

Attack On Illiteracy

Illiteracy, we had once observed, is a dark problem. An effort was launched to remove this darkness on February 21, 1980 and it was a massive effort. February 21 is an unmistakable symbol of our aspirations, and of our determination to conquer all that stand in the way of a realisation of these. It is significant that the nation wide campaign against illiteracy was begun on this day. A year has passed since then and it is time a fresh look were taken at the problem and a fresh evaluation made of the forces that support or hinder progress in this direction.

It may, however, be good at this stage to remember that the problem is big and complex, the challenge persistent, and one year too short a time to find a full and satisfactory answer. Also, the first year of any major effort of this kind is the most crucial year: unknown areas have to be explored, responses to approaches made, evaluated, policies and strategies reviewed and workers motivated and organized. All these are difficult jobs. The success of the first year must therefore be seen only as a beginning. Success in the following years can reasonably be expected to be higher if the initial thrust and initiative are sustained. The multiplier effect, which is missing in the first year, would start making an unmistakable impact in the following ones.

President Ziaur Rahman has said that a few hundred thousand persons all over the country have been made literates in the last one year. It has been possible to achieve this, he said, because of the active support and cooperation of the educated. He has asked the educated to spread themselves in the rural areas, to set up a yet larger number of mass literacy centres and to work in these on a voluntary basis. This then was the strategy followed in the first year, and, judging from the ap-

peal made by the President to continue with the practice and to make it stronger, it must be concluded that the government considers the strategy to be a success. Emphasis on this is not to minimise the responsibility of the government, nor to put to the efforts directly mounted by it a lesser priority. This is just to remind all, once again, of the enormity of the problem and of the need for action by all to find an answer to it. If illiteracy is removed from this country, which we hope will be the case in not too distant a future, the credit should go to the people in general and to their concerted and cooperative effort.

Experiences of the past show that the neo-literates often relapse into illiteracy. There are many factors which are responsible for this and these are all too well known. This must not be allowed to happen this time. Those who have been turned into literates must continue to be carefully looked after and their interest in education must be increasingly enhanced. One basic way of doing this is to bring education still closer to life and to convince the neo-literates of the value of education as a weapon against the miseries they are faced with.

The President has remarked that illiteracy is the greatest impediment in the way of national progress. This may be interpreted to mean that the government considers the problem of illiteracy as a real challenge to the attainment of economic development and social growth and as more threatening than other problems. The President's remark is a pointer to the conviction that only through a meaningful and imaginative educational programme can the people be made fully aware of the problems that are to be faced. They must be well equipped, for it is only they who can solve these.