

Wednesday, September 7, 1988

One billion illiterates

By the turn of this century the developing countries, including Bangladesh, will together have a billion illiterates unless the present trend of investment on education is corrected. This was the dire prediction made by Mr William Draper, Director General of UNDP (United Nations Development Programme) last Saturday at the opening session of a seminar in Amman on development strategies for the year 2000.

The world already has nine hundred million adult illiterates of age fifteen and older, over 75 per cent—666 million—of whom are in the Asia-Pacific region. Bangladesh alone harbours over 70 million of them out of a population of 100.5 million. The irony is that most of the high illiteracy countries have elementary education for all as a basic human right enshrined in their constitution. Yet, according to the Amman meeting, developing countries had cut expenditure on education from 13.2 per cent of their budget in 1972 to 7.6 per cent in 1985. For us it is even lower, although compared to previous allocation, current percentage is highest.

We are living with the consequences of very high illiteracy. Everything from socio-economic underdevelopment to overpopulation, malnutrition and mass deprivation is invariably associated with it. It is indeed the "supreme destroyer of human creativity and initiative"; it immobilizes the community and reduces the nation's capacity for self-reliant development. The social and human indicators in developing countries expose the stark reality and the gaping discrepancy between constitutional pretences and practices. High time we faced up to facts... Education equips human beings for a better life. With education they have a greater ability to earn an income and fight for their rights. It is the only way we can transform a liability into an asset.

Tomorrow, September 8th, is International Literacy Day. It is a high-tech world where information can be transmitted in seconds across continents and millions can watch a single event simultaneously all over the world. The fruits of education are obvious. It is a wonder that so many developing countries should still be blind to the critical role of education in human resource development.

Fortunately many among the developing countries are participating in the Asia-Pacific Programme of Education for All (APPEAL) which was launched last year with the aim of reaching three goals: eradication of illiteracy; universalisation of primary education; and provision of opportunity for continuing education. China, Sri Lanka, South Korea, India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Nepal, Philippines and Thailand are the participating countries. We hope Bangladesh too can follow suit and invest now for a better future.

13