

Achievements Of Literacy Drive

Nilratan Halder

ANY figure concerning the country's literacy rate near the 50 per cent mark is bound to raise many a eye-brow. If that figure is put at six per cent higher than the mark—56 per cent that is, people are surely to dismiss the claim as a manufactured one or a figment of imagination. The reason why people look askance at any positive contribution by any government is simple: political environment here is of little help to justify such tall government claims. This is however one area that needed to be either completely independent of any negative political pull or should have enjoyed the blessings of involved politics of an ideal kind. The latter situation is perhaps too much to ask for and the next best option left for any political government is to go about the business in a most planned manner. Happily after some initial setback, trial and error during the eighties, the launching of the Integrated Non-formal Education Programme (INFEP) in 1991 brought about a decisive change in the country's literacy scene. In a country where the middle age bracket (between 15-45 years) has the highest share in the population—52.4 per cent fall under this category—the more than moderately successful implementation of INFEP between 1991-97 made a difference in the literacy, if not education, situation. The age group between zero to 14 is the second largest population, comprising 43.2 per cent of the total and the 60 plus group has a meagre 4.4 per cent share in it.

Clearly, anyone can see where the option for action lies if the literacy rate has to be raised at a desirable level. So it was a very pragmatic decision to target the first and second age-bracket population that lies outside of the pale of formal primary education. The programme envisaged to accomplish the job broadly in two ways: 1) by bringing in under it school-age children of poor families who have either dropped out or even never had the opportunity to go to school; 2) by creating opportunities for unschooled adolescents and adults to acquire functional literacy.

The success of the INFEP was there to see. So the government decided to consolidate the gain and also work towards achieving the ultimate objective of hundred per cent literacy by the year 2006. Fortunately for it, international donor agencies also came up with increased support—both financial and moral—to stand by the country. A number of non-government organisations (NGOs) also started working in close co-operation with the government or independently to support the cause. A number of international initiatives and events—such as the launching of the programme of ATLP (appeal training material for literacy personnel) by UNESCO in 1987, holding of the WCEFA (world conference on education for all) in Jomtien, Thailand in 1990, World conference on Children's Rights in New York, Education for All Summit Conference of nine high population countries in New Delhi in 1993—gave the required momentum to our literacy drive. During the same period Bangladesh penned down the Compulsory Education Act and created a special government organ named Primary and Mass Education Division (PMED) to help the cause.

However the government attempt received a major boost with the establishment of the Directorate of Non-Formal Education (DNFE), a permanent national agency solely devoted to non-formal education. The DNFE has developed an elaborate system to implement its programmes. It has set itself the task of attaining the ultimate goal of total literacy in the country by the year 2006. The plan no doubt is ambitious and must call for a concerted effort from all involved in it. For convenience the responsibility has been divided under four projects. What is significant is that the government share in the funding for NFE has for the first time been more than the donors' in the fiscal year, 1997-98. Of the total allocation of Tk 10065 lakhs, the government portion was Tk 5165 lakhs and the rest amount of Tk 4900 lakhs was from the contribution by the donors. Project no-4

of DNFE is almost entirely financed by the Bangladesh government and it has received an allocation of Tk 1000 lakhs.

The DNFE proposes to achieve its targets step by step. So it has some important tasks to accomplish before the year 2000. First of all, it seeks to raise the enrollment rate at the primary level to 95 per cent, in which the share of the girl students is projected to rise from 70 per cent in 1991 to 94 per cent. The next objective is to bring down the dropout rate at this level to 30 per cent by that time from 60 per cent in 1991. Adult literacy rate has been targeted to rise from 35 per cent to 62 per cent during the period 1991-2000. After the completion of the NFE projects in 2001, this rate is expected to touch the 80 per cent mark. The initiatives are extensive no doubt but much will depend on the delivery mechanism.

As was the case with INFEP, the four on-going projects of DNFE also cannot stick to set rules because of the demanding situation and complexities involved. Without flexibility such programmes stand little chance of being successful. But too much of flexibility is likely to be counterproductive at times. Clearly, uncertain elements are there and they must be overcome by constant monitoring of the situation and the problems faced. The DNFE's focus on new and unconventional areas is praiseworthy but it also makes its job even more challenging. For the first time in our history, sex workers, scavengers and prisoners have been brought under literacy coverage. Yet another significant population awaits similar attention. This is none other than the disabled or physically handicapped. They account for 10 per cent of the total population and an overwhelming majority of them are illiterate. Lack of teaching materials, other facilities and social awareness are responsible for illiteracy among the disabled and physically handicapped.

With increased allocation of fund in the NFE sub-sector room has been made for accommodating certain norms and responsibility that have been gaining in-

creasing recognition the world over. Reducing gender disparity is one such social responsibility. The NFE has the provision of enrolling female—only learners in at least 50 per cent of its literacy centres. Before the original INFEP ran its course, new projects either complementary to it or intervening in nature were worked out to iron out gaps and lapses in it as well as to push ahead the programme. According to NDFF, the annual growth rate of literacy between 1991-97 is 2.3 per cent. In 1998 a total of 3.3 million learners have completed their literacy course and 5.6 million more are taking the course now. So the increase in the number of learners is quite high.

Now the question is how authentic these figures about the progress in literacy are. The whole performance is subjected to evaluation—both internal and external. The funding agencies such as the ADB, WB, SDC, UNICEF, UNDP, NORAD and SIDA all have evaluated the projects—some of them more than once. All have concluded that the impacts of the NFE programme are highly positive. They also pointed out that the attempt to translate the quantitative gain into the qualitative has been quite successful. Both post-literacy exercise and incorporation of livelihood training have contributed to the retention of the success rate. Their independent assessments prove valuable. We therefore cannot say that the achievements in literacy are a mere jugglery of words and figures.

If the three-month post-literacy package programme has contributed so much to the NFE, there is a need for turning the process of learning a life-long practice to fight unlearning. In that task the donors will have to play a role once again. They should come forward with necessary fund to help finance the establishment of an adequate number of continuing education centres-cum-rural libraries. If easy reading material and newspapers can be made available to the neo-literate there, the literacy movement will have achieved unquestioned success.