

Literacy—Some Implications

Selina Mohsin

THE year 1990 was declared International Literacy Year (ILY), by the United Nations. It was hoped that the observance of this occasion would foster deeper understanding of the multifaceted problems of illiteracy and prompt greater efforts to its eradication. This year International Literacy Day was observed on the 8th of September 1991, so it appropriate to examine certain aspects related to illiteracy.

Illiteracy is not only a symptom but also a cause of underdevelopment. Development has to be perceived as a global action of change in society—a process where a gamut of interconnected aspects—socio-political and economic interact upon each other. The idea that literacy automatically leads to development is over-simplistic. The relationship between literacy and development is a complicated one. This relationship can be understood if we see it as being of an interactive, organic nature. Literacy supports the process of development and is in turn nurtured by it (see Carron and Bordin, 1985).

In 1985, there were approximately 889 million adult illiterates in the world and over 100 million out of school children of primary school-age group in the developing countries. These children are the potential adult illiterates of the 21st century unless action is taken to enroll them in schools. Approximately 98

per cent of the world illiterates live in developing countries and the differential between illiteracy rate for women and men is 21 percentage points (1985). It may be significant to note that three quarters of the world illiterates, comprising 666 million, live in Asia.

In the past, literacy and development have been analysed and debated in many forums. It is now an accepted fact that literacy is one of the variables towards an integrated approach to development. It supports the development process. It interacts with other variables and other productive inputs of the educational programme.

The Human Development Report 1990 described human development as the means of increasing the options of the people. The most vital choices that people should possess is the (1) options to lead a healthy life, (2) to possess adequate knowledge and (3) to find access to work and income. This new measure of development—the Human Development Index (HDI), therefore, comprises three indicators: (1) life expectancy, (2) education and (3) income. Thus there is a close link between literacy, physical and economic well-being.

It needs to be remarked that the attainment of literacy finally depends upon the desire of the clientele group; upon their conviction that acquiring literacy skills are worth-

while. Motivations will be present when literacy programme is a component of a wider movement of progress and reform which promises to change the quality of life of the learner by arousing new aspirations and by providing new possibilities.

Thus literacy is not merely a matter of acquiring basic education, it is a question of development in general and enhancement of human potentialities, in particular. This requires sustained struggle against illiteracy social, economic and cultural mobilisation as well as efforts towards education. The right to Education For All (EFA) must not be seen merely as a rhetoric but as a reality. The World Conference on Education For All held at Jomtien, Thailand 1990 was the largest of its kind. It was assumed in this conference that the goal was measurable and attainable.

To be realistic, it is vital to realise that Education For All (EFA) must have six favourable factors: (1) political will, (2) adequate financial allocation, (3) demand for education, (4) effective managerial capability, (5) removal of all kinds of inertia in the existing education system and (6) time necessary for expansion of such magnitude in the educational infrastructure (see Hallak, 1991). To refer to Hallak's keynote speech on Education in London (1991) it was emphasised that Education For All should form an

integrated part of a policy of development and democracy. Thus the present concept of literacy takes on a new significance for development planners. Since literacy is not an independent variable in the process of socio-economic development but one of the variables, it consequently needs to be integrated with other inputs of development. Policy makers need to keep in mind specific situation in which literacy is being implemented and to address the needs of the learners in their context and environment.

Evaluation and analysis of literacy programmes cannot adopt a simple dichotomy of success or failure. Progress is a matter of degree and the degree of progress needs to be carefully analysed and remedial measures adopted or else it will remain conceptually interesting but in terms of productive applicability and societal impact quite useless.

Finally, we need vision, dedication and a sense of deep commitment. Today Education For All may seem impossible but to quote Bernard Lown, President of International Physicians for the Prevention of the Nuclear War, who was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize 1985, 'Only those who can see the invisible can do the impossible'. Let us face the challenge of Education For All and try to attempt what seems impossible today but which may well seem possible within a few years.