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Illiterates Continue To Swell In Asia-Pacific

Estela Carreon

HONGKONG—The rise and fall in the number of "no-read, no-write" people in Asia and the Pacific have kept for the region the dubious distinction of being a centre of gravity for illiteracy.

China, the world's most populous country, has a total of 229 million illiterates in the 1987 estimate by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO). That count has increased to a whopping 230 million as reported in the latest (1988) UNESCO statistical yearbook.

These are people aged 15 years and above, who have not benefitted from the school programme and literacy campaigns for out-of-school youths and adults.

Another Asian country—Pakistan—used to have an illiterate population of 29 million. This has gone up to 33.6 million, according to the UNESCO count.

Nepal, sometimes called a "rising"

nation in the Himalayas, lives up to that word for its illiteracy, has risen from six million to seven million "no-read, no-write" people. The increase is not too big in Thailand—"only" about 300,000 over the previous three million.

A Reverse Trend

But happily, there is a reverse trend in other parts of the region, according to the UNESCO statistical compilation. In India, for instance, the illiterate population has gone down from 264 million to 238 million; in Iran, from 12 million to 11.7 million; in Bangladesh, from 37 million to 33 million; in Afghanistan, from seven million to 5.8 million; in the Philippines, from five million to 4.6 million; in Malaysia, from three million to 2.4 million; and in Vietnam, from five million to 4.8 million.

Most other Asian-Pacific countries have registered slight declines, while a few others have recorded moderate

increases. These reversals do not substantially change the UNESCO's estimate of a total of 666 million illiterate people in the region.

There are also some 100 million children in the 6 to 14 age group who are out of school, according to the UNESCO. Thus, some 766 million people are deprived of education in this part of the world.

Rapid population growth appears to have offset the substantial gains chalked up by literacy programmes in the region. The population factor has been cited by the UNESCO as a major cause of the rise in absolute number of illiterates in the region. The other factor is the "tragic leakage"—meaning immense school dropouts—in the primary school system.

While the aggregate literacy rate of developing Asian-Pacific countries has increased from 53.6 per cent in 1970 to 63.7 per cent in 1985, the number of adult illiterates has also grown by about 80 million.

"Clearly, the rate at which the adult population is gaining literacy is outstripped by the rate of population growth and the continuing phenomenon of primary school drop-outs," says the Bangkok-based UNESCO Regional Office for Education in Asia and the Pacific.

The region's population, excluding that of the Arab states, reached 2.74 billion in 1985 and now projected to be nearing the three-billion mark. About 60 per cent of the primary school enrollment drop out before reaching Grade IV. This grade is the stage when pupils attain permanent literacy, according to the UNESCO. The big number of dropouts is added to the illiteracy cohort every year.

Thus, the Asian-Pacific region, once reputed to be the "birthplace of ancient civilisations, of great literary traditions," is now home to about 72 per cent of the world's illiterate population, according to the UNESCO.—Depthnews.