

## UNESCO Literacy Award

It is indeed remarkable that with a mere 38 per cent adult literacy rate (1995 figures) to "boast" about, Bangladesh is to be awarded a literacy related prize come September. The government's Primary and Mass Education Division, according to an agency report, has been selected by an international jury to be awarded one of UNESCO's five international literacy prizes for the Asia-Pacific region.

The 1998 Human Development in South Asia Report credits Bangladesh's "conscious" government policy since 1990 with the accelerated pace of improvement in the basic education scene. Primary school enrolment has no doubt risen, the drop-out rate is not as high as in the early 70s and greater gender-parity has been registered in primary schools.

Education officials point out that these advances are the result of legislation making universal primary education compulsory, recruitment of more female teachers, free schooling for girls upto the eighth class and the "food for education" incentive. That may well be, but it is not enough. Much more needs to be done to bring the growing number of school-age children and adult illiterates within an intense, sustained mass education programmes. And this cannot be done without local government and community participation.

Although the adult literacy rate has increased one and a half times between 1970 and 1995, some 62 per cent of the present adult population (45 million) cannot read or write. Do we have adequate centres to attend to them? And are we equipped to provide primary education to the overwhelming numbers born every day? About four million children remain out of school at present. The physical facilities that we have are nowhere near this great need.

According to one estimate the total number of primary schools in the country jumped from 47,000 in 1990 to around 63,000 in 1996, forty per cent of them belonging to NGOs. Clearly, the available physical facilities cannot meet the huge demand. But it is not just expansion of physical facilities that is required. Reform is also needed. The general teaching methods and standards in the majority of Bangladesh's primary schools today are enough to kill all learning abilities and improvements cannot be achieved if teachers' skills are ignored.

All these need time and perseverance. Meanwhile, time runs out and our problems accumulate if we do not use creative ways of advancing the literacy drive. There is no reason why we cannot make good use of secondary school students in a national "Each one teach one" effort.

The UNESCO award—worth a cash reward of US\$150000—is understandably in recognition of the efforts being made, both as civil society initiatives and government-guided achievements. But it needs no saying that despite all the good intentions of successive governments, Bangladesh has still a long way to go in educating its masses. Let this recognition be an incentive for more concerted effort rather than complacency.