conscience of the society to the magnitude of the problem.

In any modern and civilized society, reading and writing are taken for granted as indispensable elements in a person's equipment for living. The whole social, economical and political structure of the modern community rests on the conjecture that every citizen can communicate, and be communicated with, by means of the written or printed word.

The progress and prosperity of a nation rests first and foremost upon the progress of its people. Unless their intrinsic potentialities and inherent capabilities are developed, the country cannot make a smooth go-ahead socio-economically. The chief problem of Bangladesh, like that of many other developing countries is not the poverty of natural resources but, rather, the lack of qualitative development of its vast manpower. The principal implement for all kinds of advancement is man.

That the people of a country are its greatest national asset is now a universally accepted axiom. If they are really literate, they are economic capital to the entire nation but if they remain unlettered, they become a sheer national liability. It is in realisation of this fact that the great Indian leader Mahatma Gandhi once said, "Mass illiteracy is India's national shame and must be liquidated on war footing. But the literacy campaign must not end with a knowledge of alphabets but it must go hand in hand with the spread of useful knowledge."

In Bangladesh, the rate of literacy is indeed distressing. More than thirty million people over the age of 15 years lack even the rudiments of literacy which is elemental determinant to the principle of universal prerogative of equal opportunity and optimal personality development. The most shocking aspect is that the percentage of literacy in Bangladesh is showing a regressive trend; from 24.3 in 1974 for population of five years and above to 23.8 at the 1981 census. The problem of illiteracy looms larger than ever as the actual number of illiterates is on the increase because the population is increasing faster than attempts to wipe out illiteracy.

To build a better Bangladesh, the primary task must be to build its huge human resource base. To put it more perceptibly, that means improving the education and literacy skills, and thus the mental and physical health of its men, women and children.

A noted American authority on Development Communication, Daniel Lerner says, "Literacy once acquired, becomes the prime mover in the modernization of every aspect of life... gives people access to the world of vicarious experience... and becomes the sociological pivot in the activation of psychic mobility."

Even in a developed country like the United States of America, there are people who cannot read and write. In the northern hemisphere, the figure is close to one in twelve on average. In the third world it is as high as one in four. According to recently release UNESCO statistics, despite extensive efforts to reduce the figures of illiterates, there will be around one billion illiterate people in the world at the turn of the next century.

In today's world, an illiterate indi-

vidual is an off shoot outsider, unable to take advantage of the opportunities that exist and often more ill-treated than the lettered. Moreover, literacy is instrumental in better understanding of one's own role and responsibility in society and, as well as, of others. It is a conditio-sine-qua-non for both individual and collective progress and prosperity.

Nowadays it is being increasingly perceived that literacy has both a consumption and investment component. Recent researches have revealed that a large part of the income growth in the past years can be explained only in terms of the contribution of human capital accumulated through investment in literacy training and education. The wealth of the western world has increased many times since illiteracy was substantially squelched at the dawn of this century.

Illiteracy is not a natural attribute but it is a status like poverty or bankruptcy or destitution. The state has a responsibility to eliminate illiteracy through whatever means it may think proper and justified.

How to exercise the widespread illiteracy from Bangladesh whose economic infrastructure is also not that strong and stable? First, education must be imparted to adults so that they can realize and appreciate the educational need of their children. Former President of Tanzania, Julius Nyerere, stressed this point while inaugurating the first five-year plan of his country back in 1964 saying, "First we must educate adults. Our children will not have an impact on our economic development for five, ten or even twenty years."

The most obvious long term solution for mass illiteracy is to cut it off at its source by ensuring universal and adequate primary education. But the primary schools cannot effectively function in an illiterate

community. The relationship of mass literacy and primary schooling is mutually beneficial.

It was noted at the third international conference on adult education held in Tokyo in August 1972 that 45 per cent of the school age children in Asia, 50 per cent in the Arab states and 60 per cent in Africa do not attend primary schools. This dismal reality has further worsened over the years.

In Bangladesh, a high percentage of rural children of schooling age cannot afford to attend schools mainly for economic constraints. Though primary schooling is tuition-free, they find it difficult to pay for paper, pencils and school uniform. Even the time factor is important. The period they spend in school do not bring them immediate monetary reward but if they work in the field during that period, they can either earn money or meal. So, indigent families very often opt for the latter because every day is a day of stiff struggle for their mere survival. Extramural teaching may be one probable solution in this regard.

In order to light a spark that will set the illiteracy prairie ablaze, Bangladesh needs to work out a composite strategy. The strategy should be based on the character and traditions of the target group to be given literacy training, their socio-economic levels, demographic and psychographic variables, and the different opportunities and facilities available to them. Like any other educational process, the process of literacy development is slow and gradual.

While it may be utopian to claim that illiteracy can be totally eradicated from Bangladesh in the near future, yet it will not be unrealistic to proclaim that its incidence can be appreciably reduced if we can chart a pragmatic course of literacy action without further delay.