

Social Mobilization for Total Literacy

The Case of Lalmonirhat

by Syed Naquib Muslim

FREEDOM from illiteracy is now recognised as one of the core elements of social development.

However, with the passage of time, the definition of literacy is undergoing changes.

In pursuance of the mass literacy programmes launched by the government, Lalmonirhat one of the 64 districts of the country, has started a comprehensive mass literacy programme designated as 'Total Literacy Movement'.

many parts of Bangladesh is dysfunctional for mobilising all segments of society to achieve hundred per cent literacy rate where the existing literacy rate is only 18 per cent; moreover, the existing administrative infrastructure is not adequate to meet the academic needs/demands of the localities of the district and he therefore felt that only through social mobilization involving all sections of the citizens, the uphill task of educating the illiterate multitude could be handled.

Background

The mass literacy programme of this district has a brief background. Azizul Haq, a freedom fighter of Lalmonirhat, used to run, at his own initiative, a adult literacy centres during the evening hours under the municipal area.

In order to fully operationalise his vision and mis-

sion, he convened the first formal opinion-sharing meeting in April, 1993. The meeting stressed the need for starting a social mobilization involving all sections of people viz. local elite, local leaders of political parties, teachers, mosque imams, policemen, officials, freedom fighters, journalists, advocates, NGO officials, Ansar VDPs and local businessmen. Inspired by the gathering, primary teachers with the help of the members of district administration commissioned literacy 421 centres. Within a few months, as many as 18000 persons became free from the disgrace of thumb impressions. Subsequently in December 1993, a comprehensive survey was conducted to determine the size of the total illiterate population of 11 to 45 years of age. The results of the survey indicated, there was about 2 lac 70 thousands illiterate population in the district.

The dramatic success of the initial phase drew the attention of the government international bodies including World Bank, UNICEF, UNDP, and leading NGOs. When the initial phase commenced, there was no uniformity and consistency in the content and methodology of lessons. Moreover, the district administration realised, to achieve full coverage in the entire district, a strong and efficient institutional network needed to be created. Thus to give the programme an institutional shape, district and thana administrations were able to convince the respective

UP chairmen to utilise 25 per cent of the thana development budget in mass literacy programme.

Projection has been made to install 6603 centres in 5 thanas. The size of the clientele has stood at 29,520. To bring uniformity in the curriculum books 'Chetona I & II' as prescribed and circulated by INFEP were used in all the literacy centres.

The promoters of the programme believe, a number of factors have led to the success of the venture. These are:

- Continuous communication and linkage
Regular periodic meetings and assemblies
Frequent publicity, propagation and motivation
Participation of cross-section of people
Regular reporting and feedback
Controlling drop-out of learners and volunteer-teachers
Intensive supervision and inspection
Concentration more on failures than successes

Unique Features

The programme is mostly based on the cult of voluntarism and altruism. Both the actors and the activists are working in a voluntary spirit.

Monetary rewards ranging from Tk 1200/- to Tk 1500/- have been declared for those who will achieve 80 per cent to 100 per cent success in making the learners literate.

The programme has taken the shape of a social movement. People from all spheres of life have come for-

ward on being motivated to joining hands with the district administration for achieving total literacy in the district. Everybody is sharing the credit or success as well as lapses or failures.

The programme is not cluster-based as is the case with most of the NGOs operating in this country. Coverage is extended to all the five thanas of the district including Dahagram union, under Patgram thana where people are languishing in day-to-day troubles because of the Indian restrictions on their free movement.

The successful volunteer-teachers of this area sacrificed their reward money and with their contributions raised a rice-mill at a cost of Tk 55000/- which has started paying them dividends.

Continuous extensive and multi-level monitoring, supervision and appraisal is another important characteristic of the programme. Formative feedback by the programme administrators through open and free communication in the form of periodic meetings at the thana and union levels is at the heart of the activity.

In this district, GOs and NGOs have set a unique example of functional alliance and peaceful co-existence and they are poised for accomplishing the common goal of making each citizen of the district literate.

The programme is being carried out on a decentralised administrative system. It is decentralised up to what is called 'centre' which is the lowest tier of the entire programme administration. Workers at all tiers have received intensive orientation about the modalities of administering the activities and about the content and process of conducting teaching sessions.

The female response to the programme is more encouraging and exemplary. The female learners seem more zealous and enthusiastic than their male counterparts. Men have the plea that because have to go out for searching jobs, they get little time for attending classes. Male and female learners are engaged in healthy competition about regularity in attendance and obtaining good grade in examinations.

Problems

UNICEF is confronted with a few problems: 1. This is of

course an ambitious venture as all the five thanas are being covered concurrently. This raises the question of managerial sustainability. What happens ultimately remains to be seen. 2. The people of Lalmonirhat especially those in the rural part are everyday facing an unfriendly foe i.e. nature. Duet-storm, is a regular phenomenon. Lack of electricity is regular feature. They experience rains during their learning sessions whereas they face drought during sowing season.

Because of the temporary migration by the male learners, the continuity of lesson administration is broken. The male learners mostly migrate to Bogra and Dinajpur in search of seasonal jobs during crop harvesting period.

Replicability Issue

Can a specific model being practised one part of Bangladesh be replicable in another if we take into account the socio-economic realities and psychosocial factors of the population which are at variance? The Comilla Experiment is a case in point. Rural development literature indicate, this particular model of rural development did not yield positive results elsewhere.

Conclusion

Literacy for the sake of literacy will fetch little pay-off to the people and will not sustain for long specially in a district where bare survival is the prime concern of the majority of the people. Literacy that does not build capacity to meet the basic needs of life may ultimately prove meaningless to those who are in abject poverty. They must grow capability to survive and to earn income so that they can economically support themselves. It is therefore essential that the on-going literacy programme is linked to productivity and is integrated with poverty alleviation or income-generating activities. In a poverty-stricken area, where majority of the people are landless and agri-workers and are struggling against unfriendly nature for survival, the concept of voluntarism may not work for long and the apparent interest being demonstrated by the volunteers may turn diffused. What is therefore needed is a financial back-up from the government and technological collaboration of the leading NGOs like RDRS and BRAC to ensure sustainability of this important programme.

Students Speak Out

by M Iftikhar Uddin

THE Economics Department of Dhaka University has a rather unfortunate record of system loss (a modified term for session jams). Of course this is true for almost all other departments of Dhaka University.

By the time students of the 85-86 session finally finished their Honours examinations, they were more than two years behind schedule. While most of the blame may fall on the phenomenal sine dies of the Ershad regime, many will not forget to mention the course system and teaching methods.

For the students of the '90-'91 session, who were ten months behind schedule by the time they finished their Honours final examination in April - sine dies had little to do with the loss. When asked, a student of Honours final year mentioned that it took some three months before their second year classes could start after the first year finals. The same batch had to spend six months waiting for their third year classes to begin.

The lengthy examination schedules also add to the woes of the students. A graduate of this department recalled that their Masters examinations began on September '91 and then continued until January '92. Mr. Faruk Shams, a lecturer of the department also decried the uncertain and lengthy examination schedules and the long delay in starting classes. Many graduates and students of the Economics Department are hoping that the authorities will adopt the semester system, like the Commerce Faculty, to solve this problem. They maintained that, if that were the case, the examination schedule would be cut to six months at the most.

As for the content of courses, Mr. Ghalib, a graduate of the Economics Department, commented, "If I were asked to write a paragraph on what I have learned, the last line would be: I have learned nothing to correlate with my professional life." He claimed that before doing his MBA, he didn't realise that communicating with people, for example, is an essential skill.

Another graduate, who is now an Assistant Director of the Water Development Board, also emphasised the lack of tools to correlate the theoretical knowledge with the practical world. He said that although research is an important tool in this regard, only a selected group of students are allowed to do research. As a result, the majority of the stu-

dents are not only being deprived of the chance to strengthen their knowledge base, but are also being denied of the career in a research oriented job.

Some students, when asked, acknowledged that their learning lacked practical exposure, and suggested more case studies and assignments in their courses. They maintained that despite monthly seminars to familiarize them with current trends in economics and related fields, participation is poor due to clashes with their other obligations and lack of organisation and information.

Chowdhury Sharmin Mahmud, an Honours final year student claimed that he had so far spent about Tk. 3000 to buy necessary texts. An additional Tk. 1500 has gone out of his pocket as photocopying expenses. These expenses could be reduced if an adequate number of books were available in the library. With only 3 or 4 copies of a book, for more than 100 students, our future economists are forced to make frequent trips to Newmarket and Nilkhet.

Finally, where do graduate economists go? With a limited number of job opportunities for our economists, the most attractive offer for a graduate is that of a research oriented job. But, as mentioned earlier, these are limited to a select few. So the next best option is the post of a lecturer in a private or government college. The only satisfaction in this case is that a graduate is able to apply his/her knowledge.

The rest will try their luck in general jobs and will face competition from thousands of graduates from other departments. An executive of a private firm claimed that although it is generally thought that students of Economics are more sought after than students of other disciplines, in reality, in the job market they only have a slight psychological advantage.

Recently, however, there has been a wind of change. Rules regarding subsidiary examinations have been stiffened. A major change in the shape of integrated subsidiary courses will bring some welcome changes. This, along with some other reforms, might just turn the Economics Department into a useful institution, catering the needs of a growing economy. But, apparently, there is still a long way to go.

Sugar Cubes Slowly Give Way to Education

by Sylviane Diouf-Kamara

AFTER ten years at the Koranic school in Malika, a half-hour drive away north of Dakar, 19-year old Sidi Diarra is proud of his accomplishments and enthusiastic about his dream of opening a chicken farm.

"I have learned so much here: agriculture, poultry farming and carpentry, and I can write in Arabic, Wolof and French," says Diarra. "In Malika I have also learned to get along with everybody."

Here, as customary in a darra (Koranic school), which educates boys and girls up to 18 years old, the priority lessons for the talibes, or students, are Arabic and the Koran. However, the well-tended gardens, the henhouse, the wood shop and the art room show that this darra has greater ambitions than most. In addition to giving students nutritious food and clean lodgings, the school teaches reading and writing in French and Wolof, the national language, as well as other subjects that will help them continue their education and find jobs. Some students have gone on to formal high schools and colleges; others have opened businesses.

With 70 resident male students as young as five, and 32 female day students, the school was created 14 years ago by a group of women who were distressed by the poor conditions of most daaras. Determined to improve the lives of talibes, they began a fundraising campaign and won approval from the government. Not all daaras can promise their students an education equal to Malika's. Bargny is a small town an hour east of Dakar. Twenty young talibes from 5 to 14 years old live in the darra, sleeping on the dirt floor of a small room. They have no sheets or blankets, and they study in a roofless room under a scorching sun. Their only water comes from a stagnant pond surrounded by garbage. Their marabout (teacher) is just back from a 20-day trip, when students were left without supervision. One died of malaria. The neighbours are now caring for the children.

Talibes are a fixture of life in Senegal, where 40 per cent of students go to Koranic schools. Before colonisation, these schools taught the traditionally oral population how to read and write Arabic. Koranic schools were supported by local communities, which paid the instructors and gave food to the students. To receive their rations, the students went from house to house reciting the Koran. Their public recitation of the holy text

gave families an opportunity to judge the quality of their children's studies.

But first colonisation, then urbanisation and today the economic crisis have changed the social contract. During the dry season, more and more marabouts take students from their villages to live in the city, where the teachers can make a better living by selling talismans and sending the boys out to beg.

Nine out of ten talibes, whose average age is 10, come from rural areas, and 85 per cent are from the poorest families. In the city, their conditions are usually appalling. Malaria, gastroenteritis, conjunctivitis and scabies are widespread. They also frequently fall prey to street accidents. There are 50,000 to 100,000 beggar talibes in Senegal. They cluster near traffic-lights in the cities - little boys dressed in filthy rags, a large can strapped to their shoulder for collecting the sugar, rice or coins for which they beg for up to 10 hours a day. Most receive minimal Koranic education. Many talibes are left by their parents in the care of the marabout and have to pay for food and money to beg for their education.

Now, though, the effort begun by the concerned women

of Malika is having wide-reaching effects. In 1992, UNICEF and the government of Senegal launched a programme to improve the living conditions and instruction of these young students. Called Rehabilitation of the Rights of the Talibes, it has targeted 30,000 children - between one-third and a half of all talibes who are in especially difficult circumstances. UNICEF has provided close to \$1 million and has earmarked an additional \$1.4 million for 1995 for the programme, which also relies on the participation of the Ministry of Health and non-governmental organisations.

The first of its kind in Senegal, the programme aims to make the daaras an integral part of their communities so the residents have a stake in the schools' success. It focuses on restoring the talibes' basic rights, providing them with better food and lodging as well as access to clean water and educational opportunities.

In the long run, it will help change harmful attitudes of the marabouts and parents, stem the talibes' migration to the cities and increase self-financing of the daaras. The project has, for example, provided funds to women to invest in income-generating activities that will support the daaras.

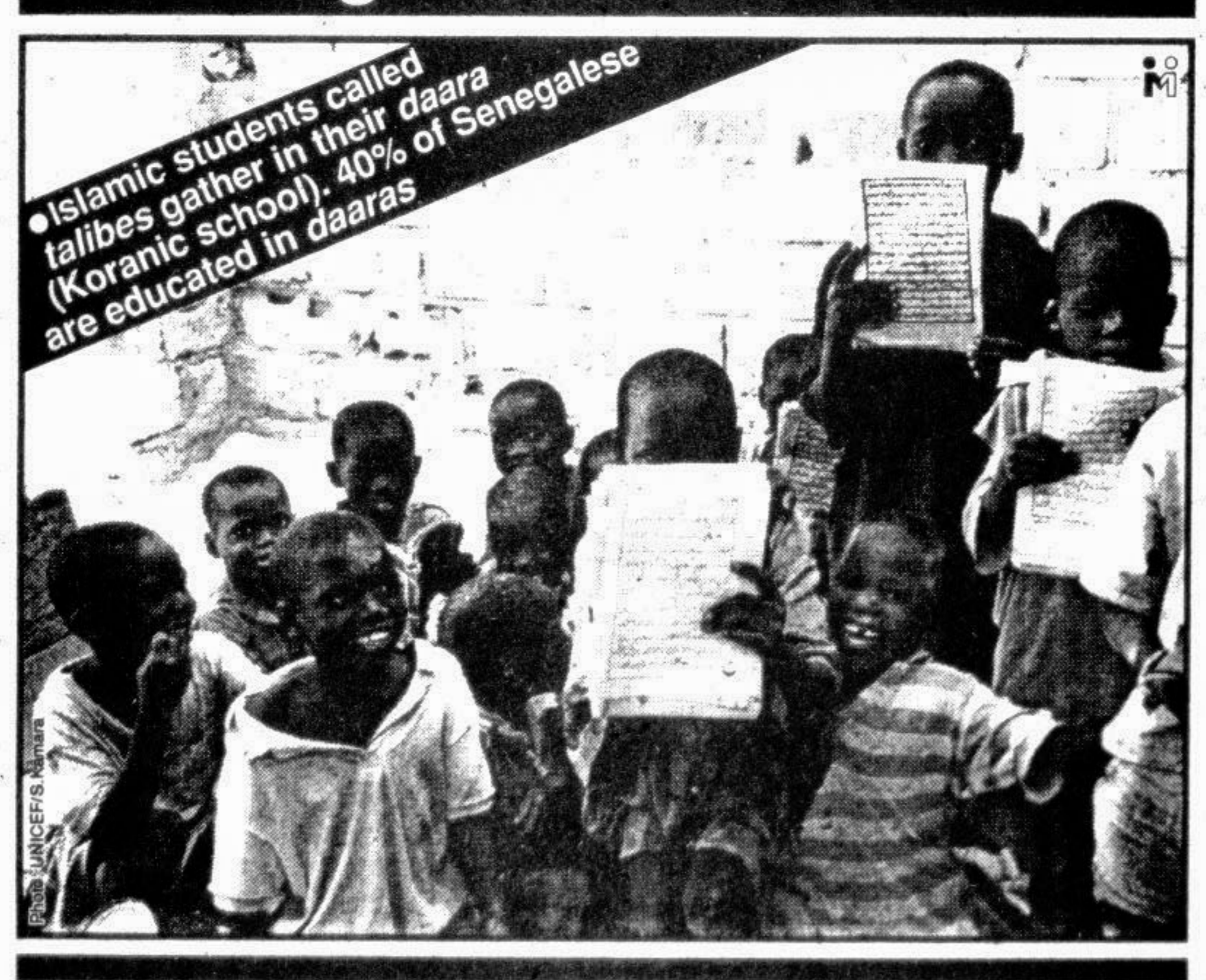
"The women are the most involved, the most active," says Mamadou Wane of UNICEF. "The villages the migrant talibes come from have been targeted by the programme, and 40 community daaras have already been opened. They are supervised by local committees."

The programme is beginning to pay off. Throughout Senegal, more than 6000 talibes have gained free access to health centres and 45 have been trained as health assistants.

The programme, which is being closely studied by neighbouring Mali, will end in 1996. It may be renewed for another five years, but eventually the future of the daaras will be in the villagers' hands. It will take economic development and better rural schooling to eradicate the migrant talibe problem, but Ndioro Ndiaye, Senegal's Minister of Women, Children and Family, already sees a change in society.

"The community is reacting positively," she says. "I see fewer and fewer people giving seven sugar cubes to the talibes as their daily absolution. They are starting to understand that they have to give something more important, something that is really important."

Teaching the talibes



Communists Aim to Write Past Wrongs

Three-quarters of Nepalese women are illiterate, a situation which has come to be regarded as putting a break on development. Now, the government is stepping up its literacy drive, and putting more emphasis on informal education in local dialects.

by Mohan Mainali

FOR Nepal's Communist party government, it is not so much a case of class struggle as of struggle in the classroom.

The government has announced an ambitious programme to reduce illiteracy, which is among the highest in the world.

This is a break from the party's belief, dominant until a decade ago, that armed struggle was the only way of eradicating "the exploitation of the working class."

It also goes against the conventional wisdom of many Nepalese that literacy is unnecessary for subsistence farmers in isolated rural areas.

Such thinking has been perhaps the main reason for the failure of earlier campaigns. Universal literacy was set as a goal as early as the 1950s. In 1971 "education for all" was the cry. In 1985 "basic needs" became the slogan, with education specified as one of the basic needs of the Nepalese people.

But there was no commitment to turn the ringing declarations into reality. Today only 25 per cent of women are literate and 54 per cent of men.

Gradually, however, policy-makers have come to realise that literacy is a key to development. The Ministry of Agriculture, the Agriculture Development Bank and several international agencies back literacy programmes as a way of improving villagers' conditions. More than 240 non-government organisations (NGOs) are working on reducing illiteracy.

Says Keshev Lal Shrestha, a central committee member of the ruling party: "The party has come to realise that we can't eradicate underdevelopment and exploitation of the poor

people unless we can make them aware of it by educating them."

The new policy involves a second major shift of approach - a recognition that formal education will not do the job.

In Gorkha district, for example, about Rs20 million has been invested in schools which have been unable to produce even one student to take the examination required after five years of primary school.

In the face of such an appalling record, out-of-school instruction is seen as they only way forward.

"We are running literacy classes round the year," says Satya Bahadur Shrestha, acting chief of the National Non-formal Education Council. In previous campaigns classes were held for only six months to avoid interfering with agricultural work.

Three of the country's 75 districts are being subjected to an all-out drive to achieve universal literacy, says Shrestha, who expects results within two years.

The government is also at last experimenting with classes that make greater use of local dialects, ignored by previous campaigns. The country's geographic, ethnic and linguistic diversity poses problems - more than 36 dialects are spoken by about 50 ethnic groups living in isolated villages - but only if instructors insist on using a single, formal language, new thinking on "functional literacy" emphasises everyday vocabulary.

A major effort will be required to produce reading material in local dialects for new literates. Failure to do so will make the campaign unsustainable.

Chiz Kumar Shrestha of World Education, a US-based

NGO which has been working in Nepal for several years, is sceptical of the grandiose plans.

"Technically, it is feasible to make one million people literate every year," he says. "But the present management system is so poor that it cannot deliver the service in an efficient way."

"Verbal commitment is not enough. The government budget allocation does not match its ambitious literacy programme," he adds.

"The budget allocated for

non-formal education, which would benefit 60 per cent of the population, is less than 0.5 per cent of the total budget."

In response to the ruling party's instructions, the Finance Minister has increased the literacy programme budget by 37 per cent this year. But the allocation is equivalent to the cost of making less than 200,000 people literate.

- GEMINI NEWS Exchange rate: \$1=Rs49 About the Author: MOHAN MAINALI is a Nepalese journalist based in Kathmandu.

South Asian seven

Table showing illiterate population percentages for South Asian countries: Nepal (62% Male, 87% Female, 74% Total), Afghanistan (56% Male, 86% Female, 71% Total), Bangladesh (53% Male, 78% Female, 66% Total), Pakistan (53% Male, 79% Female, 65% Total), Bhutan (49% Male, 75% Female, 62% Total), India (38% Male, 68% Female, 52% Total), Sri Lanka (7% Male, 17% Female, 12% Total). Source: UNESCO, 1990 figures.

