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The Problem Of Functional Illiteracy

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THE term 'functional illiteracy' in educational parlance is of recent origin and it has been defined by UNESCO thus: "A functional illiterate person is one who cannot engage in all those activities in which literacy is required for effective functioning of his group or community and also for enabling him to continue to use reading, writing, and calculation for his own and community's development". This definition was provided keeping in view the populations of the Third World countries.

In fact all attention, till the recent past, including the four world conferences on adult education, was focused on the problem of illiteracy of the Third World countries. There was a general impression that the industrialized countries were immune from this problem.

This was so becuase of two reasons. First, it was believed that industrialized countries have closed the source of illiteracy by making primary education compulsory and universal. Second, the policy of providing equal educational opportunity to all pursued by the industrialized countries, has effectively buttressed the first one.

It was not long ago that doubts were expressed and people started talking about prevalence of illiteracy among ethnic and minority groups in the industrialized countries. But recent investigations revealed a different pictures. It is reported that "those affected no longer exclusively the ethnic minorities, immigrant groups or the handicapped; the majority of them are young people of native stock generally brought up in the same culture and mother tongue".

The shock of this discovery was not easy to digest. The overriding question that is now asked is, "How can it be that democracies with fifty or even a hundred years of free and compulsory schooling are having to recognize that a proportion of their young people have somehow or other lost the ability to read, write and do arithmetic?" Along with this, the effectiveness of the policy of providing equal educational opportunity to all is also being investigated. An analysis to that effect presented in an issue of PROSPECT—the UNESCO quarterly review of education—is quoted hereunder:

"In countries with university and compulsory schooling, there is a strong temptation to consider that, if illiterates exist, then the school is responsible, which has either created illiteracy or not been able to prevent it".

This is harsh affirmation, but it is borne out by investigation, and even more by statistics. The primary function of education as an institution is to teach basic skills (reading, writing and arithmetic) and to make sure that they are properly learned and mastered. And yet, for dacades now, the figures for failures, grade repeaters and drop-outs, carefully counted at the end of each school year, have constantly sounded the alarm, to say nothing of the ritual complaints of teachers accusing the preceding class and/or level of having sent them pupils 'not up to the standard' expected. What is more, the school system is in general explicitly or implicitly based on selection and on its corollary, disqualification. If such disqualification is not accompanied by specific provisions to cater specially for–or rescue–the school-leavers affected, even though not all the 'disqualified' necessarily relapse into semi-illiteracy, for some of them that risk will be real.

A second factor is that formal education, in theory and in practice, is designed for a hypothetical average pupil. By that yardstick the fittest survive and the weakest are rejected or marginalized by the institution itself. This social and cognitive Darwinism is all the more hard to tolerate in democratic countries by the fact that these same countries are at present vying with each other, to develop special courses for expectionally gifted children and adolescents. Why are there no courses for the less gifted ones that are more credible and more effective than special education or employment-oriented youth training schemes ?

Although this is where the trouble lies, we must be careful not to pin all the blame on the school, for at least two reasons: First, it is those who are socially most disadvantaged who are eliminated and thus run the risk of relapsing into semi-illiteracy; and secondly, it is after all governments that set the groud rules for the school system as they do for the economic and social system.

About the other element in the equation–the government—we shall say little. Surveys, official reports and studies propounding different points of view make it clear that the government, with its firm grip in national policy, holds the vital key to the problem. It is also mentioned that the policy or equal educational opportunity for all has not been followed to its full logical conclusion. In other words, most of the countries concerned have not attempted to solve the fundamental contradiction between the pursuit of equality in education and the persistence of the unequal distribution of labour, wealth and power in society.

Whatever the reasons are, it is now established that illiteracy is no longer the prerogative of the Third World countries. In an article Denis Kallen stated: "Illiteracy is the tip of the iceberg of educational failure and under achievement. Nevertheless the numbers of fuctional illiterates in the developed Western countries are impressive. For the countries of the European Community it was for 1981 estimated at around 4 to 6 per cent of the adult population, or 10 to 15 million persons. In the United Kingdom alone their number is estimated at 2 million and a recent American report mentions a rate of 13 per cent functional illiterates among 17-year olds and of upto 40 per cent among the young people belonging to minority groups. (United States, 1983)". Although it has not been possible as yet for the countries concerned to ascertain accurate figures of the functional illiterates in their respective countries, the Final Report of the European specialists' meeting in Humburg, 1986, mentioned: "It was now estimated that 10 per cent of the population of the industrialized countries could neither read nor write properly".

However, the nature, composition and characteristics of the illiterates of the industrialized countries are different. The illiterates of the industrialized countries are sometimes referred to as 'new illiterates' because they attended schools, though not always upto the end of compulsory schooling, i.e. from age 6-7 to 15-16 years. Besides, "the illiterates or semi-literates of the industrialized countries—unlike the developing countries, where illiteracy is still widespread and the social strata concerned easily localized—though they are many in number, nonetheless constitute isolated cases in a highly literate human environment. Unlike certain minorities (such as gypsies in Hungary or large groups of black people in the southern states of the United States of America) or immigrant workers in various parts of Europe, large indigenous groups are not to be found concentrated in specific geographical areas. Relatively large groups may be said to exist in the countries of southern Europe (Spain, Italy, Portugal) and, within those countries, in their sothern regions. Elsewhere, such groups have been identified, often by accident, in rural areas, in the suburbs of large cities and in certain particularly disadvantaged urban neighbourhoods".

That illiteracy is a stigma is very much known to them who suffer from it in the industrialized countries. "The illiterate person's conviction that he is an isolated case, an exception, makes him feel that he is solely responsible for the situation he is in. To be an illiterate, which is to be practically an ignoramus in the eyes of the rest of the society, means lack of prestige and social erosion". In such a situation, the persons concerned, young and adult alike, feel distressed and embarrassed and gradually they withdraw themselves from the main stream of social life. (The article is based on materials presented in Prospects—UNESCO quarterly review of education—Vol. XVII, No. 2, 1987).