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Public Libraries For Mass Education

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THE Government is aware of the gigantic problem of illiteracy, and is making all efforts to establish schools, particularly primary schools, colleges and universities to make us a literate nation. The government visualizes that by the year 2000 it would be able to achieve 60% literacy. How far this target is achievable should be examined in the light of past achievement in this respect. The aim of this paper is to show how we can reinforce this effort of the government by establishing public libraries—more of them being the rural areas.

As of 1974 census, the rate of literacy in Bangladesh was 22.2%. The rate was 21% in 1951 and 21.5% in 1961. And it was estimated that over the years the actual number of illiterates above 5 years of age increased by 90% raising the total from 24.6 million to about 46.2 million. According to 1986 calculation the rate of literacy is 29.2%. What the actual number of illiterates at the moment would be is another matter of computation.

The above statistics lead us to construe that if our arrangement for mass education remains as it is, we shall be left with an increasingly large size of illiterate population with the passage of time. This will be so because: (1) we cannot immediately enrol all children of the agegroup of 5 to 10 years for formal education, (2) there will be a large scale dropout from those who are in schools for primary education, (3) a substantial number of the children who have finished primary education will relapse into illiteracy unless they grow up with books and practise literacy and (4) the problem will be worse confounded by the growth of population.

And if this is the problem of mass education in Bangladesh its solution must also follow from this, but the problem is also related to other

questions. The questions are: (1) what is mass education? and (2) why should the masses be educated?

MASS EDUCATION: Mass education is related to the semantics of 'basic education', 'mass literacy' and 'functional literacy'. It is also related to the particular socio-economic conditions of the country concerned. And without entertaining the meanings of these semantics mass education may be defined as giving the masses of the people basic education so that they may read, write and do the computing of positive numbers by adding, subtracting, multiplying and dividing in their mother tongue.

But even this much of basic education may not be necessary for a country at a particular stage of its history. This is because the primary aim of basic education is to give people the knowledge of things and how things are done and this knowledge can be imparted even by transmitting information to people by explaining things to them in a face to face situation or through radio and TV. Mass education would mean giving people the knowledge of three R's and transmitting basic information to them. How this should be done would depend on the administrative set up and the socio-economic conditions of the country concerned.

Mass education is necessary to enable people to participate in the efforts for the economic development of the country. Mass education is necessary because economic development has to come through the development of people. Mass education is of crucial importance in the economic development of a country and it must be achieved by any means. And hence the importance of innovation in mass education.

NO AD HOC ARRANGEMENT: Prima facie, the very high percentage of illiteracy in Bangladesh is the result of lapses in compulsory formal primary education. Obviously, it follows that lapses in formal education should be made up by nonformal education but the lapses become so gigantic by now that any ad hoc or crash programme type arrangement for achieving mass literacy would not help much. Illiteracy is a kind of disease which cannot be cured once and for all. There is no immunization against it. It is bound to recur in those who have basic literacy but do not practise it.

Since we cannot immediately enrol all our children for primary education, since there will be a large scale dropout from our primary schools and since neoliterates are likely to relapse into illiteracy if they do not practise literacy, arrangement should be made for their nonformal education. This would call for an institution where literacy could be both taught and practised, which could make the campaign for literacy both effective and economical. This is necessary for us because the problem before us, besides the constraint of money, is that we should not only make our people literate but could also keep them literate. And this would call for innovation in mass education because at the moment we do not have any institution which has arrangements to enable people to acquire literacy as well as to practise literacy. In schools, for example, people only acquire literacy and in libraries they only practise literacy. So, the innovation suggested is: educational institutions have libraries and in that sense libraries are part and parcel of education system. But once we are out of educational institutions we shall not have access to institutional or academic libraries. The option

for us would be to have public libraries where we can practise literacy.

THE OPEN SCHOOL

Historically, the public library has emerged as a kind of open school for the members of the public. Historically, public libraries in Bangladesh have appeared more or less as result of the civic activities of the members of the public. The public library has opened its doors to the members of the public and given them the facility to do leisurely reading there and to borrow books for home reading. It serves as an information centre in that it answers enquires and reference questions from the members of the public. It organises talks and lectures on topics of public interest. In the circumstances, our question is: Can we ask our public libraries to run mass literacy courses for the members of the public? According to an eminent Western library scientist, the librarians must not play the role of others. This he said when the librarians were opting for that to enhance their social status. But the library is an organization—instrument—to achieve some goals. If it is linked to a factory which produces a particular kind of product, there is absolutely no reason why it should not produce any other product, if it can. To us it appears that it should not be very difficult for the public libraries to run mass literacy courses, particularly because it seems to us so much in line with public library activities. And if so, can we have more public libraries to take up mass literacy programmes? The question needs to be examined in the light of the total education and information programme of the government.—(To be continued)