

Mass literacy key to uplift

by Dr. M. R. Shelley

MASS literacy is a constant companion of poverty and underdevelopment. Most of the technologically backward and economically poor nations of the Third World suffer the curse of widespread illiteracy. As the Director General, UNESCO revealed on 15th September 1982 of the 824 million illiterates of the world, 640 million reside in Asia alone while the illiterates in Africa constitute 80.3% of that continent total adult population (the illiterates in Africa number 156 million). In the oil-rich Arab lands 57 million people or 62.1% of the adult population are illiterate.

In underdeveloped and developing countries the countless millions who cannot read and write remain unable to transform themselves into active agents of development. They cannot comprehend the meaning and relevance the significance and use of the process of socio-economic development in individual and national life. As a result societies and governments cannot achieve the desired success in organizing and mobilizing the mute millions for active and effective participation in development.

This is the core of the tragedy of underdevelopment. Illiterate people cannot utilise to the full the various supplies and services a modernizing government tries to put at their disposal. Agricultural progress remains slow, population activities and family planning pro-

grammes fail to achieve their targets, cooperative movements get clogged as illiterate and uneducated groups fail to understand both the motivating and the operational mechanism of organized cooperation.

It is therefore generally agreed that in order for all modernizing and development movements to succeed mass literacy is of primary and key significance.

Bangladesh like many third World countries has a predominantly illiterate population. Nearly seventy-eight per cent of the population of Bangladesh cannot read and write; approximately eighty-seven per cent of the Bangladeshi women are illiterate. Such massive lack of literacy poses a stumeling block on the path to the country's overall socio-economic development and progress. In order to bring forth the desired success in various fields such as agricultural development, growth in food production for food-autarky and arrest of the rapid rate in the growth of population, it is necessary to launch and sustain a resolute national programme to make the masses literate.

The government is well aware of this need. It is going ahead with a nation-wide programme for universal primary education with international and World Bank aid and assistance. It is also taking stock of the situation in the field of mass illiteracy.