

Ekushey and Literacy

The love for our alphabets rather than being reinvigorated after the birth of Bangladesh seems to have diminished, when judged by the yardstick of what we have done with it. Indeed how can one explain the poor functional literacy rate still obtaining in a country that has been privileged for the last 27 years to have had mother tongue as the sole medium for imparting basic education to its people?

The official rate of literacy is 51 per cent. But loosely based as it has been on the ability to sign rather than a broader level of proficiency in reading, writing, doing sums and filling out forms etc. the government figure reads over-optimistic.

Of the approximately one crore 70 lakh children enrolled with the primary schools; run or aided by the government and the NGOs, 60 per cent, that is one crore two lakh complete schooling at that level. Of that figure approximately 20 per cent are known to acquire the required competence to take up studies at the secondary level where the cut-off point in terms of the transition to functional literacy rests. The fact that 92 per cent of the children of school-going age enter the primary education stream is a welcome development, but nothing to be celebrative about, given the drop-out rate and the extent of skill generated in terms of functional literacy.

The adult literacy campaign which has to do with huge carry-overs of illiterate or semi-literate souls evidently faces a stupendous challenge. But this is also an area where a great potential exists to spread literacy under crash programmes. We can match the near hundred per cent literacy figure of Sri Lanka in five years' time if we are determined to turn one crore unlettered adults into literate persons every year. This is where the consciousness of Ekushey needs to be utilised in a bid to galvanise the local communities wholly into action all over the country.

The allocation to the education sector remains a paltry 2 per cent of the GDP, but what causes a greater disappointment is that most of this money goes into payment of salaries and construction of buildings. The expenditure pattern needs re-prioritising.

Neither the sacrifices of Ekushey would be redeemed nor can the vital socio-economic indicators read any better than at present so long as we are stuck with an unsatisfactory spread of literacy rate.

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