

ERADICATING ILLITERACY

In his message on the occasion of the International Literacy Day which was observed yesterday, President Hussain Muhammad Ershad emphasised that the educated minority has an important role to play in the national goal of eradicating illiteracy. Indeed, the handful of privileged people who make it up to the higher secondary level and further on, owe it to the nation to participate actively in illiteracy eradication programmes. Whether they are designed by the government, the community or under individual initiative is immaterial as long as they serve the purpose of equipping the illiterate people with basic reading, writing and arithmetic skills.

The Year of Literacy 1990 for Bangladesh started with significant declarations. First, a bill was passed by the Jatiya Sangsad making primary education compulsory and free for all from the beginning of the next academic year. Secondly, education of female children was declared free up to class eight outside municipal areas. Thirdly, if an only child happens to be female the government would pay for her education up to the tertiary level.

There are many who criticize the gender bias towards education on the grounds that it is untenable. But the mass of evidence in favour of promoting girl students first and foremost leaves no scope for dispute. In many developing countries it has been seen that a few years of basic education to women has had a direct bearing on the improvement of the indices by which the quality of life is measured. Child mortality rates as well as maternal deaths go down significantly relative to the rate of literacy of the mothers. The prevalence of contraceptive use is also high among women with some basic education.

There can be no argument therefore on the cost-effectiveness of female education knowing that it yields such high dividends for human resource development. However, a good deal remains to be worked out on how best to reach basic education to the target group and create opportunities for 'continuing education', that is, providing the atmosphere to use the basic education in everyday life and expand it. Without scope to hone the acquired skills within the family, in the workplace or in social life thousands of literate people are unable to apply their knowledge acquired in schools to practical life. In other words, skills not in use are skills lost as far as basic education is concerned.

The functional aspect of education at all levels can be ignored only at the cost of the entire nation. Obviously the present system leaves a lot to be desired. By giving undue importance to examinations rather than classroom teaching, and teacher and curricula quality, we are annually reminded how wasteful we are in the education sector. To take this year's SSC examination results alone: we are confronted with a 69 per cent failure rate, which is 10 per cent higher than last year, due perhaps to stricter invigilation. The faults behind this high failure rate must be recognised and removed.

The government has plans for reforms in the examination system, classroom teaching standard, academic atmosphere and teacher quality. We must first ensure that the teaching method is effective, and let examinations be optional. Certificates after all are no measure to judge the level of real education.

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