

World Literacy Day

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The Universal Declaration of Human Rights as adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1948 says, "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." The fourth UNESCO International Conference on Adult Education held in March 1985 noted 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."

Wherever there is illiteracy, problems rising out of poverty, malnutrition, inadequate health care and runaway population growth are not only aggravated but prevent any free choice of work and also hampers normal participation in the political life of a country and is, most definitely, a hinderance to development. In fact, illiteracy and underdevelopment are Siamese twins for there is a distinct link between per capita income and the rate of illiteracy. As early as 1955, studies had shown how countries with per capita incomes above USD 500 have a much higher rate of literacy (at 90% or more), whereas those with per capita incomes of less than USD 200, had literacy rates of 30% or less.

This link is not really too difficult to understand when one realises a literate population is also a literate workforce, and, as a literate workforce can also move more easily between jobs and tasks, this gives them greater opportunity for upward mobility and, being literate, they can take better advantage of any credit arrangements available. In addition they can work from written instructions without the need to take advice from others. A literate person can be more easily integrated into the efforts of the community for improving the quality of life and, as they have a better understanding of hygiene, they can be expected to improve the health of the community—and they can make informed choices about their own lives.

As basic education is meant to be a tool to be used for making the social transformations needed to guide people towards the pursuit of accepted human values. Ideally, if we are to attain our ends, primary education is a must for all countries which is why it is incorporated in the charter for human rights. In order to do this effectively, it is very essential to mobilise the community to put in a greater effort in their approach to education, for it is this which is the pre-requisite for strengthening the early development of children. Therefore, if such ends are to be attained, there is a great need to call on all the available resources by motivating people into subsidising the work of government, in cash and kind.

Political manipulation of the education system must not, however, be allowed to thwart the efforts being made to impart education to the people, especially to women and girls, lest we forget the well worn cliche that "an educated woman is an educated nation" or, as Napoleon put it, "Give me an educated mother and I will educate a nation."

Although, admittedly, the non-formal mode of learning has a purpose in the larger scheme of things, especially where illiteracy rates are high and difficult to reduce, but this should not allow us to sit back on our laurels. Content we have done our bit, for we must not be satisfied with such "stop-gap arrangements" until each and every person in the land can read and write. But the lack of a reliable professional cadre at policy and management levels still continues to be the biggest handicap in the endeavour to bring education to the doorsteps of the people even as we accept the universal truth that every child has a right to an education to be provided by the state.

The type and content of education can, and does, frequently differ from nation to nation and is dependent on individual needs which, even if not pleasing to everyone, is a fact of life with which we all must live. As this in turn raises pertinent questions, particularly those relating to quality, for state run schools must be able to satisfy the majority but leave free the minority who seek alternatives. In other words, although education should be compulsory it should not be mandatory in regard to schools or their location.