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Literacy Under Compulsion

During the last few years there has been a rapid expansion of community development works. Everywhere in its 64 thousand villages in Bangladesh, government, voluntary agencies and patriotic citizens are trying to help people help themselves, in various fields of human endeavour. New methods and new techniques have been adopted to drive out the curse of illiteracy from the country.

But generally people associate education with schools. But the truth is that schools particularly in the villages have not been very effective in helping small communities to adapt themselves to change. If we look into the history of mass literacy movement, we find that the most successful literacy campaigns were started by compulsion. Turkey began her literacy campaign immediately after Mustafa Kamal Ataturk had become President. After the overthrow of Czarist regime in 1917, Lenin had signed a decree to liquidate illiteracy in two years time. More recently a big mass literacy campaign is going on in Indonesia, Ghana, Mexico, Thailand and Burma. So with the enthusiasm generated by the national liberation movement, hundreds and thousands of people in newly liberated countries are coming forward to learn the alphabet.

Yet with all the stimulus, many illiterates do not make the needed effort to learn, because they consider it useless; others because they are too busy with their daily chores and others again who find reading and writing too irksome. In Russia, refusal to attend literacy classes was made punishable by fines, loss of food cards and sometimes hard labour. In China, a law was passed imposing taxes on illiterates. In Turkey illiterates were debarred from government jobs. In Java, passing a literacy test has been made a requirement for getting permission to marry.

Of course, compulsion is one method. But more important is to demonstrate that reading and writing are useful and learning to read is not difficult. For this what is needed is the right type of instructors. Another way of incentive is to provide the adult illiterates with a literacy kit, as done in Ghana. The kit contains a primer, an exercise book, a pencil and a beautiful badge. When the learner pins on his badge, he feels important that he has joined a national movement.