

The Bangladesh Times

TO READ AND TO WRITE

The International Literacy Day, observed last Friday, once again brought into focus the state of universal basic education in Bangladesh. According to the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, the literacy rate for women in the country was 13.2 per cent in 1981, while for men it was 25.8 per cent, showing how far behind constitutional commitments we are notwithstanding the increase in the budget allocation.

Experts in Rome, predicting that world illiteracy will rise dramatically over the next decade, blamed inadequate government funding compared to population growth as the major obstacle to eradicating adult illiteracy and providing basic education to the increasing number of people. Indeed, even in our country resource allocation is still far short of the UNESCO recommended 7 per cent of the national budget. As a consequence we have not been able to come to grips with the formidable problem, although there is no lack of understanding that for real development we must not lose time in evolving effective methods to bring basic education within the reach of all.

The gravity of restructuring the whole educational pyramid to reach the maximum number of the population must be appreciated. UNESCO, UNICEF and the World Bank are expected to convene a conference by the end of the year, specifically to drive home the importance of the role of basic education in improving the quality of life. International advisory bodies and national governments in many Third World countries realise that more external aid and domestic resources will have to be allocated for compulsory primary education, which is undeniably the most effective tool for real development.

We have about 44,000 primary schools and less than two lakh teachers for them, which means each of the five grades has to make do with less than one teacher. A government "school mapping exercise" in 1983 showed that only 22 per cent of the schools could be used round the year and 70 per cent of them only during the dry season. Besides, only 20 per cent of all primary schools had working tubewells and under 6 per cent had usable toilets. About 87 per cent of the country's school children are scattered over a radius of two miles of a primary school, making attendance difficult to sustain. It is physically impossible to reach all the primary level children with basic education unless these glaring inadequacies are removed.

A recent paper read on the occasion of the International Literacy Day revealed that nearly 32 thousand of our villages do not have any primary school. If we are to achieve the government target of reaching 70 per cent of the primary school children for full five years by 1990, and 90 per cent by the turn of the century we must take immediate steps. There is no substitute for an efficient formal primary education system. It is the highest level which can be a realistic goal for the majority. Investing in primary education brings dividend that has far-reaching effects on the total well-being of the nation. Increasing physical facilities, teacher training including refresher courses, and frequent monitoring of the primary education sector could set us on the path to achieving our goal. It is through this basic service that the nation can achieve meaningful development of our human resource.