

41

Literacy And Human Rights

Education, and, by extension, literacy, is recognised as one of the fundamental human rights and an essential ingredient for the enjoyment of other human rights. The Universal declaration of Human Rights, adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1948 states, "Everyone has the right to education ... Education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms".

Since then very little headway has been made in making this a reality. The fourth UNESCO International Conference on Adult education held in March 1985 noted accurately that, "There can be no human development without the right to learn. There will be no breakthrough in agriculture and industry, no progress in community health and, indeed, no change in learning conditions without the right to learn. Without this right there will be no improvements in the standard of living for workers in cities and villages".

It is known that illiteracy aggravates the problems arising from poverty, malnutrition, inadequate health care and the runaway population growth which face many countries today. It obviously prevents a free choice of work and hampers the people's participation in the political life of their countries and definitely hinders development. In fact, illiteracy and underdevelopment are two handmaids, for the link between per capita income and the rate of illiteracy has long been established. In fact, as early as 1955, studies found that countries with per capita incomes above USD 500 had a literacy rate of 90% or higher, while countries with per capita incomes of less than USD 200 had literacy rates of 30% or even lower.

Obviously the link between the two is not difficult to understand. A literate population is obviously more productive on the job; and can master new technologies and methods with ease. They have greater job opportunities and, in rural villages, they can take better advantage of any banking and cooperative facilities. They can also learn from written materials without having to wait for some-one to explain to them, things about climate or new methods for farming and livestock management, or even for maintaining equipment, wells and irrigation systems. In the urban areas a literate person is more easily integrated into the efforts of the community to improve the quality of life. They have a better understanding of hygiene and can, therefore, ensure better health for their families and, as they can make more informed choices, they can determine the size of family they may want. In other words they would know what is in their own interest.