

## The Legacy Of An Illiterate Mother

Illiteracy is a curse for which there is no cure other than to learn how to read and write. It not only restricts a person's mental growth and closes off all the various avenues of opportunities. It also limits choices by restricting access to information and a knowledge of the outside world. When a woman is illiterate it places an unpardonable burden on her children, for an illiterate mother can unwittingly pass on her own myths and superstitions to her offspring, some of which may have a retarding effect on them.

No matter how educated a person may become in later life, what he or she has learned at his or her mother's knee often has a lifelong impact. In other words, when a woman is illiterate her pet superstitions are perpetuated through her children and this is the factor that helps to keep the nation backward. To quote a very old saying, "Give me an educated mother and I will give you an educated nation." Indeed, it is not for nothing that other equally famous sayings on the same theme have come into circulation, such as: "The hand that rocks the cradle rules the world," or "An educated mother is an educated nation." All these give recognition to the important part the mother plays in the mental development of a child.

Unfortunately as a nation, we have always been at a disadvantage for most of our previous generations have not benefited from an educated mother. What we need to do now is to consider whether, and to what extent, this has affected our progress over the years. As 65 per cent (?) of our women are still illiterate, we must also pause to consider what this could be doing to our new generation. That this is important is clear. Research has shown what is learned during the formative years of a child stays with the child throughout life, even when a high standard of education is superimposed at a later stage.

With such a high rate of illiteracy among women, what guarantee do we have that the coming century for us would be brighter? A child may out-perform his mother in every respect but still carry with him the legacy of results of illiteracy without realising it.

In 1996 the government handled the responsibility to give us an educated nation by 2005 to the Directorate of Non-Formal Education (DNFE). It is highly doubtful whether they considered the factor of the illiterate mother, which is possibly as retarding as the lack of infrastructural support in this sector.

It is time we devoted a good deal more of our resources for education to educating mothers. The value of an educated mother is seen in the statistics, not only on education, but also on family health. But with still so many deprived of the ability to read and write, the nation will find it extremely difficult to get along with the rest of the world, unless the problem is taken head on and nationwide urgent action is taken.

With most of our women and girls still denied education, we would be perpetuating the legacy of illiteracy and backwardness. We must be serious about universal education — formal and non-formal alike — and we must start it right away.