

How Literacy Lose Grounds

by Nilratan Halder

THE United Nations General Assembly proclaimed 1990 as the International Literacy Year (ILY). Worldwide the number of the illiterate, however, is estimated at some 900 million notwithstanding the fact that the overall literacy is continuing to fall. In countries like Bangladesh the picture is gloomier still with the literacy rate showing just the reverse trend.

The ILY considered to be a 'Summons to Action', a launch-pad for efforts specifically devoted to drastically reducing illiteracy has evidently not got off to a particularly flying start. After two years — a fifth of the total period — Bangladesh has not really much tangible to show on the literacy front, much less in education.

The hard fact is that the population growth which is at the rate of 2.18 officially (although thought to be much higher) is racing far ahead of the supporting means and measures to curb the country's illiteracy. At the present rate of population growth rate vis-a-vis the gain in literacy, the country simply requires no less than 200 new schools to maintain the status quo relation between them. But primary schools are not at all coming up.

Consequently, the number of illiterate is on the rise. The current budget has allocated a higher percentage of the GNP than before for education but not enough to tackle the gigantic problem facing the education arena. Even the problem at the primary level remains as yet the most acute. People however seem to be more concerned about developments in the higher education, particularly that of universities, than the primary education.

And it is not for nothing that primary schools have to take classes in the open, under trees or in school houses or buildings with the potential risks of tragedies involving human lives. In 1983, according to a government-sponsored 'school mapping exercise', 87 per cent of the country's school children lived within two miles of a primary school. That situation has not perhaps changed much in the intervening period.

Similarly, the absolute number of the illiterate in the population over five years old was 45 million, and in the population over fifteen 27 million. By the year 1981 these

figures went up to 56 and 33 million respectively. There is no knowing that the trend has been offset by any remarkable improvement in the primary education, rather, in all likelihood, it has gained momentum. One silver lining however is that both literacy and school attendance for women have

one. However the overriding compulsion for them to drop-out is purely economic. They need food and clothes to meet a certain standard. And free textbooks are not an adequate answer to the problem of drop-outs. That the poor parents need their children's helping hands in household

infrastructure-wise facilities and quality-wise teachers in urban schools are immensely superior to those of rural ones. That disadvantage has its life-long effects on the village students. The irony is that the majority of the students come from villages. And keeping the majority at constant disadvantage, no country can expect to make much of a headway.

That precisely is the problem with us. Keeping the whole country in the dark we have set ourselves the task of lighting the houses that are already illuminated. Primary teachers have moreover developed a nagging habit of taking care of their family matters to the neglect of their duty as teachers. Even the quality of a substantial number of them are suspect. One good thing however ever to happen is the induction of more female teachers majority of whom are more caring than their male counterparts.

Coming back to the national budget allocation for primary education, it must be recorded that the paucity of fund is a major obstacle to raising the standard of primary education. Let there be a crash programme — that hopefully involves both formal and non-

formal education — to expand and improve the primary education. Literacy after all is divided in functional and non-functional forms. And the stress should be on the functional education. We ought to recognise that primary education is the ground work, the base, and it certainly deserves a better deal. The question is: are we ready to give it its due?

secondary schools but the same cannot be said about the primary schools. How the students studying in those primary schools are discriminated against can hardly be imagined. But the truth is that the students so left to suffer early in life can never hope to effectively compete with their more privileged brothers and sisters.

grown far faster than for women. In 1981 the literacy rate for men and women were 39.7 and 18.8 per cent. This gap seems to have bridged a little.

About 60 per cent of all primary school-age children were enrolled, according to 1985 enrolment figure. Another distressing figure is that at the time only 22 per cent schools could be used



Imparting basic education needs care

round the year, 70 per cent only during the dry season. Add to this the number of drop-outs and the gloomy picture just becomes gloomier.

The students stay out of school for various reasons. The poor state of schools is only the education at the primary level in the primary schools and kindergarten ones. Even in villages there are still

formal education — to expand and improve the primary education. Literacy after all is divided in functional and non-functional forms. And the stress should be on the functional education. We ought to recognise that primary education is the ground work, the base, and it certainly deserves a better deal. The question is: are we ready to give it its due?

formal education — to expand and improve the primary education. Literacy after all is divided in functional and non-functional forms. And the stress should be on the functional education. We ought to recognise that primary education is the ground work, the base, and it certainly deserves a better deal. The question is: are we ready to give it its due?

Universalising Basic Education

THE World Conference on Education for All, held in Jomtien, Thailand, in March 1991, gave participating countries an opportunity for a critical review of their education systems and a redefining of their goals and strategies. UNICEF assisted many countries in these endeavours and advocated strongly for universal primary education, with emphasis on education for girls and women, early childhood development and non-formal education for those who cannot go to formal schools. UNICEF advocacy and support have been for universalisation of basic education through both formal and non-formal education as appropriate in each country and regional situation.

In some countries, including Algeria, Iran and Turkey, UNICEF co-operation with Ministries of Education started after the Jomtien Conference. It is significant also that the spirit of Jomtien was reflected in new programmes of co-operation some of these coun-

tries, especially with regard to the education of girls and women.

UNICEF programme co-operation in basic education has been mostly catalytic, but following the Conference and the World Summit for Children, activities in many countries have facilitated some reordering of priorities in country programmes for the next cycle.

UNICEF support for early childhood development has continued in many countries, most notably in Cote d'Ivoire, Ghana, Lesotho and Mauritius, where it constitutes the only major UNICEF involvement. Other activities in this area include the development of home-based stimulation and development (Colombia, Venezuela), the provision of equipment (Myanmar, Vietnam), teacher training for day care (Caribbean nations, Nepal, Sudan), needs assessment studies for child care (Malaysia, Republic of Korea, Sri Lanka) and parent educa-

tion programmes (Bolivia, Haiti, Philippines).

Non-formal education:

About 40 per cent of school-age children either do not have access to formal schooling or drop out before completing the primary level. UNICEF has been addressing the need for non-formal education and the needs of girls in particular. In sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia, UNICEF has also been focusing on curriculum reform, teacher training and the provision of education materials for primary grades.

The girls child:

The education of girls and the need to increase their enrolment and retention rates in formal and non-formal schools have been a major focus in the SAARC and MENA regions. Communications efforts have emphasized the education of girls and women as the cutting edge of women's development, and a number of Governments during the year showed new or renewed resolve to deal with this issue. In Bangladesh, the Government declared that the education of girls would be free to grade 8, and that all new primary-level teaching recruits would be female. In Djibouti, the Prime Minister committed himself to a goal of 80 per cent literacy for females under age 25, by 1995.

Adult literacy:

UNICEF continued its support for adult literacy programmes with special attention to the qualitative improvement of teaching and learning materials, training and social mobilization (Benin, Botswana, Burundi, Kenya, Liberia, Malawi, Tanzania, Zimbabwe). Literacy programmes for women have been linked to skill-training and income-earning opportunities in a number of countries. China has combined functional literacy classes with vocational training for young girls. Sri Lanka has combined vocational, marketing and credit management training with literacy activities. Pakistan and many other countries have incorporated literacy and functional education in development programmes for women.

Lessons on health, nutrition, the environment and

sanitation have been included in health education in Benin, Egypt, Mali, Mauritania, Uganda and Zaire, among other countries. In Latin America, *Facts for Life* has been adapted to incorporate the psychosocial component of child development in health and nutrition education. CSD messages have been disseminated through Islamic learning institutions.

Innovation:

Among the innovative approaches which UNICEF continues to support are the Escuela Nueva in Colombia BRAC schools for older children in Bangladesh, mobile schools with multigrade teachers in the Philippines, education for teachers and students via television and radio in China, India and the Maldives, and education for peace and conflict resolution in Lebanon, Mozambique and Sri Lanka.

An ad hoc UNICEF Education Advisory Committee met in New York in July to discuss UNICEF's role and strategies in the achievement of the goal of education for all, and it was agreed that staffing in the education sector should be strengthened at regional and country levels. An effort has been made to develop a training package in basic education for UNICEF staff, and orientation sessions were held for representatives and senior staff in West Africa, East Africa, the Middle East and Latin America.

Inter-agency collaboration:

Collaboration among agencies was strengthened at the policy level following the Jomtien Conference. The heads of the four sponsoring organizations — UNDP, UNESCO, the World Bank and UNICEF — met in New York (July 1990) and in Washington, D. C. (January 1991). All four agreed to increase their financial support for the principal Conference objectives.

The UNESCO-UNICEF Joint Committee on Education (JCE) held its second meeting in Paris (26-27 October), and efforts are being made to improve co-ordination of the agencies' implementation of Conference recommendations. Agreement was reached on major priority areas for joint action.

Massive Illiteracy Causes Women's Low Social Status

by Wilasine Phipphitkul

UNTIL today, Thais can still be heard saying, 'having daughters is like constructing a toilet in the front yard of the house' or 'men are grains but women are cooked rice.'

And in Vietnam, many still tend to think that 'one son means having children, but the possession of two daughters really means nothing at all.'

Many people in Papua New Guinea, too, are still of the opinion that 'a boy inherits his land while a girl becomes another man's wife.'

In Bangladesh, the saying that 'the presence of women on the land that is being sown would lead to the destruction of the crops' is still heard. In Bhutan, the belief is that 'a woman must be reborn nine times to gain the stature equal to that of a man.'

Views like these, whether or not said in jest or even half-seriously, were presented by 21 literacy specialists who met here recently to discuss the link between women's status in society and literacy.

Their conclusion: sexual discrimination may be the primary cause of persistent illiteracy in developing countries, especially among women.

Negative attitudes towards women and girls may be at the root of massive illiteracy in developing countries, the specialists said during a meeting organised by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO). The specialists stressed the need to develop curricula which highlight women's role in society.

Nearly all (98 per cent) of

the world's adult illiterate population (880 million in 1985) are in developing countries. According to UNESCO, women comprise 48.9 per cent of the illiterates in developing countries.

Two out of three unenrolled school-aged children are girls. In Asia and the Pacific, there are 28 million female illiterates (against 14 million illiterate males)

per cent lower than that for boys.

In Asia and the Pacific, the number of female illiterates is even increasing. During the past 15 years, their number rose to 28 million while male illiterates numbered only 14 million.

In Pakistan, for example, the literacy rate among rural women is 10 per cent and among female urban residents 40 per cent. In contrast, rural male literacy rate is 30 per cent and urban male literacy rate is 48 per cent.

In some areas in Bangladesh, the female literacy rate is at most only four per cent. Sultana Afroze, a Bangladeshi who has actively campaigned for women's education, noted during the meeting that the link between literacy and the low status of women is particularly pronounced in her country and the Indian subcontinent.

This low regard for females

is demonstrated as early as birth. It is also not confined to the unsophisticated and uneducated.

In the Terai region of southeastern Nepal, which is close to the Indian border, it is a matter of collective sorrow for the community when a baby girl is born to any of the families. Similarly, more conserva-

tive families, who are still bound by feudal traditions, often treat daughters as more inferior to even pigs and dogs.

In her native Bangladesh, Ms Afroze still hears often the saying that 'the presence of women on the land that is being sown would lead to the destruction of the crops.'

The literacy specialists underscored the need not only to make women literate but also to ensure that those who have acquired the basic literacy skills do not revert into illiteracy. They emphasised the need to provide education which is tailored to women's needs and of a quality which would equip them with the tools needed to cope with the requirements of everyday life.

Dr Namtip Aksorkul, UNESCO's literacy programme specialist, pointed out that 'even though there has never been specially laid down re-

strictions for women, we found that there are still fewer women than men attending many of the literacy programmes in the region.'

She said there were a number of reasons for this including the parents' unwillingness to send daughters to co-educational schools or institutions without women teachers. Or there is the traditional practice of keeping girls as far away from boys as possible outside of the family circle.

Among adult women, the pursuit of literacy is often hampered by the many chores traditionally assigned to them. Dr Namtip said women are often loaded with household chores double the normal workload. 'This heavy workload both inside the home and out leaves very little leisure time for the women to engage in reading and writing,' she said.

The lack of materials suitable and attractive to women is another reason for the failure of many literacy programmes to really reach them. Many educational materials are designed only for women with limited skills. On the other hand, many programmes are designed to provide specific benefits to men such as training in tractor operation and similar courses.

As Shahenn Atiqur Rehman, the former minister of education in Punjab, noted, 'How could they (women) understand the working of an automobile engine when a good many of them had never seen a road?' — (Depthnews Asia).

Blacks Demand Reform in South Africa's Education System

by Mondli Makhanya from Johannesburg

THIS year may finally see something done about South Africa's deepening education crisis. Following disastrous results for final year high school students, politicians and educationists feel that urgent measures need to be taken to resolve the crisis.

An education summit involving all the country's political, educational and business leaders is now being mooted. It has also been planned that education be placed high on the agenda of the Convention for a Democratic South Africa (CODESA), which is negotiating the country's future political system.

Although the pass rate was slightly higher than last year, it brought nobody any comfort. Only 40 per cent of about 230,000 students who sat final year examinations last year, passed. Worse, 28,000 of those who passed met the minimum requirements for university entrance. Compared to the higher than 90 per cent pass rates achieved in white, coloured and Indian education departments, this failure rate is alarming.

As in previous years, politicians have attempted to lump the blame on each other. Predictably — and correctly — most of the blame went to the apartheid policies. The government has offered blacks an inferior education. In subsequent years, government expenditure on black and white education widened. At present about five times more is spent on white children than on black children. The professional standard of teachers in black schools is also poor as they are themselves products

of the same discriminatory education system.

Although the government's education policy has changed somewhat in recent years, apartheid education has left its sad legacy.

It has made government schools symbols of apartheid and during the township uprisings of the late 1970s and early 1980s, schools were

failure is beginning to sink in to all parties. Those who failed outright and others who will be unable to find a place at a university will face the prospect of joblessness for at least the next few years.

The economy is 'nearly stagnant, with growth a minuscule 1.5 per cent. Economists have predicted that less than 10 per cent of

South African schools have been symbols of apartheid, in which the government has offered blacks an inferior education. Even now the expenditure on black and white education is widening. Educationists are asking to divert the expenditure from white to black education and the merger of the country's 16 education departments — one for every tribal homeland. However, the legacy of apartheid education will continue to harm the youth of South Africa.

among the first targets to be attacked by frustrated black youths.

School boycott came to be seen as a legitimate weapon in the fight against apartheid. A popular slogan among the militant youth during the mid-1980s uprising was 'Liberation Now Education Later.'

While they pinpoint the government as the culprit, they themselves have not been absolved of the blame. Radical student groups encouraged the school boycott during critical periods throughout the year. In some schools, pupils even prevented school inspectors from entering the premises, and in some instances gone to the extent of expelling teachers and principals.

So while accusations and counter-accusations are traded, a realisation of the effects of continued high

people coming onto the job market can be absorbed into the formal sector.

This scenario in a society where unemployment levels are as high as 40 per cent is frightening especially in view of escalating crime. Recent figures indicate that a large percentage of unemployed are under the age of 30 — the group that has been responsible for the country's spiral of crime during the past two years.

Fears have therefore been expressed that if the education system continues to churn out unemployable people, it will just exacerbate an already high crime rate.

Hence the planned national education summit towards the end of February. The idea of an

education summit emanates from the Joint Working Group, a group of academics assembled by ANC president Nelson Mandela when he went to meet the government over the education crisis early last year.

The National Education Coordinating Committee — originally formed to fight against apartheid education — is undertaking a 'Back to learning' campaign which will encourage 'effective' learning in schools. This will entail extra tuition for pupils at community centres countrywide.

For its part, the government is proceeding with the piecemeal deracialisation of education. Under the state's deracialisation drive, parents at white schools vote on what status their schools should assume. Those range from remaining pure white to becoming partially integrated (under which prospective black pupils undergo aptitude tests), to going private and becoming 100 per cent integrated.

Pressure is also being put on the government to increase education expenditure. Given the economic difficulties in which Pretoria finds itself this may not be possible. Already, the country's education expenditure is quite high at 5.5 per cent of the GDP. The World Bank has advised the government that this is too high for a developing nation.

Anti-apartheid organisations and educationists are asking for diverting the expenditure from white to black education and the merger of the country's 16 education departments (one each for every tribal homeland). This will certainly help to save millions of rands currently being ploughed into multiple administrations.

But this is a matter for CODESA to sort out. On this forum's agenda is the reincorporation of the 'independent' homelands into South Africa and the total scrapping of the homeland system.

While long speeches are read at the summit and politicians haggle it out in CODESA, South Africa's annual carnival of disaster will be in progress in classrooms countrywide. Thousands of black pupils will be turned away from township schools because there is no space — as has already happened.

Disruptions will continue and South Africa will witness yet another set of frustrated youths onto its streets.

— (OEMINI NEWS)

Mondli Makhanya is a reporter with the Weekly Mail of Johannesburg.



South Africa spends five times more in educating a white child than a black child