

Overcoming a national failure

A collective effort needed

FAZLE HASAN ABED

THIS year is the first year of the International Literacy Decade (2003-2012). The motto of the decade is "Literacy as Freedom". More than 800 million people in the world and almost sixty percent of the people of Bangladesh do not know this freedom. A confusion exists, among claims and counterclaims about progress in literacy, regarding the status of literacy of the people of Bangladesh. The study by *Education Watch*, carried out with scientific rigour and based on the administration of a literacy test to a nationwide randomly chosen sample, provides a baseline. This baseline should end the confusion about our literacy status and serve as the benchmark for future planning for literacy, continuing education and nonformal education programmes.

The study is about the state of literacy, not about nonformal education in general or primary education. The findings, however, point out some very relevant and critical aspects of primary education and nonformal education, which have vital policy implications. The study reveals the dominant role of primary education as the means for acquiring literacy; but it also shows that the very poor quality of mainstream primary education is a serious obstacle to better literacy outcomes, since one-third of those who complete primary education still remain illiterate. Nonformal primary education shows a better performance. The question then is what should be done to incorporate some of the positive features of nonformal primary education into mainstream Primary Education.

It has been found that literacy courses in general

including the government-run Total Literacy Movement (TLM), at least in the manner these have been conducted in Bangladesh, have had an insignificant impact on the literacy situation. The study reveals a large 12 percentage point gap between male and female literacy and a staggering 26 percentage point disadvantage for the rural people compared to their urban counterparts. The urban slum dwellers fare the worst with a literacy rate of 19.7 percent against the national average of 41.4 percent. The study also underscores the need for a broader and integrated vision of non-formal and continuing education in which the literacy effort should be embedded.

The study, like all research reports of *Education Watch*, presents an objective picture of an important facet of basic education in the country, based on collection and analysis of data in a professional manner. It is not intended to apportion blames or point fingers for deficiencies and failures. The findings on literacy do indicate a major national failure - failure in seriousness of effort, in setting priorities right, in applying professionalism to management and decision-making in education, and in lacking a vision and understanding of how literacy and nonformal education programmes work. This is our collective failure as a society and as a nation. We - the public authorities, the academics, the NGOs and the larger civil society - need to work together to overcome this failure. I hope that this is the message that will be heard from the findings and conclusions of *Education Watch 2002*.

Mr. Abed is the Chair of the Campaign for Popular Education



Target: Literacy

Literacy for a learning society

MANZOOR AHMED

LITERACY is a subject rife with symbolism and emotions. In the modern world, the incapacity to master the written word is a symbol of backwardness and underdevelopment for a society and an individual. We have seen, therefore, promises and efforts of governments and politicians to get rid of this unwelcome symbol. This probably explains repeated attempts to launch campaigns and movements against illiteracy in our part of the world and elsewhere. Almost all have been disappointing, but the politicians seem to fail to learn their lesson.

Symbolism and Reality

Historical experience shows (as explained in chapter 2 of *Education Watch 2002* report) that these campaigns have succeeded only in a few countries such as the former Soviet Union, China and Cuba, where these have been an essential component of an overall social and political revolution. In a few other countries, such as Tanzania, Nicaragua and Ethiopia where initial successes were claimed, but these petered out with the derailment of the respective revolution, depriving the educational movement its nourishing energy.

Symbolic or not, education, and by the same token literacy, has come to be recognised as a human right by constitutional provisions of many countries and by international treaties. Literacy, as the tool for learning, is the core of any educational process, and thus the foundation for social, economic and personal development.

It is essential to go beyond the symbolism and to achieve real progress in literacy as the core of educational development of a nation. With this end in view, the skills and competencies to be earned in literacy have to be such that they make a difference in the learners' life. These have to open the world of knowledge and information to the learner. These have to enable a person to communicate with written words, not feel helpless when a child seeks help

and guidance in his or her own pursuit of learning, to read for the sheer pleasure of it, to look up knowledge and information that one needs every day, and to continue to broaden one's world of knowledge and learning. These were seen as the uses of literacy by the respondents in the study.

Literacy, therefore, has to be an essential part of lifelong learning; part of an effort to turn every community into a learning community, the whole society into a learning society. In the learning community and the learning society, everyone will have the opportunity to pursue learning according to one's needs and inclinations, and every one will contribute to creating learning opportunities for others, as UNESCO's Edgar Faure Com-

mittee report *Learning To Be* put it as early as in 1972. This is also the promise of *Education for All* goals adopted in Jomtien in 1990 and re-affirmed in Dakar in 2000. With this broad vision of literacy and education, *Education Watch* designed its investigation of the status of literacy in Bangladesh. The aim was to get beyond the symbolism and tokenism to gauge real achievement of skills that can be used in life and can be developed further.

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Policy Implications

The findings of the study, in the view of the *Education Watch* Team, provided a rich harvest of policy questions and policy guidance regarding the future course of literacy, continuing education, nonformal education and lifelong education.

1. *A baseline for literacy.* The findings on literacy rates for the population 11+ and 15+, for males and females, for urban and rural areas and for different regions of the country, based on scientific sampling and administration of skill tests, establish for the first time reliable baselines for future

planning and assessment of progress in literacy and continuing education.

2. *The need for a comprehensive approach.* The study confirms that a combination of quality primary education, nonformal basic education for adolescents and youth, and a network of nonformal and adult education centres is essential to combat illiteracy effectively and sustainably.

3. *The poor quality of primary education.* The literacy results of primary education completers draw attention to the serious deficiencies in primary education and schooling in general. As the study shows, one-third of those who have completed five years of primary schooling are still illiterate and it takes ten years of schooling

model of this type exists. On the other hand, poverty is not just a matter of income. Improvement in health and nutrition, knowledge and practice of family planning, priority to children's education, knowledge of and claiming entitlements to public services and so on affect people's well-being in important ways. A network of multipurpose community learning centres offering need-based locally adapted continuing learning opportunities are likely to have a greater impact on poverty reduction than poor quality skill courses detached from the necessary supportive components.

6. *A broad vision of nonformal and continuing education.* A wide spectrum of learning objectives, complementary to basic literacy and necessary to sustain and

to ensure that all of a population group are literate. On the other hand, 97 percent of those completing 4-5 years of nonformal primary education are literate. The aim clearly should be to enable children to achieve sustainable literacy with three years of primary education.

4. *"One-size-fits all" campaigns don't work.* Campaigns of fixed duration with a focus on "token" literacy and targets for declaring districts as "literacy-free" do not reflect an understanding of literacy and how it can make a difference in people's life. An expanded view of learning objectives and a more integrated programme approach combining basic literacy, consolidation of literacy skills, and their application through development activities need to be adopted.

5. *Poverty alleviation calls for multi-purpose continuing education.* Narrowly focused standard skill training courses are not the answer. Skill training needs ancillary support and responsiveness to employment market which education providers cannot handle. No large-scale successful

ment-civil society partnership and decentralized enough to make it responsive to local conditions and accountable to the community. It is neither necessary nor very efficient for these activities to be managed by a government department, especially because the civil society including the NGOs, community organizations and the private sector have to play a major role in them. The role of a government agency such as DNFE can be that of a professional organization with facilitative and broad regulatory functions rather than executive functions.

8. *Affirmative action for the disadvantaged.* It is necessary for the government to promote and cooperate with all actors to support a policy of affirmative action, targeting the disadvantaged and marginalised sections of the population. Strategies and programmes that address specific needs of the different disadvantaged groups - such as the disabled, ethnic and cultural minorities, people living in inaccessible and remote areas - need to be developed and implemented. The dimension of gender should be a factor in all policy and strategy considerations.

9. *The National Plan of Action for Education for All must reflect a broad vision of a learning society and lifelong learning.* The NPA document prepared in fulfillment of the Dakar Framework for action for EFA should be based on a credible assessment of progress made in literacy and results achieved from literacy and nonformal education programmes. NPA should be linked to planning and budgeting of development programmes and not remain a statement of noble intentions.

It is the hope of the *Education Watch* team that the findings and conclusions of the study will be used to shape a new vision of and develop future plans for literacy, continuing education and lifelong learning.

Dr. Ahmed is the Convener of *Education watch* and a co-author of the *Education watch 2002* report.

Literacy situation in Bangladesh

SAMIR RANJAN NATH

THE theme of this year's *Education Watch* is literacy. The specific aims are to estimate the proportions of the population that are at various levels of literacy, how literacy has been acquired, what uses are being made of it, and what the perceived expectations in post-literacy activities are. The socio-economic correlates of literacy have also been estimated.

Major Findings

The literacy test revealed that 41.4 percent of the population 11 years and above in Bangladesh are literate 21 percent at the level of initial literacy skills and 20.4 percent with advanced literacy skills (Figure 1). Of the respondents under literacy test, about a half (49.3 percent) did very poorly (receiving less than a quarter of the total score) and were categorised as non-literate. Another 9.3 percent were semi-literate indicating that these people did not cross the threshold of minimum acceptable level of skills to be qualified as literate. People in the category of the non-literate and semi-literate did not have literacy skills that were useable in any practical way in life situations.

It is estimated that the population of Bangladesh 11 years and above is 92.8 million. The numbers falling into various literacy categories are as follows: 45.8 million non-literate, 8.6 million semi-literate, 19.5 million literate at the initial level, and 18.9 million literate at the advanced level.

The females lagged 12 percentage points behind the males in the literacy league table; the rates were 35.6 percent for the females and 47.6 percent for the males. Only 13.3 percent of the females and 28.1 percent of the males had advanced level literacy skills. The literacy rates for rural and urban respondents were 37.2 percent and 63.6 percent with a difference of 26 percentage points. Such gap was seen both at the initial and the advanced level. A wide gap in the literacy performance of the respondents of different stratum was found. The respondents of the metropolitan cities did very well followed by those of municipalities, the rates were 69.5 percent and 59 percent respectively. Only a third of the respondents of rural Dhaka,

Chittagong and Sylhet divisions were literate (Table 1). Less than a fifth (19.7 percent) of the urban slum residents were literate. The literacy rate of the adult (population 15 years and above) was found to be 38.8 percent at the national level. 2.6 percentage points less than the literacy rate for population 11 years and above. The females lagged behind the males in all the eight strata (six rural divisions, metropolitan cities and municipalities). Parental education, especially of the mothers, religious affilia-

schools were found to be more effective than the state owned as well as state-supported primary schools. It was found that six to seven years of schooling with present standard is required to achieve a sustainable literacy status for 80 percent of the population. It was observed that exclusively non-school means of education including the Total Literacy Movement (TLM), and learning at home have a minor impact on overall literacy situation in the country. The literacy rate was 42.1 percent in the TLM implemented

occupations and workplaces. Majority of the literates perceived the need for training for occupational skills development. Special programmes for women and community education centres were demanded by about half of the literates.

Research Method and Quality of Data

Definition and test development: The *Education Watch* research team reviewed the literacy definitions used for literacy nationally and internationally. It also examined existing curriculum of formal and non-formal provisions, and considered the socio-cultural context of the country and its current development stage. The research team agreed that proper importance should be given to functionality and effectiveness of literacy skills and their use in the community. The following definition of literacy was adopted for this study: *Possession of skills in reading, writing and numeracy related to familiar contents and contexts and the ability to use these skills in everyday life in order to function effectively in society.*

For the first time in Bangladesh, literacy situation in the country was assessed through administering a literacy test on a nationwide representative sample of population 11 years and above in contrast to the 'self reporting' method used in the population censuses and household surveys. Based on the above definition, a purposefully designed test

these three skills in practical life situations. A total of 24 question items were in the test, six for each component.

Measuring literacy: Recognising the continuum of literacy skills and taking a pragmatic approach to conducting the assessment and to communicating the results in a policy relevant language, it was decided to categorise the population into four levels, viz., *non-literate, semi-literate, literate at the initial level and literate at the advanced level*. Total score of the literacy test was 100, equally distributed by skill components. The test instrument was designed in such a way that those falling in the category of literate at the initial level and literate at the advanced level could be designated as literate. Besides the literacy test instrument, three other questionnaires were used to collect demographic, educational, socio-economic and community information of the respondents.

Sampling: The sampling strategy of the study was designed scientifically, which allowed valid and reliable estimates for six administrative divisions, metropolitan cities, and the municipalities. A total of 13,145 persons aged 11 years and above taken from 3,840 households of 268 villages/mahallahas in 64 districts were given the literacy test. Over 100 research assistants, half of them female, administered the test and collected necessary information.

Data quality: A strict quality control protocol was applied to collecting and recording the data, assessing responses to the literacy test, and analysing all data.

Assessment of quality of data through post-enumeration check revealed that data quality was good and the reliability coefficient of the test data was high.

The *Education Watch* study assessed literacy status of the population through administering a literacy test on a nation-wide sample survey. Such an initiative is first of its kind in Bangladesh. It is expected that it would end the confusion about literacy rates in the country and will establish the benchmarks for literacy rates. It is also hoped that the results of the study will be used to shape a new vision and develop future plans for literacy, continuing education and

lifelong learning.

Mr. Nath led the literacy survey team and is a co-author of the *Education Watch 2002* Report *Literacy in Bangladesh: Need for a New Vision*.

Table 1 Literacy rates at a glance						
Sub-groups	11 years and above			15 years and above		
	Literacy	Initial	Advanced	Literacy	Initial	Advanced
Bangladesh	41.4	21.0	20.4	38.8	18.5	20.3
Female	35.6	22.3	13.3	32.0	19.2	12.7
Male	47.6	19.5	28.1	46.3	17.8	28.5
Rural Bangladesh	37.2	20.6	16.6	34.5	18.0	16.6
Urban Bangladesh	63.6	23.1	40.5	61.5	21.5	40.0
Rural Dhaka Division	35.2	20.0	15.2	32.1	17.7	14.4
Rural Chittagong Division	32.2	20.7	11.5	30.5	18.2	12.3
Rural Rajshahi Division	37.2	18.3	18.9	34.4	15.4	19.0
Rural Khulna Division	45.8	23.7	22.1	42.7	20.9	21.7
Rural Barisal Division	47.7	25.5	22.2	45.8	23.3	22.5
Rural Sylhet Division	33.6	20.3	13.3	30.4	17.5	13.0
Metropolitan cities	69.5	20.5	49.0	68.2	19.7	48.5
Municipalities	59.0	25.1	33.9	56.4	22.8	33.5

helping children in study. A good number of the literates also used their literacy skills to read books, newspapers and magazines for information and enjoyment, and in

instrument was developed through a pilot study. The test consisted of four essential skill components of literacy: *reading, writing, numeracy and use of*

Education Watch study on Bangladesh literacy

Questions you may ask

+ *Is the sample size adequate for making national estimates of literacy rates?*

+ Random sampling techniques allow making valid estimates for a large population from a small sample. Statistical experts have determined that over 13,000 people from 3,840 households in 268 communities provide an adequate sample. The sampling procedure has been explained in the report.

+ *How have literacy skills been assessed?*

In contrast to "self-reporting about who can read and write in a household reported by a household member - used often in literacy surveys - the study administered a specially designed test on 3Rs and their use to the total sample.

+ *Why were 11+ and 15+ age-groups considered?*

Usually the 15+ age-group is considered for adult literacy measurement. In Bangladesh, primary education, the main means of acquiring literacy, is expected to be completed by age 10; therefore, 11+ age-group has been taken for literacy assessment. The 15+ literacy rate was found to be 2.6 percent lower than that for the 11+ population.

+ *Why were the four levels of skills measured?*

Literacy experts are of the view that there are degrees of skills in literacy and a strict dichotomous measure is misleading. Four levels of skills allowed better differentiation of literacy skills of the population.

+ *Why were the semi-literates not included in the category of the literates?*

According to the definition used in the study, semi-literates can recognise a few words, but cannot read full sentences and cannot recognise or use written numbers. The definition of literacy could not be applied to this group.

+ *What is the difference between "initial" and "advanced" literacy?*

The ability to read and write simple sentences and count at a simple level, the usual definition of literacy, described in this study as initial literacy, does not allow one access to the world of knowledge and information, without further assistance to improve one's literacy skills. Advanced literacy is the stage in which one can use literacy skills independently for further learning.

+ *How have the quality of data and their analysis have been ensured?*

+ Elaborate procedures of quality check, re-testing, supervision and statistical tests have been used to maintain quality of the research process. The details are given in the report.

+ *Can the present findings be used as the baseline*

for national literacy rates?

+The findings based on nationwide sampling and scientific analysis should serve as the baseline against which future progress can be measured. No baseline statistics with adequate explanation about how the estimates have been arrived at do not exist at present.

+ *How consistent are the present findings with other study findings?*

+ Results based on sampling of households in *Education Watch 2001*, other recent household surveys concluded by Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics or with its involvement, the trend of progress shown by census data since 1981 indicate that the adult literacy percentage is in the 40s. The result of 2001 census has not been made public, but is unofficially reported to be consistent with this trend.

+ *What would be the literacy rate if only reading and writing skills are considered?*

+ The rate for the 11+ population would be 45 percent - 3.6 percent higher than when counting and application of skills are included.

+ *What has been found about TLM in the study?*

+The study was not about TLM, but about the literacy situation as a whole. The incidental findings about TLM were the following:

+ The literacy rate among those who did not attend primary school or other education programmes and relied exclusively on the TLM course is only 1.3 percent.

+The literacy rate in the villages included in TLM was 42.1 percent against 40.6 percent in other villages.

+The literacy rate of the 11-45 age-group - the priority group for TLM - is 47.4 percent in TLM communities; the national rate for the age-group is 46.2 percent - not a statistically significant difference.

+ *What has been learned about primary education from the study?*

+ The study was not specifically about primary education. However, it was found that:

+Primary schools are the principal means of acquiring literacy for the population. Only a small fraction of one percent acquired literacy through non-school means.

+However, one-third of the children after completing 5 years in a formal primary school or madrasa remained illiterate.

+In NGO-run nonformal primary schools, almost all (97 percent) became literate after 4-5 years of schooling.