

FOCUS

How Can Publishers Contribute to Publishing Books for Neo-literates

by Mohiuddin Ahmed

LITERACY is not enough. A literate may be a person who can just about comprehend the meaning of a few simple words. The big problem of all literacy work starts here, because it is not merely to teach people how to read but to be able to want to read, or to love to read which is important. There is no country in the world of which the same might not be said. The literate must be made a reader. The school system and the literacy programmes in Bangladesh have more than their share of lapsed readers. Above all, it would be the development of suitable literacy materials which could help sustain any literacy programme.

What is the present state of literacy materials development in Bangladesh? Are there problems of providing reading materials for both rural and urban neo-literates? What are some of the most needed reading materials necessary to sustain the post literacy programmes in the present situation in the country? These questions and concerns continue to vex not only the voluntary and non-government organisations but also the education authorities responsible for the government's literacy programmes. Research and investigations have been geared up in both the NGO and government sectors which have initiated literacy programmes both in the rural and urban areas.

It is satisfying to note that in Bangladesh materials development for literacy activities have received adequate attention during the past two decades. The situation had tremendously improved by the end of 1980s. In Bangladesh there is always the need to consider carefully how scarce resources can be used. Both the government and the NGOs have been developing strategies for a number of years to facilitate the imparting of programmes for literacy and to sustain it. Literacy classes also became the starting point for many NGOs in Bangladesh. Organisations in Bangladesh which are serious about post-literacy work were producing their own materials or had formed a close link with a larger organisation to gain access to its writing resources.

Both because the resources are scarce and because the skills and training in developing materials are also rather complex, the education planners have been looking at strategies and techniques to accelerate both writing and development process and the production and distribution process of the literacy materials. UNESCO and UNDP supported the government project undertaken in 1987. The Mass Education Programme (MEP) actually started in four upazilas in February 1988. The plan was to set up 60 centres in each of 64 selected upazilas in the first year, and to cover all 460 upazilas by the end of the period. The goal of the MEP was to increase the literacy rate of the 11- to 45-year-old age group to 60 percent by the year 2000. By June 1990, however, the programme had been extended to only 27 upazilas. Besides the centres run by the local government committees, a total of 35 NGOs are presently associated with the MEP. The plan accords high priority to the work of NGOs in literacy and recognises the value of the many NGOs working in the field.

From a survey of the materials produced by the various organisations in Bangladesh, it may be said that at least three general approaches are noticeable. They may be classified as:

a. **Social Upliftment Approach** which includes reading material designed to create awareness of individuals a democratic society and materials designed to educate people on health, nutrition, family



planning and other social issues. b. **Manpower Development Approach** includes such reading materials designed to give some vocational and trade information. These reading materials can help generate interests of the neo-literates in certain vocations and trades which may help them set up businesses or land jobs both in the urban and rural areas. They also include information about agriculture and livestock development. c. **The Information Update Approach** is the information dissemination approach which includes the Newsletters in large and the pictorial magazines informing through cartoons and illustrations.

The Paradoxical Situation

The question now is who are the producers and publishers of the reading materials for the neo-literates? How are they distributed? It is significant to note here that almost all the neo-literacy materials developed and published so far in Bangladesh have been done by the government agencies and NGOs who are operating literacy programmes.

According to the Association of Development Agencies in Bangladesh (ADAB) Directory (1987) almost 53 percent of the NGOs stated that their work included running of literacy centres. Here, it may also be safely concluded that the efforts put forth both by the govt. and the non-govt. organisations did not produce sufficient readers and thus create a reasonable demand for inducing private or commercial publishers to venture to risk any capital investment in the area of publishing for neo-literates.

On the other hand the education system of the country in primary and secondary levels did not create any clientele for reading for pleasure which would induce the private publishers to invest and make a contribution. The paradoxical situation of producing neo-literates on one hand and running a state education programme with no clientele for reading for pleasure or no demand for reading matter on the other hand, meant that Bangladesh produced its share of those who learnt to read but don't read, thus the lack of literature is not to be blamed for nearly as much as is commonly assumed; for literature or reading materials become available when there is really a demand for them, no matter how great the poverty. So, a part of the blame must be laid on an education system which neglects almost entirely the teaching of

reading outside the textbook.

Publishers' Share of Responsibility

The greater part of the Bangladeshi publishing industry is geared towards the production of textbooks for schools and colleges. This part of the industry acts as 'printing contractors' to the National Curriculum and Textbook Board (NCTB) which make available camera ready copies of books to the so-called publishers whose investments are at no risk as the books are prescribed for use in schools. Further, textbooks up to class V are made available free of cost to students in the government schools. This part of the publishing industry is so preoccupied with producing 'help books' and 'note books' for the government prescribed textbooks that it has developed its own vested interest and, therefore, strongly opposed the present government's decision to privatise textbook publishing (initially at the secondary level) which would demand professionalism and risk-taking and hence competition on the part of the publishers.

However, the industry also consists of a small section of enterprising publishers, devoted to creative publishing and who have the potential to develop professionally and contribute to the development of literacy materials, provided they receive adequate support from the government's education programme and Mass Education Programme (MEP). Given adequate opportunity for training and support in marketing, some of these publishers are bound to make their desired entry in this area of publishing.

The Most Needed Reading Materials

Now the question may be asked as to what are the most needed reading materials for the new literates? With the materials presently available, are the new literates able to learn to participate all activities of the society? Are books and materials now being produced and published by the NGOs and other agencies suitable to meet the 'book hunger' of the new literates? The answers, if any, would probably be in the negative. It has been observed that most of the materials being produced by the government and non-government organisations are based on the three main approaches mentioned earlier in this article. The donor usually decides about the contents of the book. For example if the books are funded by WHO or UNESCO or by the USAID the contents would probably be about health, nutrition, family planning or agriculture, prevention of diseases etc. This is neither functional literacy nor a concept-

building approach. The most needed reading materials should include literature on concepts of self-respect and self-worth which is the first step towards overcoming poverty — books which give the reader a sense of history and identity, and develop the reader's interest in his environment, both physical and social, literature on moral and social values is likely to sustain the reading habits of the new literates.

Some NGOs are producing adapted or plagiarised versions of foreign books. This is only a cut-and-paste exercise. Writing and illustrations skills which would help produce books which sustain the interest of the readers needs to be imparted to writers and illustrators. No doubt, this would be a time-consuming and expensive process, but it would help produce the most sustaining reading material. Writers and illustrators must be people who have been involved with neo-literates for some time, and who can write and draw creatively in order to motivate the readers.

Although some skills development activities have already begun in Bangladesh they are still isolated efforts. A critique of the literacy effort points out that there is very little experience of sharing, coordination or effort for continuum on the part of both the non-government and government organisations presently operating literacy programmes. A coordination effort should begin forthwith.

Suggestions of Improvement in Other Areas

Distribution and dissemination of the existing materials is inadequate due to the absence of a suitable infrastructure for distribution. The government needs to find necessary funds for setting up an effective physical infrastructure such as warehouses or depots at the upazila levels for book distribution. Such a distribution network could also cater to the needs of the commercial publishers. Lack of an effective distribution network is indeed a major obstacle for the publishing industry of Bangladesh.

Bangladesh was yet to develop an effective library network. Some form of a public library system is, however, in operation. Library grants need to be increased with a component to give specialised service to the new literates. Multiple copies of literacy materials along with audio-visual support can become a very effective means to motivate readers to come to read books at the library and thus help sustain literacy.

The custom of receiving free books at the government schools and at the literacy centres could, in the end, act as a negative factor in the development of a 'book buying culture'. Readers should be encouraged to buy their own books, if necessary, at a token price. Subsidised books should always carry a notice declaring that the price was subsidised or else it would appear to be a price distortion. Because books produced by private commercial publishers cost more and are priced higher, the readers are likely to be confused about the mark up in price.

Private publishers may be encouraged by a buy-back scheme of the government and the NGOs. This would help the publishers develop professionally so that their services may be commissioned by NGOs and other literacy programmes for producing literacy materials.

A regular training programme for development of skills for the writers, illustrators, designers, and printers should be a national priority. Writing for neo-literates demands special skills and therefore professional trainers from countries which have successfully produced literacy materials, may be employed for training. This would expedite development in this area.

No More Rwandas

by Nicholas Dunlop

Marie is a schoolgirl. She has no family. She saw her parents, brothers and sisters killed with machetes. The militiamen took the infant sister she was carrying and clubbed the baby to death. When she was attacked in her turn, she survived by pretending to die. No help came. No one tried to stop it.

ALL of us watched, feeling sickened and powerless, as the same scene was acted out in Rwanda again and again. More than five hundred thousand people were murdered. When help came, such as it was, it came too late.

It wasn't the first time the world has watched from the sidelines while the innocent have died. One thousand five hundred children have been murdered in cold blood in Sarajevo by Serb snipers and gunners. No one has arrested the murderers. The killing continues.

It doesn't have to be this way. A high-level commission of 28 distinguished women and men from all parts of the world called the Commission on Global Governance, co-chaired by Prime Minister Ingvar Carlsson of Sweden and former Commonwealth Secretary-General Shridath Rampal, has come forward with proposals for an international system that could prevent future Rwandas and Bosnias.

The UN would have an early warning system to identify conflicts that could lead to bloodshed.

Time is short. In more than one country the danger signs of impending bloodshed are there. Burundi, Rwanda's next-door-neighbour, is on the brink of civil war. So is Africa's largest nation, Nigeria. There, a brutal military dictatorship is holding the winner of a demo-

PREVENTING GENOCIDE AND WAR



Reducing Gender Disparity through the Media

by Aasha Mehreen Amin

ONE of the most powerful agents of change is the media. The role of the media is especially significant in contributing towards gender equity, and women's involvement in decision making. This was the overriding theme of August 14th's lively discussion meeting arranged by CIDA (Canadian High Commission). With an assortment of participants, including print and electronic media journalists, TV artists and writers, various arguments were put forward.

Maheen Sultan who acted as coordinator of the meeting, highlighted some of the issues related to gender equality that have been discussed by various groups organized by CIDA. Gender inequalities, she pointed out, were due to the unequal relationship of men and women dictated by social constructs. "Women's rights are a social and development issue, we have to talk of structural changes". She mentioned some of the goals chalked out at one of these meetings including elimination of all forms of discrimination against women; equality in all spheres (legal, economic, political etc); participation in public and private spheres; equal participation in family, society and state levels. All these areas should be supported by the media, she added.

Maleka Begum a senior journalist at Bhorer Kagoj pointed out that women from the grassroots to the highest level have great expectations about the role of the media in promoting their cause. She said that in the case of the print media for example, positive advancement depends a lot on how women are projected. In the case of the prostitution issue Mahila Parishad protested vehemently against newspapers print-

ing the pictures of prostitutes asking why pictures of the men going to prostitutes were not printed. Journalists, she said, should also be more informed about women's rights in order to be able to report effectively. She praised the role of the mufassil correspondents who played an active role in informing the public about how fatwas were persecuting women and violating their basic rights.

One of the criticisms against the print media has been that it has the tendency to use images of women in a negative way. Ferdous Azim a Professor of Dhaka University and member of Nari Pokkha commented that newspapers often use cheap images of women in order to attract readers. We must learn how to counteract this tendency of newspapers who are more interested in increasing their readership rather than promoting gender equality.

To this, Baby Moudud, a senior journalist of Ittefaq, gave the example that given the choice between the picture of a beauty pageant and that of a procession of women protesting something, most newspapers would prefer to print the picture of the pageant in the front page.

Mahfuzullah, creator of BTV's Manabadhikar and a senior journalist, pointed out the need for training journalists about the use of certain words, and about refraining from those that are actually gender biased. Subjects like rape should be reported with veracity and not titillation.

Another criticism against the print media that was pointed out at the meeting was that it did not focus enough on issues related to women. Sabir Mustafa, Associate Editor of the Financial Times, explained that the reason behind this was that newspapers in general give

first priority to hard news, most of which do not comprise gender issues. But lately, he admitted, some of the newer newspapers have made an effort to give special attention to women and development issues.

Ultimately, however, in a country where the majority of people cannot read, it is the electronic media that can reach out to them. Tarana Halim, a TV artist and legal consultant to MIDAS stressed that TV can play an important role in making women aware of their rights. Women should know what specific legal steps can be taken when such rights are violated. Women's legal issues could also be included in the syllabi of schools; for example, a chapter can be devoted to basic legal rights. But it must be remembered continued Halim, that the laws themselves have to be reformed and amended to reflect gender equality. As for the various forms of media, if they were united in their commitment to women's empowerment then they could be more effective.

Going back to television's role, Tarana Halim pointed out that TV dramas could be used to send the correct messages. "Instead of showing a wife giving up her job because her husband did not like it, why don't they show something positive, like the story of a successful woman entrepreneur" she said. This, she added would encourage and inspire women.

Nasreen from Helen Keller International, added that the media should report on the silent, sporadic women's movements all over Bangladesh. Journalists in rural areas should be in constant touch with such events. Zubaida Gulshanara, a writer, criticized the current practice of the media of using stereotyped images of women

for promotional purposes. "The media should play a more educational role," she said, "and show more of their accomplishments." She also commented that even within the writers circles there was a subtle undercurrent of sexual discrimination.

Another important media, perhaps the most far reaching is the non-formal or traditional media, pointed out Natasha Ahmed from Nari Grontho Probratana. This includes all forms of folk art — songs, jatra etc.

Cinema, another non formal medium, has great scope for influencing people and promoting gender equality, commented Sabir Mustafa, adding however, that at present it was just the opposite with very sexist images of women being shown in films.

Speaking on the role of the radio, Abu Taher, Deputy Director of Radio Bangladesh, emphasized the importance of educating through entertainment which was the most effective way of making people aware of gender disparity. The various target groups should be identified such as illiterate, semi-illiterate, literate etc and programmes should be catered to them accordingly.

The various ideas expressed at this informal discussion indicated that the media as a whole, whether print, electronic, formal or traditional, have enormous scope to make a difference in changing people's attitudes and influencing their ideas on women's rights and status.

It is not just about reporting more on women's issues. It is about reporting them effectively and projecting an image of women not just as defined by traditional patriarchal dictates but as human beings capable of taking their own decisions and enjoying the same rights and privileges as their male counterparts.



TILL date numerous meetings and discussions were held between the mainstream political forces, but no rapprochement was possible because of 'not-to-allow-concessions' stand by either of the quarters. Another constitutional problem that arose with the absentee members of the parliament took more time than needed to see through the matter peacefully resolved. The exercise of the Presidential reference to Supreme Court of the issue seemed to have resolved only one part of the problem leaving the question of caretaker government to be settled by political parties.

The Political Crisis : Seeking a Formula

by Helal Kabir Chowdhury

Then came the days of the expression of views and opinions in the form of formula by well respected legal experts of the country to the long-standing dispute over the neutral caretaker government. Their suggestions, that is, ways and means to get the national politics in the right direction generated substantial interest and enthusiasm

in the minds of the commoners. The experts who opined and suggested on the various aspects of the problem are no mean personalities whose expertise can just not be shirked by policy makers and legislators. They have expressed themselves through their tested political acumen and set examples of honorary legal expositions. Neither quarter can overtly or covertly ignore their formula as most of them contain substance for a political resolution.

A suggestion has come from the pen and prodence of Barrister Ishiaq Ahmed. When Barrister Ahmed gave some inkling of the formula the law-makers expressed enthusiasm and Speaker Sheikh Razzak Ali hinted that he should come up with a complete proposal. Then came prompt response from the noted lawyer who on the very next day elaborated his formula. Will it be difficult to find 'neutral non-partisan persons' coming through bye-elections for all the vacant seats or a limited number of seats who are to form the caretaker government for holding the general elections? If it is only ten from whom the Prime Minister will be chosen, it is possible to find out that number. Barrister Ishiaq in his offering has covered all

the relevant aspects stating among others, "Bye-elections could be announced to fill all the vacant seats or only to fill the number of seats equivalent to the number of persons who are to form the agreed cabinet."

Both the BNP and Awami League had shown positive attitude towards the formula but it did not receive any significant reference in their meets. It seems this much talked about formula had its natural death by now.

Parliament is the custodian of the sacred Constitution and the Speaker is the forerunner in that end. It is expected of him to play a more vital role than noticed. He should not frequently descend on others but create instances for his successors in the years to come.

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