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Illiteracy

Illiteracy is a dark problem. Light and sweetness are the domain of education. Illiteracy therefore breeds a state of darkness, a state, in a way, even of non-existence. An illiterate man is not necessarily an ignorant man; nor are his vision of life and his understanding of its complexities necessarily inferior. But he is a man who cannot add to his perception the knowledge that has been gained throughout the ages. He cannot, perhaps, impose a pattern on life. It is here that he ceases to exist. As a responsible person. As a person who must contribute to the progress of his world. Increasing pressures of various kinds make the problem still darker. Removal of illiteracy is a commitment, but one which gets harder every day to realise. Because of population problem. Because of the challenges of time. Because of lack of resources, lack of organization and lack, strangely, of manpower.

Most disturbing is the fact that the number of illiterates are steadily on the increase. In Asia and the Oceanic region the rate of illiteracy was 75 per cent in 1955. It came down to 66 per cent in 1960 and to 58 per cent in 1970. This, apparently, is satisfactory. But the situation, in reality, is a little different. Though the percentage of literacy has gone up, the number of illiterate persons has actually increased from 307 million in 1950 to 355 million in 1970. Due, of course, primarily to population growth. Accurate statistical data on the subject is hard to get and these figures therefore are probably approximate ones. But that is no consolation. Illiteracy, in spite of all efforts, is not being reduced. On the contrary, it is spreading fast, at least in this region. Over 66 per cent of the population in Bangladesh is estimated to be illiterate, the rough figure being 50 million out of eighty. One main cause of this continued spread of illiteracy in Bangladesh is heavy dropouts from primary schools.

Illiteracy stands in the way of development. Development efforts in a country like Bangladesh largely depend on the involvement of as many persons as possible. There must be widespread and intense campaign against illiteracy, for the people must see their dominant role as the crucial factor in development. Values which strengthen and carry through development efforts must without fail be created. We have now developed a strategy of dependence on our own resources, both human and material. This strategy will work only if the people are made aware of their immense possibilities and

if they commit themselves fully to development tasks. Literacy is a must for such an awareness and such a commitment.

People living in the rural areas are the particular victims of illiteracy. Rural development suffers on this count. The people for whom development programmes are designed must be able to provide leadership to those. They must also have an insight into the changes which are intended to be brought about. No rural development seems possible without some measure of reform, and reforms of all kinds, however minor, however imperceptible, depend for their success on the support and the initiative of the people for whom they are meant. The other group which suffers badly on account of illiteracy is women. Female literacy has been found to lag behind even in many of those countries which have been able to attain a higher overall rate of literacy. Women constitute almost the half of our total population. Their impact on the development process is invigorating and positive. It is our ardent wish to see them emerge as a clear economic force. Mere removal of illiteracy in general may not necessarily ensure a corresponding removal of female illiteracy.

Efforts at removing illiteracy in Bangladesh must keep in view the multiple aspects of the problem. Effective measures are immediately called for to tackle the problem of school dropouts. The factors behind such dropout are perhaps largely economic. If so, these must be tackled at that level. Educational facilities in the rural areas must be increased. Government have nationalised primary schools and have also initiated a massive development programme for these. This surely is encouraging. Building the right kind of infra-structure is absolutely necessary, but the infra-structure by itself will not ensure progress in education. The parents must be made literate. This by itself will be a check on school dropouts. Non-formal education must be stressed. Its links with both formal education and the development needs of the country must clearly be established. Development and education should invariably go together. President Ziaur Rahman has gone all out for attaining, as fast as possible, a better standard of living for the people. Through development efforts. He has emphasised time and again the need for removing illiteracy. The education planners will surely take note of the President's keenness and try to do their best keeping in view the hard facts of reality.