

INTERNATIONAL LITERACY DAY 2015

"The number of illiterate people in Bangladesh is larger than entire populations of some European countries"

Rasheda K. Choudhury, Executive Director of Campaign for Popular Education (CAMPE), a network of more than a thousand NGOs and educator groups working in the basic education sub-sector in Bangladesh, speaks to Nahela Nowshin of The Daily Star and sheds light on the conditions and challenges of literacy in Bangladesh.

How is literacy measured in Bangladesh?

There was a time when a person was considered literate if he or she was able to sign his or her name, which you could say was more or less imitation. But now, as far as I know, the government follows UNESCO's definition of literacy according to which a person would be considered literate if he or she is able to read, write and understand a letter and is able to do basic arithmetic. This is the basis on which literacy is supposed to be measured.

But a lot of the time, we inevitably see some variations between government research and independent research due to the assessment instruments, especially with regard to self-assessment (most widely used). An example of this would be asking a person whether he or she knows how to read and write to which he or she would simply answer with a yes or no, and that's how you would measure that person's literacy without actually testing his or her reading, writing, and arithmetic abilities. This method is also used in the census. In contrast, independent researchers do not rely on self-assessment and this is where the variation between government and independent research comes in. As of now, government research results

at 61 percent in accordance with UNESCO's definition of literacy.

How would you evaluate this literacy rate of 61 percent?

Around 40 percent of the population has no education opportunities. However, what is more important than the percentage of 60-40 is the absolute number of illiterate people. 40 percent in absolute numbers amounts to hundreds of thousands of illiterate people in the 15+ age group. This is not a negligible number. This should be the biggest takeaway from these figures. The number of illiterate people in Bangladesh is larger than entire populations of some European countries.

What are some obstacles in the way of achieving universal literacy status?

Let me first point out that since the country reverted to democracy in 1991, literacy rate has gone up. Whereas in the early 1980s, the literacy rate was somewhere in the 20s, today it is in the 60s. So we've come pretty far. But most of the contribution to boosting the literacy rate has come from mainstream primary education which is an area of huge achievement for us. The dropout rate has fallen to 20 percent from 40 percent five years ago. So more children are going to school, staying in school and literacy rate is going up as a result.



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But there are no programmes dedicated to those who do not have opportunities for education and are dropping out. There is no system or provision designed for those belonging to the 15+ age group who are not in school. If these opportunities are not created, how are you going to get them

enrolled? You will not find in the entire budget funds allocated for adult literacy. This is the first obstacle.

The second stumbling block is this: for this age group, mere literacy does not mean anything to them. What they need is literacy with skills for livelihood. These people are reluctant to come to literacy centres; they have bigger challenges to face related to their livelihood and they don't have the time.

There is a gender dimension to this as well and is much truer for women. In Bangladesh we now have three crops a year. Out of 21 tasks related to crop production, 17 are performed by women. These women -- after an entire day of hard manual labour -- simply do not have the time to go to literacy centres when they're asked to.

So there is an urgent need for literacy-related programmes along with skills training as per demand. For instance, programmes designed for Rajshahi will be different from those of a haor in Sylhet because of demand.

Programmes must be set up in a way so they meet the specific needs of different illiterate populations in various localities. This is something we tend to overlook. One-size-fits-all policies don't work for literacy because different groups have different types of challenges.

The sad thing is that the existing few

literacy-based programmes are extremely projected. After a project is undertaken and one phase of the project is over, it takes about one to two years for the next phase to be implemented because of bureaucratic reasons. When this phase eventually starts, participants tend to forget everything that they have learnt in the meantime and we are back to square one.

What would be your recommendations to overcome these challenges?

In short, I would say that we need strong political commitment combined with appropriate strategies, investment and monitoring. The role of one stakeholder is extremely important and that is the local government. You cannot have a literacy movement with a central, administrative government. You need to have public representatives at the local level. For example, the three women members in the Union Parishad have more of an idea about literacy needs in the various types of households in comparison to members of the central government. So in this regard, the role of the local government needs to be strengthened. Also, at the end of the day, there has to be a social movement with sincere political commitment to attain better literacy rates.