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INTERNATIONAL LITERACY DAY TODAY

Number of world's illiterates continues to grow

There is no sign of the world's illiterates decreasing. As of today more than 850 million people, or almost one-third of the world's adult population, are illiterate. They include more than 121 million children of primary school age who do not or cannot afford to attend school.

Percentage-wise illiteracy is declining, bringing its rates down from 44 per cent in 1950 to 32.4 per cent in 1970 and 28.9 per cent in 1980. In the wake of the fast population growth, which has been far larger in rural areas, however, the absolute number of illiterates steadily continues to grow.

The number, which was estimated at slightly more than 700 million in 1950, increased to 758 million in 1970 and reached 824 million in 1980. It is expected to reach 884 million in 1990 and "most likely to exceed 900 million before the end of the century," says Secretary General of UNESCO for Education.

Mr. Tanguiane, who describes it as a "vast and persistent" problem, recalls that the right to education is "one of the most basic human rights." It is, therefore, most essential

to promote children's school attendance and to intensify adult literacy programmes. Illiteracy affects more women than men and more rural communities than urban societies, its consequences normally hitting the former three times harder than they do the latter.

In developing countries economic and social advancement cannot be achieved unless workers reach a certain level of education. Some observers have claimed that literacy is not indispensable to growth. England and France, they point out, began to industrialise in the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries with the involvement of illiterate populations.

"This theory does not exactly correspond to the facts," says Le Thanh Khoi, a Vietnamese professor at the Sorbonne in Paris, who served as the rapporteur for the expert group on the evaluation of the 1975 Experimental World Literacy Programme.

"For one thing, the rates of illiteracy in both those countries did not exceed 60 per cent," he explains. "Furthermore, technology at the time

was far less complicated than it is now and the process of industrialisation took place over decades.... There is a parallel today between economic growth and the decline of illiteracy. No country has ever attained the former without causing the latter to diminish...."

In the twentieth century the problem has been defined in new terms, for it now has a political as well as an economic dimension. Teaching literacy to adults has been theorised and closely linked to social change.

The struggle against illiteracy became an integral part, for example, of the Russian Revolution of October 1917. Illiteracy dropped from 75 per cent in 1917 to 43 per cent in 1926 and to 11 per cent in 1939. Immediately after the August 1945 revolution Ho Chi Minh called on the Vietnamese people to perform three basic tasks: to conquer famine, foreign aggression and ignorance. The massive campaign of Cuba in 1960 taught more than 700,000 illiterates how to read and write in one year.

In 1979 Ethiopia launched an energetic drive aimed at

eliminating illiteracy by 1987. In two years 34,000 literacy centres had been opened, providing 10 million people with new instruction. These initial successes earned Ethiopia the 1980 literacy prize of the International Reading Association.

Adult education in India is aimed primarily at the illiterates between the ages of 15 and 35. The instruction given covers basic literacy skills, functional development and the promotion of social awareness. A number of Rural Functional Literacy projects have been launched, and they are financed by the central Government and administered by the authorities of individual States. In Bihar State, for example, priority has been given to women's education and in rural districts local women are responsible for the supervision of women's adult education centres.

In Thailand a less direct approach has been adopted in the fight to eradicate illiteracy. The country's functional literacy and family planning project aims to help adults develop an attitude of critical thinking through group discussion techniques. Instruc-

tion in reading and writing is seen as a by-product of this process rather than as its main objective.

There are as many different approaches as there are countries in tackling the problem of illiteracy.

Generally speaking, however, teaching literacy to women faces more obstacles than teaching men, says Professor Le Thanh Khoi. "These obstacles may be material, such as the burden of household and family duties in addition to their work in the fields," he explains.

"But the major difficulty often stems from the indifference, if not the outright hostility, of their men. In the most traditional regions, generally rural, many husbands fear that literacy courses may be, for their wives, opportunities 'to meet other men,' a gateway to a new-found feeling of superiority, or even lead them to refuse to do manual work...."

It appears that further promotion of the literacy campaign may require further enlightenment of the rural society itself and often and particularly of its men population. —UNIC Feature