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What Is Literacy?

by Md. Ferdous Khan

MOST people have rather a mistaken notion about the meaning of literacy. In Bangladesh prior to 1951, a person who could anyhow sign his name was treated as literate. It was later discovered that a number of such people learned to sign their names by repeated practice without even recognising the individual symbols for sounds (i.e. the individual letters). It is obvious that such persons cannot be considered as literates for they have not acquired any skill in reading and writing. According to the 1961 census, Bangladesh (the then East Pakistan) attained a literacy figure of 21.5% of which an estimated proportion of 3.3% could only sign their names presumably recognising the shapes of individual letters used. Strictly speaking the latter 3.3% were also to be looked upon as illiterates because they were incapable of reading and writing anything beyond their own names. Learning to sign one's own name has its value in creating confidence in the mind of the learner and giving him a sense of prestige but it should not be projected even as a minor aim in literacy efforts. That would be over-emphasising it. Since the end of 1978 in the Sadullahpur thana of Rangpur District a vigorous mass literacy campaign has been undertaken by the local people. The first phase of the programme comprises eradication of thumb-impresion i.e. teaching every individual illiterate male and female to write his or her own name. The initial success in one selected area (Naldanga Union) has created great enthusiasm in all the neighbouring Unions. So far so good. But here I would like to pronounce a word of caution. Unless the learners are initiated into effective literacy lessons i.e. into the second phase of the programme without unusual delay whatever success has been achieved will be quickly lost. But the arrangements envisaged in respect of organisation and methodological training do not appear to be adequate for the purpose. In the signature teaching campaign individual mode of approach has of necessity been taken recourse to the literate section of the people pursuing the illiterate adults to the fields houses and kitchens but for the second phase this mode of approach and organisation will be a large measure inadequate. The Report (report dated 5.12.78 of Mahbub Alam Chashi Special Secretary Swarnivar Ministry of Agriculture and Forest Government of Bangladesh) says that "The over-all result was a mass up-

surge and involvement of all in the process". Let us hope that appropriate measures will be taken to keep alive this upsurge and channelise it toward effective acquirement of literacy. According to UNESCO's definition "a person is literate who can with understanding both read and write a short simple statement on his every day life." The 1951 Census of Pakistan of which Bangladesh was then a part used markedly different concept and defined literacy as "the ability to read any language in clear print" without reference to understanding of the text. The result was that a large number of persons who were able to read the Holy Quran in Arabic without understanding was taken as literates. The 1961 Census employed for separate tabulations three different definitions (i) the ability to read and write a simple letter; (ii) the ability to read with understanding; and (iii) the ability to read the Quran without understanding. Bangladesh in her 1974 Census defined literacy as

illiteracy. In Bangladesh about 60% of 2.9 million children enrolled in class I drop off before reaching class III (the drop-out is about 40% between class I and class II). All these drop-outs gradually relapse into illiteracy on account of the disuse of the skills learned and ultimately swell the rank of illiterates in the country. Money energy and time spent on them are totally lost. About two-fifths of the world's adult population numbering over 900 million people can neither read nor write. Most of them are in Asia Africa and Latin America. In the developing countries the illiteracy rate is as high as 50-80% of the total population and in some cases even higher than 80%. There is another mistaken notion about literacy particularly in this part of the world. A literate person is often considered as an educated person and an illiterate person invariably as an uneducated person. In a number of books in Bengali per centage of literacy has been mentioned as percentage of the educated. Education in-

ters of Education on the eradication of illiteracy meeting in Tehran in 1965 defined functional literacy as 'educational action combined with socio-economic and vocational training within the framework of a development undertaking.' UNESCO publication entitled "Functional Literacy" (1970) states that "Functional Literacy work should be taken to mean any literacy operation conceived as a component of economic and social development projects." This is what is commonly known as the concept of work-oriented literacy; it involves integration of the varied aspects of literacy instruction with specific occupational needs.

I do not quite agree with this rather narrow definition. According to me functional literacy is literacy put to use—any use not necessarily associated with agricultural industrial or professional work. Fortunately today literacy finds ready utility in the environment in reading newspapers and posters in reading simple books in reading and writing letters and in keeping daily accounts. Linking literacy lessons only with occupational needs right from the very beginning though a very laudable idea, is not at all easy to achieve in practice. It would require production of a great variety of primers charts and suitably graded reading materials strictly differentiated according to the nature of the environment and to the specific economic objectives of the groups concerned. What is more it would require highly trained and professionally competent instructors to use these materials effectively. I have grave doubts whether we in Bangladesh can meet to an appreciable extent these two prerequisites.

We may consider any comprehensive literacy programme in two consecutive phases one phase growing into the other. The first phase comprises a series of well-graded lessons aiming at enabling the learners to read and write simple passages. The second phase, which is the application-phase will use the skill gained in the preceding phase to go through graded reading materials with a view to absorbing new knowledge and acquiring new techniques directly relevant to the learners' needs and interests. The first phase requires carefully written well-illustrated primers while the second phase involves production of suitable follow up literature for neo-literates on various topics. We can and we should very effectively link the second phase with economic and social development projects and the occupational needs of the clientele groups.

Literacy: the right of every human being

Literacy is a right - but millions of people are still unaware of that right!

"ability to read and write a letter in any of the four languages (Bengali English Arabic and Urdu)."

From what has been stated above literacy is strictly speaking the ability to read and write. But this definition needs to be slightly broadened to include also the ability to do simple calculations in arithmetic; as such an ability is constantly required of an adult in his every-day life. In view of this we may define literacy as the acquirement of ability to read write and count sufficiently to use them in daily life.

Various levels are discernible in literacy skill; at the bottom end of the spectrum we have complete illiteracy and at the top-end complete literacy. Three broad intervening levels may be indicated: (a) Low level literacy (ability to read grade I books), (b) Partial literacy (ability to read grade II books) and (c) fairly high-level literacy (ability to read with ease any kind of material: level of education equivalent to grade III.)

A superficial mastery of reading and writing skills is no guarantee against relapse into

involves learning processes for gaining new knowledge ideas, skills and attitudes and literacy is not the only means to achieve these nor does it automatically carry with it all the attributes that go to make an educated person. We do come across educated illiterates on one hand and uneducated literates on the other. Many illiterate peasants possess such expert knowledge in their own fields and such acquired qualities as are not found in many so-called educated people. Our holy Prophet was illiterate so was the Mughal emperor Akbar the great; but both of them were highly cultured and not uneducated personalities of world history. But these are exceptional cases. It is of course to be conceded that to become educated in the true sense of the term and to perform an effective role in the modern society literacy is a must.

FUNCTIONAL LITERACY

During the past decade the concept of functional literacy has steadily gained ground. The World Congress of Minis-