

The Eradication Of Illiteracy

John Hastings

WITH Government's welcome new emphasis on mass education comes a renewal of hope that illiteracy will be systematically eradicated from Bangladesh. Since the suspension in 1982 of the last major mass education initiative, a great deal of analysis, research, fieldwork and pilot demonstration has provided a wealth of experience and basic materials, and with them conviction and confidence concerning the steps that now have to be taken, namely, technically sound programmes for -

- (a) Maximum Adult Functional Literacy (AFL)
- (b) Nation-wide Non-Formal Primary Education (NFPE)
- (c) Universal Primary Education (UPE)
- (d) Continuing Education (Non-Formal) systems at all levels (CE/NFE)
- (e) A community-based Education Reform Movement (ERM)

The last of these five requirements is of such fundamental importance that it must pervade all of the others. Illiteracy is without question the most serious single obstacle to the country's development. (If anyone wants to insist that the fast rate of population expansion is number one enemy, one only has to point out that it is lack of literacy that limits the effectiveness of family planning programmes.) A World Bank report (1987) states: "The primary education situation remains very serious. Initial reforms must be expanded and developed, otherwise the system will absolutely fail to provide basic literacy and numeracy."

One might say that it has been failing in this respect for 30 years - or ever since it was introduced, for that matter. Education in Bangladesh - not only at secondary and higher levels - is in its practical effects elitist, and during the past 17-18 years primary education has in addition been steadily become more and more inadequate even for the children of the richer families.

Notwithstanding changing definitions of it, literacy in Bangladesh has remained stuck at virtually the same level for about 20 years, after a small rise of less than 5 1/2% between 1951 and 1974, when it was 24.27%. The official figure for 1991 was 24.82%. Specially distressing are cases where village (in North Bengal) made totally literate a quarter of a century ago have gone back to the same low level as the surrounding villages. Undoubtedly there were good intentions and efforts to keep those villages actively literate, so why have the gains been lost?

The answer is one that underlines

the need for a popular Education Reform Movement: the dead weight of the primary education system prevents the emergence of a literate adolescent population and inexorably drags back into illiteracy a community made literate by special measures. Those apparently "successful" literacy programmes had no component of a community to reform the primary education system. The newly literate parents, enjoying for themselves the liberation of literacy, wanted their children to become literate. For many, there were no schools to go to. For others, the schools had no room and they were sent home. Most parents wanted evening classes for their children as they had to work during the day for the family to survive, but the teachers could not, or would not, provide them. Where children managed to get enrolled, teachers were frequently absent. When they came, they gave most attention to the children of richer families, partly because they were "better students" (through getting more help at home and having an earlier start on the poorer children) partly because some received additional income from them for private tuition, and partly because many teachers believe that overcome these handicaps had to grapple with a method of learning that was antiquated, slow, unscientific, boring and non-functional. Nearly all the poorer children had left before Class III. Those who had acquired reading skill began to lose it for want of reading material in their village. The same happening to their just-literate parents. There was no ERM, and if they tried to articulate their need, being poor people of no standing no notice was taken of them. The system had successfully reinforced the old message: "Education is not for the likes of you."

The response to this situation is not to abandon adult literacy and concentrate on primary education reform, because without a popular movement the reforms will not take place, and adult literacy is needed as a base for that popular movement.

Of course, all the needed reform could be carried out without the pressure from a public movement. The case for them is self-evident. The appalling condition of rural primary education is well-known to all except some townspeople. And there have been official decisions to carry out reforms. Thousands of teachers have been given re-training. A number of special project schools have been started. Some old school buildings have been renovated. Some experiments have been made in "satellite schools" (i.e. classes held

amongst communities living at a distance from their schools - not high-tech TV lessons!). The curriculum has been improved, and so has the supply of text-books. Teachers' salaries have been increased (though this has not noticeably improved teachers' attendance at school). But essential reforms like:

- * providing evening classes for all working children (i.e. the majority).
- * making teachers' full-time attendance compulsory.
- * opening new schools wherever there is none within 2-3 Km of any community.
- * greasing PE to the needs of village development instead of secondary educational academic goals.
- * abandoning repetitive, rote and passivist learning processes in favour of fast and dynamic, creative methods.
- * making under-used public buildings, like most secondary schools, available at off-times for full public use for non-formal education, economic and skills development, sport and cultural events for all, and so on.

have not figured in official planning and clearly depend on being articulated by the deprived population. For this to happen, AFL + ERM is the vital formula. Perhaps the main reason for delaying these desperately needed reforms is that the few who plead the cause of the poor, including some of the poor themselves, go unheeded. Very few poor villagers, unless they have been aided through private schools or hostels (and thereby sadly often isolated from their fellow-villagers), have ever been able to become educated, let alone become planners or legislators. Basically, the poor, in despair, have opted out of education, or else been forced out of it. Rural children in the fields, and 'tokais' in the towns, will say they are not at school because "schools are not for us." Children feel the verdict of this deeply-rooted classism at an early age. But the decision-makers have been served well enough by the system - their comparative wealth enabled them to get through it (or in some cases to by-pass it), and though they must know the grim facts about what it is like for others they have never felt the impact of that personal deprivation. Less excusably, they have not redressed the national loss caused by the system. With tradition dictating that the poor do not get education, and the poor apparently accepting this as their fate, a significant number of administrators may well have convinced themselves that there is neither demand nor need to

provide educational opportunity for the poor. A few may even be convinced that a literate nation would be a threat to their privileged position. It is now high time to declare that full literacy is a benefit to all and a threat to no one. Maximum literacy raises the standards of all education, improves the output of employees and share-croppers, increases production for the benefit of all citizens, facilitates development where it is stagnant for want of literate beneficiaries, opens up new channels for investment, enhances the quality of life, enriches culture, and much more. Education for all is every government's responsibility. Above all, it is a universal human right.

If the reforms are not going to be carried through without pressure, then the only hope is for those who desperately need them, deserve them, and have the right to them, to campaign for them. But storming the ramparts of Fortress Education is no easy task. Many in various countries have tried and fallen back sorer and wiser. To fight with will, wit and wisdom requires a new strategy, and the most recent literacy campaigns have not equipped new literates with these weapons. They have become better enabled to escape fraud, exploitation and destitution for themselves and to plan a more prosperous future, but banding together to achieve changes to benefit the whole community requires another stage of conscientisation. Moreover, no clarion call has yet been sounded out concerning the urgency, extent and priorities of the several reforms needed if their children's and future generations are to have access to full humanity. An education reform manifesto needs to be formulated and disseminated so that it becomes an article of faith in the hearts and on the lips of sufficient numbers of both rich and poor until the reforms are implemented.

It goes without saying that the movement should be reasoned, have some support amongst the educated, and be non-violent, even good-humoured. But it should also be clear that in the modern world prolonging the deprivation of the poor, whether in education, job opportunities or equality of the justice, is a dangerous and costly choice to make. The Government of Bangladesh is therefore absolutely right in calling for universal literacy and educational advancement. It is the administrators' and everyone's duty to turn this call into action which can be seen and felt in every Thana of the country.

(To be continued)