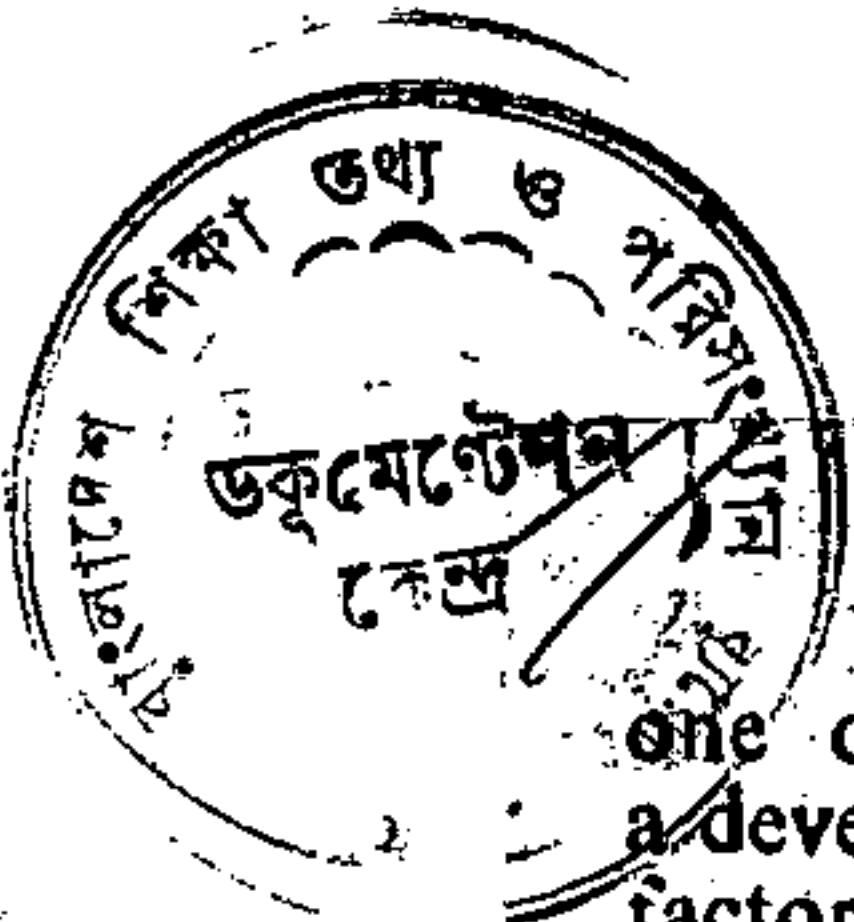


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Mass literacy

EXPANSION of literacy is one of the topmost imperatives of a developing country. It is a key factor in any meaningful development. Yet, even after seventeen years of independence the country cannot claim to have made any significant dent in the problem of

illiteracy and still three-fourths of the population cannot read and write. Any progress in this direction has been offset by galloping population and thus even if in numerical terms literates have increased percentage-wise the rate of literacy is stagnant or near-stagnant.

The statistics in regard to literacy were also confusing because in the past formal literacy rather than functional literacy was considered sufficient for purposes of census enumeration. Mere formal literacy (ability to sign one's name) can have little impact in the development of manpower unless it is also functional (ability to carry on written communication with another individual).

There are two approaches to the problem of literacy—formal and informal. The formal approach consists in strengthening and expanding primary education and the informal approach concerns special off-school short-term literacy courses for adults and underprivileged children. Some developing countries have tried the latter method with good result. Adults are fast learners and sometimes better motivated. It is clear that both methods must be applied simultaneously to rid the country speedily of the curse of illiteracy. It is true the country cannot depend on primary education alone to raise

literacy level but it is very important that primary education should be expanded and improved and dropout rate reduced so that children after being enrolled do not relapse into illiteracy. The teachers of primary schools who were for a long time a neglected lot are now being given some attention. Their pay has been raised and there is an effort to give them a new status. These steps are expected to result in the improvement of their performance. Allocation for primary education has also been raised from 40 per cent to 50 per cent of the total budget for education. This is timely. But a national effort has to be made to raise literacy by pooling all available resources, government, non-government and voluntary.

Prime Minister Moudud Ahmed, speaking at a conference of Rotary Club on Friday, called upon the social service and welfare-oriented non-government and voluntary organisations to devote themselves to the successful implementation of mass literacy and population control programmes. Some voluntary agencies have already made their mark in these fields. Education for all by the year 2000 has been promised. While we are only a decade away from that target year, a hard look has to be given to the whole problem of illiteracy.