

Determined efforts needed for mass literacy

By M. A. Quddus

Excepting some temporary and short-lived efforts, there has been no firm policy and determined endeavour in the country for past 40 years to eradicate the curse of illiteracy.

Three short-lived efforts made during the 40 years were: the adult education component of the V-AID programme of the United Front Ministry, the pilot project on adult education undertaken in 1963 in co-operation with the Bangladesh Academy for Rural Development, Comilla, and the Mass Education programme launched in 1980.

Short-lived as these efforts were, there was no significant improvement in the literacy situation, and the curse of illiteracy is growing even more rapidly now. Recently the Government made known its plan to start the second phase of Mass Education programme, but it is yet to clear what shape the programme is going to take although an allocation has been shown in the Annual Development Programme (ADP) for the current fiscal year.

Against this backdrop, it will perhaps not be out of place to trace a background of the efforts made so for removing illiteracy from the society, though with very limited success.

The first venture for adult literacy began with the V-AID programme launched in 1954-55. Some thanas were selected for the purpose. V-AID workers — one male and one female, after one year's training in rural development were posted for a cluster of villages. They lived with the people and worked for multiple development such as agriculture, animal husbandry, health and sanitation, and education for illiterate adults both male and female. This programme continued upto 1960-61 in a limited scale.

Meanwhile, Mr. A. G. Bivar, a veteran I.C.S. Officer, who experimented adult literacy projects while in office dedicated himself to the same work after retirement. He set up an Adult Education Centre in Dhaka with some like-minded retired officials, and took up training programme for V-AID workers and teachers in the methodology of teaching illiterate adults. His second work was the publication of reading materials, charts, primers and follow-up books for neo-literates. In all he published 24 books including 12 for neo-literates on different titles. This was a pioneering work in adult education — the first non-governmental organisation to set an example. This effort suffered a serious setback when the V-AID programme was abandoned.

A seminar on adult education held at the Academy for Rural Development, Comilla in 1962 made a number of recommendations —

ly to four thanas — Kotwali in Comilla, Gouripur in Mymensinghi, Natore in Rajshahi, and Gaibandha in Rangpur — where the academy had co-operative projects. This was known as the Pilot Project in Adult Education.

The base of the adult literacy and adult education project was the co-operative societies, and Imams of mosques, educated housewives selected by the societies were teachers to educate the male and female illiterates of the age group of 8 to 30 years.

The Institute of Adult Education not only trained adult education personnel but also published all kinds of reading and publicity materials after repeated tests. The number of follow-up books to keep neo-literates continue to read upto 1968 was 60 under different life related subjects. There were a good number of adult education centres in the project areas and each centre was provided with a set of books to develop reading centres for both men and women.

On completion of two years of the project in 1965, a three-member appraisal committee was appointed. The committee comprising Mr. A. F. M. Yahya, CSP, Dr. K. T. Hossain of Dhaka University and the ADPI adult education — was satisfied with the results and recommended its expansion. Subsequently the programme was expanded to four new thanas which were outside the programme of BARD, Comilla. But no more expansion followed.

This pilot project was small but the objectives desired and achieved were clearly identified. It was a socio-economic programme. Considering the socio-economic and religious conditions of the people, three objectives were targeted: (a) functional literacy and education, (b) economic development and (c) family planning. The third objec-

tive — family planning — though not a major issue of concern in 1963 was included in BARD's training programme under the title "Danger ahead".

After liberation late Mahbub Alam Chashi led an initiative in this direction and two new schemes were prepared one for rural areas and the other for municipal areas. A Taka 6-crore project was started by him but it was abandoned abruptly in 1973-74.

Another method was tried specially at the primary stage through the "Muktangan Project", which also died like bubbles.

Then came the Mass Education Programme launched in 1980. But 1981 the programme was organised under the administrative control of an ADC (Literacy) in each district with a literacy organiser in each union. Literacy workers were to work on a voluntary and self-help basis. The campaign was started with all enthusiasm only to end in a fiasco. It was abandoned in July 1982.

We can only hope that the mass literacy drive will receive the due priority for enlightening the vast majority of our population who still cannot read and write.