

Action, Not Rhetorics, about Literacy

The International Literacy Day will once again be observed with usual fanfare of seminars, statements, some street processions and a lot of pious proclamations. We will once again be told—as if we have not heard it before, at least a thousand times—how important education is, and what vital role it can play in development. So, what are we doing about it? Yes, we have allocated the biggest portion of the national budget for it. We have also set up a separate mass education department directly under the PM's office and, of course, we are giving it a high profile in the national media. But the question is, have we examined how effectively we are implementing our loudly proclaimed policies?

Of the money which we spend for education, more than 70 per cent is used for teachers' salary. A large portion of what is left, goes for school furniture, maintenance etc. When was the last time we had an investigation as to how our teachers are performing? What is the level of teachers' attendance in the rural areas? These questions become relevant in the face of widespread allegation about non-existent and absentee teachers eating up a significant portion of the education budget. When we see 60-65 per cent passing the S.S.C. examination, we naturally wonder what happens to the 35-40 per cent who failed. Why did they fail? Did not the system let them down? Who will answer for the national waste that this amounts to?

On the occasion of the International Literacy Day our focus is specifically on mass literacy, which is mostly covered by non-formal education programmes. Here the success of some non-governmental organisations should really be our guide. The BRAC schools, which are somewhere in-between the traditional formal and non-formal systems, have been found to be efficient, cost-effective and highly successful. We would like to suggest that the government should seriously examine the potential of the BRAC model and, if found suitable, replicate it nationally. There are several other NGOs who have done remarkable work in mass literacy. All these experiences should be brought together and put together into a comprehensive national approach. It is a waste of scarce national wealth to go on "re-inventing the wheel", when successful model of mass primary education exists.

We would like to repeat our earlier suggestion of political parties participating in mass literacy activities. At least they can organise literacy campaigns in areas from where their candidates were elected to the parliament. This is one area where constructive work by our political parties can easily be organised. We should introduce literacy programmes in mills and factories throughout the nation. Latch time literacy classes with the incentive of free lunch could be one method. Mill and factory owners should realise that educating their workers is actually cost-saving in the long run. Because educated workers will be more productive, and open to new technologies. The garment industry could take the lead and set up literacy classes for the children of the women who work there. This could be a response to the criticism of using child labour which is made against them.

What we now need is to be innovative and serious. We have wasted a lot of time, and lot more resources. The tall talk of Education for All by the Year 2000, is going to appear to be taller still, unless we really put our heart behind the effort.

The Missing Link

The recovery of 179 degree examination scripts from a grocery in Bharatkhal, Gaibandha has caused just a ripple or two in our otherwise preoccupied but not so reflective society. A twist of luck was responsible for the recovery of the scripts but not before some of them were damaged beyond recovery. The incident amply manifests the callousness of the railway clerk who received the documents of the parcels but did not care to collect the answer scripts — bound for Jatiya Bishwavidyalaya, Dhaka — at Teestamukh, Ghat.

However, to hold an individual alone responsible for this unpardonable lapse would be to view the whole situation in an oversimplistic manner. Much as the clerk may be a necessary cog in the running of the railway parcel service, his fault alone should not have let the entire service down. As important a service as the railway parcel cannot be expected to set a standard of efficient performance unless backed by in-built checking and rechecking methods. Evidently, such reviewing measures are lacking in the railway parcel service. Otherwise, how can one explain the missing of two such considerably large packets of answer script?

Explanations or not, the fact remains that the records of our postal and similar other services fall far short of desired level. Complaints of irregularities and mismanagement of various kinds are aplenty against such services and little have the authorities done to redress the problems facing the public. Why? One answer might be the continuation of the old and obsolete system in those areas. When electronic machines, including computers, are taking over much of the manual labour in so many areas, these vitally important services have sadly been left out of their beneficial ambience.

Of course, a more serious approach to the issues could improve the services even within such limitations, but no public service here has ever received the attention it deserves. Anything public has been maltreated. Time has come when the private services the world over have been taking over all the giant businesses once considered to be the exclusive preserve of the state. The trouble here is that the private entrepreneurs have not developed enough and the faded legacy of the public services finds ample intrusion in to the new ventures or, worse, accounts for other irregularities and cheating.

THE Lok Sabha has exhausted nearly half of its 5-year term but India's political scene continues to be an indelible mangle. Competitive or combative politics, which has been raging in the country, is unabated. Since none of the three formations, Congress, Bharatiya Janata Party and the National Front combine, has emerged a clear winner, the landscape remains uneasy.

The no-confidence motion was a symptom, not a disease. The disease is the failure of the three formations to evolve a working relationship, to strike a balance between what they aspire and what they can achieve. Each one of them has a traditional area of influence which has expanded or shrunk in the last few years. But they fail to come to terms with the reality: none of them can have a majority on its own, whether elections are held now or on the due date in 1996.

Lack of consensus, even to a limited extent, has only yawned the gulf between the Narasimha Rao government and the opposition. Both are fighting each other all the time, the Congress through defections from the opposition and the opposition through no-confidence motions. Congress is most to blame. Being a minority government, its programme from the day one has been to split the opposition parties. Janata Dal was the first casualty, followed by the Telugu Desam and the AIADMK. These days it is Aijit Singh group, which the Congress itself helped defect from the Janata Dal.

I am not going into the moral aspect. When top Congress leaders take the credit of 'managing votes' to defeat the no-confidence motion, it is no use reminding them of Gandhi, Nehru or Shastri. I want to point out how a consensus is possible when Congress is out to buy, pressurise or reward MPs

of other parties? Rao could have avoided a recurring confrontation by having a coalition, drawing members from non-BJP parties. The Janata Dal — leave VP Singh alone — was willing to join hands with him. But he wanted the Dal members to merge with 'the family'. Subsequently, the Aijit Singh group, with the strength of 20, was keen on a coalition but Rao again said that it should become part of Congress and then claim 'anything'. Aijit Singh was conveyed the same thing during the no-confidence motion debate. Little did he know that some of his followers had already been enticed away by Congress.

Lakhan Singh Yadav, who with six members of the Aijit Singh group has joined Congress, was the one who informed the Lok Sabha Speaker about his intention to cross the floor. It was three hours before the no-confidence motion was put to vote. Yadav met the Speaker alone but claimed to have six more. The application he submitted to the Speaker for a split carried only his signature, not of the rest.

Aijit Singh has rightly protested to the Speaker that even before his group has been recognised as an entity, the split is being consecrated. Human Resources Minister Arjun Singh's plea that the anti-defection law should not be reduced to a 'mockery' may be considered one more shot by the Congress dissidents. But he has a point. The question one

THE POST-NO CONFIDENCE SCENE

Rao should Try Coalition with Janata

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may, however, like to pose to him is why did he not speak out when the deal with Yadav was being struck under his nose. Will he resign when Yadav joins the council of ministers, part of the bargain?

True, Yadav's group raises the strength of Congress to 258. But this still does not give it a majority in a 546-member House. If the five Jarkhand Mukti Morcha members, who voted with the government, and six SSP and BSP members, who

objection was to Rao's prime ministership, not to the Congress. They were all for Arjun Singh. Their main worry was not so much Finance Minister Manmohan Singh's economic and liberalisation policies as growing communalism. Although they are the ones who advised Rao to dismiss the BJP governments against his better judgement and ban the RSS, they are now convinced that communalism will strengthen with Rao at the

suggestion that the opposition should sponsor a motion. In any case, when the BJP on the one hand and the National Front and the Left on the other brought their individual motions of no-confidence, they were not sure of either the Aijit Singh group or the AIADMK.

Since it was rumoured that both were not happy with Rao, Atal Behari Vajpayee made his optimistic observation that the chances were 50-50. The opposition became serious about the motion only when the Aijit Singh group and the AIADMK issued a whip to their members to vote against the Rao government.

The no-confidence motion, however, has strengthened Congress, particularly Rao. The party now firmly believes it can last the full term by effecting defection of some more members. And it will be busy doing that in the next few weeks. Another 10 members from the Aijit Singh group is their target. Rao has got more entrenched than before and even the limited move to change the leader that was initiated during the motion has got frozen in its tracks. Rao has been able to convey to his members that they can stay in power with him but may have to face fresh elections if they removed him.

Even in the absence of such arguments, Rao's ousting was not on the cards. The party rallied behind him because it did not want division in its ranks when the government's fate was in balance. Otherwise also,

Congress has never known a change in the leadership unless he or she is defeated at the polls. Mrs Gandhi was removed only when the party was routed in the election after the emergency. Rao may face a similar challenge if he loses in the forthcoming assembly elections in four northern states: Himachal Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh and Rajasthan.

The Rao government's survival does not, however, mean that Congress has gained. Except for Punjab and to some extent Himachal Pradesh, it is nowhere in the northern India. Gujarat is as good as gone. Maharashtra looks like staying with it but the strength will come down. Assam is another state where Congress may do well. But three or four states will not give a majority, not even the number of seats it has at present.

Its only advantage is that the National Front and the Left are not yet strong enough to become an alternative. No doubt, all factions of Janata Dal are on the point of joining hands. But the electorate does not look like preferring it. Muslims and the backward, increasingly leaning towards the Janata Dal, may have no choice except Congress when they see the BJP winning.

This scenario may be at the back of the BJP mind when it made Vajpayee as the leader of its parliamentary party. His moderate views have always won him many admirers among the minorities. But it looks that the BJP is riding two horses at the same time. Vajpayee appealing to liberal elements and Advani wooing the sadhus by recognising their role in the governance. This does not, in any way, dilute my original thesis that Congress, BJP and the National Front-Left combine will continue to compete for supremacy for many years to come.

BETWEEN THE LINES

Kuldip Nayar writes from New Delhi

abstained this time, were to line up with the opposition next time, the Rao government could be defeated. In any case, the immediate danger is averted.

Subsequent information reveals that the no-confidence motion itself was not a serious proposition even when it was presented in the House. The opposition parties neither worked for its success nor did they have any plan if the Rao government had fallen. In fact, they felt relieved when the motion was defeated. A few tall among them say that they would have "exhausted other possibilities" if the Rao government had been ousted, meaning thereby another Congress government with a new leader.

The Communists had made it clear long before that their

helm of affairs. All parties, it looks, took up the no-confidence motion curiously. After Harshad Mehta's allegations of a pay-off to the prime minister, L K Advani was asked whether his party would bring a vote of no-confidence against Rao government. His reply was vague: "It cannot be ruled out." The Janata Dal spokesman was even vaguer. The Communists, too, were non-committal.

It is really the press which built the momentum. At every briefing of every political party, the stock question was whether there would be a motion of no-confidence against the government. Some opposition leaders admit that they were pushed into it through the press reports, which were loaded with

International Literacy Day

Better Management of Educational Systems Need of the Hour

by Nuruddin M Kamal

TODAY is a very solemn day, observed all over the world as the International Literacy Day.

We celebrate this day, and we pledge to do something better. But in retrospect, what we see in Bangladesh is something very frustrating. Wastage and inefficiency still overshadows all other issues in the education sector. Severe shortages of capable and competent education managers, particularly in the primary and mass education sub-sector, lack of commitment of teachers, and unequal modes of delivery aggravate the system. Worse still is that no clear practical procedures have been evolved to establish accountability of the system.

It would also appear intriguing that the mode of delivery of the primary level education designed for children of the age group 6-10 years is diverse and complex. About forty thousand formal primary schools, about two thousand five hundred kindergartens and around fifteen thousand ebtdayee madrasahs and different types of mostly one-room non-formal educational facilities offer primary level education. In addition, introduction of 'one room one teacher' satellite schools or feeder schools for the primary system, although shows a silver lining in the education arena, these unintegrated multi-character educational access is likely to create distortions in the existing unimodal supervision and monitoring mechanisms.

Unfortunately, no uniform curriculum is followed for the aforementioned various delivery systems. No uniform inspection procedure exists even for the formal primary schools (government and private), kindergartens or ebtdayees. Non-formal primary education (NFPE) being conducted through a number of non-governmental organizations, communities, religious institutions etc has created another set of complexities, primarily because of the absence of a linkage between formal and non-formal education process. At the end of the day if there is a success in the literacy rate or improvement in the primary education system, everybody would seek a bigger claim. The reverse may be more true. What is, however, more important is the pursuit to achieve higher and better education, must follow some norms and uniformity in the processes.

Today the people living in the rural areas and people living in the urban slums and shanty towns are mostly deprived of the facilities of conventional school-based, time-bound educational facilities. And the ignorance and illiteracy thus caused is the bottleneck in the furtherance of education and literacy pursuit in these areas. Parental apathy in the spread of female education remains a major constraint. This illiterate population is unable to avail the useful information that is splashed by all types of

media propaganda about health, sanitation, environmental protection, agricultural development, self reliance, and welfare of rural communities etc. Between 1972 and 1992, the adult literacy rate (for age group 15 and above) has increased only about 3.8 per cent from a base figure of 21 per cent. Today average official figures for adult literacy vary between 31-33 per cent, while the Asiaweek newsmagazine provides a literacy number for Bangladesh as 35.3 per cent. All these are however numbers, perhaps one would, feel very uncomfortable when the literacy rate of female is stated as only 19 per cent. More than two third of children drop-out at the primary level, girls are the worst sufferers.

It is in this context people argue, perhaps rightly, that graded school, the ruling paradigm of formal education, can no more be considered as the sole means of imparting basic education to children, youth and adult. Consequently, with the introduction of new delivery mechanisms, formulation and implementation procedures for a 'new framework' and new rules of the game that would hopefully be played in the coming years. In fact, in order to retrieve the vast number of illiterates from the shackles of ignorance, use of more non-formal avenues for tapping their

potential seems to be a viable alternative. For adult illiterates, literacy-cum-functional education programmes should be strengthened which should impart them basic literacy and also know-how of some skills, which would help him involve in the development activities.

These programmes, however, must be flexible and be held at timings convenient to respective communities. Integrated functional programmes should also include special activities for rural women to provide them skills training as well.

Therefore, the issues in respect of personnel and management policies of the primary and mass education deserves to be highlighted and prioritized with a view to creating an atmosphere of understanding among the government and non-government agencies for undertaking cost-effective implementation of policy options. Unfortunately, poor administration and management, general lack of supervision and absence of proper accountability are the major impediments to enhancement of learning environment. Irregular attendance of teachers, inadequate training, and less than satisfactory supervision by the field level staffs are serious problems that must be attended to.

Moreover, some interesting parameters may also provide some food for thought. Two

English alphabets like "P" and "E" representing respectively — population, pollution and poverty in one set, and energy, environment and education in the other, mystifies our education system. Whether it is for an individual word the education system suffers or because of one set over the other is still a puzzle. If some can dispassionately analyse and priority, education will stand out prominently.

Nevertheless, a starting point for good management should be the availability of dependable data and their appropriate application. Due to lack of satisfactory MIS, school mapping results etc the chances for immediate improvement is rather low. To be more specific, under the existing system of institutional supervision through district and thana education officers can be said to be very ineffective, so are the positions regarding school management committees (SMCs) and Parent Teacher's Associations (PTAs).

Having experience, the performances of centrally controlled DPEOs, TEOs, AEOs etc., a new approach could be taken to strengthen and empower SMCs and PTAs and provide them with adequate authorities and responsibilities to help raise the competencies of the teachers by improving their pedagogical skill and knowledge. This would also mean a step towards the process of decentralization. In the same manner, the headmaster, the key functionary,

who is required to shoulder diverse responsibilities: academic, administrative, accounting and public relations without proper support, services and clearly defined authorities, should be strengthened adequately to discharge these responsibilities.

However, these actions are not enough. Broadly, the process of decentralization must be genuinely pursued and effected upon. For example, powers should be delegated to different hierarchical levels of the Directorate of Primary Education and accountability strictly enforced. To begin with, divisional offices must be set up and properly staffed, preferably headed by a director level officer, with adequate administrative and financial authorities.

Printing of textbooks, training of teachers, like NAPE, implementation of policies, supervision and monitoring works could be assigned to these divisional offices. Thana could be earmarked as the focal point for future implementation of programmes under the primary education sub-sector, while in the head office more primary school teachers and primary level field officers be deputed to undertake policy planning and decision making instead of always relying on college teachers to work in the DG's office in Dhaka.

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To the Editor...

Letters for publication in these columns should be addressed to the Editor and legibly written or typed with double space. For reasons of space, short letters are preferred, and all are subject to editing and cuts. Pseudonyms are accepted. However, all communications must bear the writer's real name, signature and address.

New Divisions

Sir, A strong committee consisting of some present and former MPs, high civil servants (present and former) of erstwhile Comilla district has been formed to launch a movement for making Comilla a Division. A vigorous movement for making Sylhet a separate Division has already started. Similar demands have been made by the people of Jessore, Faridpur, Pabna, Rangpur and Noakhali. The people of Chittagong Hill Tracts who have been struggling for preservation of their separate cultural identity will definitely demand a separate Division.

At present the Divisional Commissioner is a sinecure post without significant administrative powers. If some powers of the Secretariat are delegated to the Divisional Commissioner, then the yearning of the people to have a division of their own will have some meaning. Otherwise the creation of divisions will result in an increase of public expenditure without any purpose.

The advocates of New Divisions should therefore approach the Government for delegation of sufficient powers to the divisions to relieve the Bangladesh Secretariat of its

present load and transfer some posts of officers and staff of the Secretariat to Divisions to avoid additional expenditure due to creation of new divisions.

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Decision making

Sir, Lots have been said on the decision making process in the Government but no steps have so far been taken either to do away with or minimise the existing cumbersome and lengthy procedure. Not only in Govt. offices, in public sector corporations too, a similar system is so much in vogue.

Unless the decision making process is simplified and decision makers made accountable to the public, democracy will remain a myth. Unfortunately the Govt. functionaries have not changed their outlook and attitude and behave in the same manner they used to do before. The bureaucrats have not been able to get rid of the 'lesson' of the colonial rulers to distance themselves from the public forgetting that the people are the source of all power they now wield. The sooner they realise it, the better for them as well as for the country. They are apathetic to the sufferings of the people and hardly show any re-

spect to them unless, allegedly, that "public" wields some money or power at some quarter.

Pensioners, in some cases, cannot enjoy the fruits of their lives' toil during their life time. Many run after the 'file' for months (in some cases years) to get what should have come to them as a reward on the day of their retirement as token of appreciation for their long service. But in practice it is just the opposite — a simply humiliating situation for the retired man to move from door to door to get what is his legitimate dues. Can there be any greater disgrace than this? People in authority seem to forget that they too will retire one day and maybe they will have to face a similar, if not worse, situation unless steps are taken now to improve their own performance.

Chief Executives of the Govt. and public sector corporation offices must be approachable to the public. Under the existing system, people are harassed and humiliated at lower level unless the 'come to terms' with them. I would not believe that the 'bosses' are not aware of this situation. They either pretend not to see or hear whatever goes around them or they are helpless 'jimmies' in the hands of their subordinates. This situation must be rectified. Boldness in character and decision making is a crying need of the hour. Steps must be taken now, if necessary on 'ad hoc' basis, as so called streamlining and simplification of the rules and procedures under existing system is a time consuming process. Despite

many such pronouncements, the situation remains where it was 22 years ago.

Here are a few suggestions for whatever they are worth:

(a) Every Ministry/Division/Department/Public Sector Corporation shall frame its own rules/procedures in keeping with its requirements and nature of business (special rules for special nature of business, if any) and in conformity with the existing rules of business as far as possible in order to expeditiously transact its own business keeping, of course, public interest in view.

(b) Where there is a conflict with the existing rules, the concerned Minister, if he deems changes are necessary in the interest of service to the public, may get that approved by the Cabinet/Parliament as the case may be.

(c) The Head of the Ministry/Division/Department/Corporation shall hold a morning session everyday with the concerned officials in which the day's business are to be determined, discussed, sorted out and decisions given there on. This will eliminate minimise the practice of notings and movement of files at every level and consequential delays.

(d) Decisions taken in such meetings are to be recorded on the relevant files and signed by the concerned officials and then be sent to the concerned section/department for disposal/issuance of necessary orders.

(e) For cases requiring approval of the higher authorities, a summary may be prepared in the same meeting and submitted.

(f) For cases requiring inter-ministerial views, a weekly meeting at the level of officials having authority to take decisions would bring quicker result instead of referring files to them. For this a working paper, on the issues to be discussed, may be circulated to all concerned prior to the date of the meeting so that decision making becomes easier and quicker.

The above suggestions are only a few and, in my opinion, are not difficult to implement.

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Town protection scheme

Sir, A report published in the press recently says that IDA will provide a credit of Tk 1,028 crore for protection of Chandpur, Sirajgonj and a few other small towns. The idea is no doubt lofty. Lot of money has already been spent in the name of protection of these towns. It is worth pondering whether the money already spent and the amount proposed to be spent for the purpose is worth it. A few shops and houses in these towns will be protected with a staggering amount of public fund. If these shops and houses were shifted elsewhere even at government expenses only a fraction of amount spent could have accomplished the job. But that was not done.

It is not that engineers and other officials related to these projects do not understand it. But they won't do it because that would allegedly deprive them of a perennial money

spinner. Now, again an amount of Tk 1028 crore is proposed to be spent which the poor tax payers will have to pay back to IDA with interest. Before going ahead with the project a dispassionate study is needed to be made by some experts who do not have any vested interest in these projects. Rivers will take their own course. What we need to do is to adjust to the situation with minimum cost from public exchequer.

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Syllabus of NU

Sir, The government has constituted National University (NU) understandably to reduce the pressure on three universities, to avoid the session jam and to make examination system proper and fair. But it seems to be a fallacious step. The colleges of whole Bangladesh are now under NU. The NU has declared the date of examination for the first Degree (pass) batch as on 31st December, 93. But it is regrettable that, the NU did not give any fresh syllabus for this 92/93 batch and didn't give any instruction to the colleges. Meanwhile, the students of this batch are in a fixed what to read or not to read, because they don't know what university syllabus would be followed.

So I appeal to the National University authority to clear this confusion within a very short time and let the students be tension free.

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