

Political leaders should take initiative to boost adult literacy

Dr Harbans tells *The Daily Star*

SHEIKH SABIHA ALAM

Dr Harbans Singh Bhola is currently professor emeritus at Indiana University, USA. A former professor of education at the School of Education in the university, he is internationally acclaimed for his research on the evaluation of educational systems, adult literacy and its pertinence to sustainable development.

He has also served as a consultant to Unesco in its Experimental World Literacy Programme in China, Tanzania and various countries in southern Africa. In his earlier career, Dr Harbans worked in India. He had a passionate commitment to adult education, which is manifest in his extensive and widely read publications, a number of which have been contracted by Unesco, totalling about 350. In addition to his writing, Dr Harbans has travelled widely and is a frequently sought after consultant to may international organisations working on education, specifically adult literacy.

Dr Harbans has won the Unesco-UIE International Award for literacy research for 2004-05, which focused on 'Adult Literacy for Sustainable Development'.

He is now in Dhaka to participate in a literacy week (November 10-16), organised by the Friends in Village Development, Bangladesh in association with Unesco, the Swiss Agency for Development Cooperation (SDC) and Brac Institute of Educational Development.

In an interview with The Daily Star on Friday, Dr Harbans spoke about the current status of adult literacy in Bangladesh.

Daily Star: What is your observation about the current status of adult literacy programme?

Dr Harbans: I think the Bangladesh government has imparted all its concentration for primary education. Even in the Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP), there is no mention of adult literacy. If anyone raises the question, they would say adult education is implied there.

DS: Should we need to formulate a new policy on the issue?

Dr Harbans: Look, policies often named to describe and lead, as it is sometimes mystifying and misleading. The national strategy paper adopted in Bangladesh is not new. The model is indeed not unique to Bangladesh. All the developing countries grouped as poor by the World Bank have been strongly encouraged to follow the same model.

DS: Do you want to say the model, in any sense, is hindering the literacy programme?

Dr Harbans: Obviously. In Sub-Saharan Africa, the children need to pay for their uniforms and books. The

neo-liberalisation strategy compelled the pro-poor people to buy the basic needs. I firmly believe that the education strategy of the government has to be kept away from the grip of international programmes like EFA (Education For All).

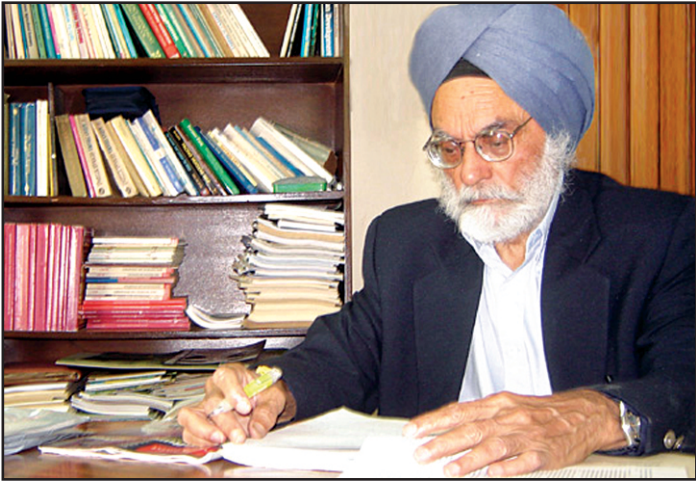
DS: Was there any adverse effects of the EFA programme on the national strategy?

Dr Harbans: In my own country India, the allocation for adult literacy programme has been transferred to basic education and thus millions of adults failed to get education. You see,

rights thinking that it would only bring them troubles. So, isn't it prudent to pretend that you are not aware of those problems other than inviting troubles?

DS: As we came to know you have field-level experience in India, Sub-Saharan countries and China...

Dr Harbans: I started my career as an education ministry official in the 60s. I got an opportunity to work with the poor, illiterate people, and it is then that I practically realised that all of us are not contemporary although we are from the same time. My work with these people opened my eyes and I



Dr Harbans Singh Bhola

you need resources for this. Not millions of dollars, rather billions.

DS: Is it possible for Bangladesh to carry out such an expensive programme?

Dr Harbans: Why not, while Bangladesh has earned \$4.8 billion remittance in this fiscal year. Implementation of universal adult literacy programme is not at all impossible. What you need is to establish an autonomous foundation for education.

DS: Do you mean the expatriates will carry the onus of the programme?

Dr Harbans: No, not only the expatriates. First of all, it has to be kept in mind that the welfare state is bound to meet the citizens' fundamental rights.

DS: Still the literacy rate in Bangladesh is 41.1.

Dr Harbans: Yes. It is because people do not demand, and the leaders do not bother to offer. You see, the poor and illiterate mass is capable of understanding only the felt needs. "Absence of pain" is synonymous to ultimate happiness to them. Leaders do not want to let people feel the needs of education. Maybe they think it is wise not to aware people of their basic

truly felt an urge to do something for them.

DS: Thus started your journey?

Dr Harbans: Yes. I was a Ph.D. student at the Ohio State University under Professor Edgar Dale who invented the Dale Chall readability formula. When I came back, I started working with the famous 'Literacy House' at Lucknow.

DS: What sort of work you had to do then?

Dr Harbans: It was 1965 when I got involved with the Literacy House, one of the best NGOs in the world. Dr Welthy Fisher, a missionary, was its founder. I worked there as the director of the school of social writing with the slogan: "If you can read and write, you can also be a writer. Perhaps you cannot be Kazi Nazrul Islam or Tagore but surely good enough a person who can write for good social purpose.

DS: And what was the response among the illiterate villagers?

Dr Harbans: Inspired by the 'Literacy House', education ministry initiated an annual prize for social writing and every year the books published from the Literacy House won the prize.

DS: What do you think, how can we

start the movement in immediate present?

Dr Harbans: I have said earlier. The state has to sponsor such programme. The political leaders should take the initiative. In India, Gandhi and Nehru started the movement and in respect of Tanzania, I must recall the role of President Julius Nyerere. He realised the urgency of adult literacy. He wanted the country to move towards development on two equally strong educational legs: adult education and school education.

DS: You have been to Tanzania...

Dr Harbans: Yes, in mid 1968 when I started with the Unesco at the training and evaluation wing. I went to Tanzania for the 'Experimental work oriented literacy programme'. I left Unesco in 1970, but from then on I have been serving with the Unesco.

DS: You might know the government of Bangladesh had a five-year plan, which was a total waste of money.

Dr Harbans: Yes, there will be waste and pilfering, you have to take it for granted in all the third world countries. Yet, the state has to go ahead with objectives.

DS: Apart from the state, which sector can participate in the programme?

Dr Harbans: You got the most vibrant and committed civil society in the world who can put pressure on the government to do effectively.

DS: And the corporate society?

Dr Harbans: You must not forget that what the corporate society does is only for profit. The donors and NGOs along with the government can play an important role. The media has a significant role to play. You can't keep millions of people shut from the print media.

DS: Can we start the movement from tomorrow, Sir?

Dr Harbans: Why not? Start igniting the conscience of poor people. I know people need food, they can't eat words. But surely literacy radicalises, wakes up people, and mingles them in the stream of development and democracy. And you people, who have the pens in the hands, keep on writing, pointing out the lacking of national strategy paper.

DS: Tell us about Bangladesh – your affiliation with the country.

Dr Harbans: This is my first visit to Bangladesh, but the relation is age old – you might term it 'lifelong'. I cannot say any ray of hope for adult literacy yet, but I hope the nation has the ability to strengthen the movement.