



Functional Illiteracy, what Rotary can do

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The widely accepted term "functional illiteracy" indicates a form of educational inadequacy. The form of inadequacy may not be the same but the problem is faced by almost all countries of the world. William Gray in his monograph entitled "The Teaching of Reading and Writing" (UNESCO, Paris, 1956) wrote, "a person is functionally literate when he has acquired the knowledge and skills in reading and writing which enable him to engage effectively in all those activities in which literacy is normally assumed in his culture group. But this is not a constant situation. Eve Malmquist elaborates, "The demands of society are changing at a rapid rate. There may be many persons who are considered to be literate, according to officially accepted criteria based on years of schooling, but they have inadequate literacy skills to handle documents and printed forms of various kinds to meet normal demands of society. In other words they are not functionally literate in modern society." (Illiteracy : A Global Problem, The Right to Read, Rotary International, 1985) The question becomes grave if we add to it the problem of illiterates.

In the mid-eighties, according to Unesco statistics, there were 800 million illiterates in the world and about half of the young adults of the developing countries were illiterates. It was also said that the map of illiteracy is the map of poverty. It is a vicious circle: illiteracy leads to poverty and poverty prevents literacy. Hence, achieving universal literacy is indeed a great challenge, now being faced by governments including Bangladesh. To derive real benefits out of the UPE and Adult education programmes of the Ministry of Education it is necessary to include a supplementary programme of continuous education with a view to eradicate functional illiteracy of various levels.

Rotary's role, in these regards can be that of a catalyst. Back in 1985-86 the Rotary International Board of Directors approved a 10-year emphasis on literacy. About the same time Rotary adopted the eradication of Polio programme known as PolioPlus and this programme came into effect globally from 1986-87. Rotary planned to raise US dollar 120 million to provide Polio vaccines for all the children of the world. Rotary created a miracle by raising US dollar 220 million by 1988 for the purpose. Rotary International signed contracts with

WHO and UNICEF to channel Polio vaccines through these agencies for various Governments. Rotary also signed contracts with relevant Governments. One such contract was signed with the Ministry of Health, Government of Bangladesh in July 1986 and Rotary International is providing all the Polio vaccines needed in the EPI programme of the Ministry of Health since then with an estimated cost of over 2 million US dollars. In addition to the vaccines, the West German Rotarians provided a refrigerated Mercedes van worth 20 lakhs taka for transportation of the vaccines to far flung rural areas.

Because of the priority of PolioPlus Programme the literacy programme could not get due attention so far. The first 3-H literacy project was approved and implemented in Thailand recently. The programme Director Rotarian Dr Richard F. Walker described his success story in Bangkok Zone Institute and Seoul Convention of Rotary International. Dr Walker's "Light House project" is aimed at non-mother-tongue speakers and can be duplicated in similar circumstances. In mother-tongue situation like Bangladesh different approach will be needed. In fact, various models are in existence in Bangladesh. Rotary should evaluate these models and may adopt or modify one of those models. If found necessary, Rotary may evolve a new method out of the past experiences. The Ladies of Rotary Committee may develop programme specially for women. These programmes then can be duplicated by all the Rotary Clubs of Bangladesh. I would visualise Rotary undertaking modest pilot projects to supplement gigantic efforts by the Ministry of Education, Government of Bangladesh.

Education is certainly our future and the foundation of that future is being built on the success of UPE, Literacy and Functional Literacy programmes of today. The collective will and determination of about two thousand Rotarians in sixtyone clubs in Bangladesh can make the difference. Let's HOPE to ENJOY ROTARY in 1989-90 through dedicated and meaningful SERVICE, specially in the field of Literacy and Functional Literacy in Bangladesh.

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