

State of literacy in Bangladesh - Challenges and Prospects

Tasneem Athar, Deputy Director, CAMPE
Good morning and welcome to all of you to the roundtable on, "State of Literacy in Bangladesh - Challenges and Prospects" being organised by The Daily Star and CAMPE. Today's roundtable is an attempt to endorse the power of literacy. Without education there is no scope of eradicating poverty-literacy is power, literacy is freedom.

Mahfuz Anam, Editor The Daily Star
I am not an expert in this field. I can just express my eagerness on behalf of The Daily Star to work with you on this issue. We, The Daily Star, believe that literacy is instrumental to our national development.

Ziaus Sabur, Institute of Educational Development, BRAC University
Literacy is envisioned in NFE policy framework as ability to read, understand, interpret, communicate and compute in verbal and written form which helps individual to develop their potentials, knowledge and ability to participate in social and economic development. It addresses learning needs of educationally disadvantaged persons under the scope of literacy, lifelong learning, economic skills etc. According to Education Policy 2009, 49% of 15 years age is literate and 36 million additional people need to be covered by 2014. Government statistics shows that 23 million people of various age groups have been exposed to literacy in the '90s.

An important statement to consider is that, "it is necessary to recognize how the concept of literacy has evolved tremendously in recent times and the 'alphabetization centered' limited and dichotomous definition of literacy has given way to one that emphasises participation to a wide spectrum of lifelong learning."

Through our decades long experience we can summarise some key strategic lessons. They are : in the first decade after Jomiten, NFE meant short term basic literacy, in the second decade literacy was linked with livelihood skills, the strategy of reaching maximum people with minimum resources focused on literacy alone is not viable and literacy programme needs to be implemented on the basis of long term commitment in an integrated package.

According to the above circumstances the 3 key questions to be grappled with are : 1) How can an effective institutional mechanism be put in place where lessons learned could be progressively applied? 2) How and to what degree defining, planning and implementing literacy under the broader framework of NFE and formal education can be merged? And 3) How can literacy be transformed into a multi-dimensional intervention that can contribute to sustainable poverty reduction?

Mr. Habibur Rahman, Director, Education, Save the Children-USA

As education is a set of cultural activities, so we have to integrate culture with education. Otherwise, local people might not accept it. The definition of literacy should be very concise. It only includes the skills of reading, writing, and counting. We have to identify the illiteracy pockets just like poverty pockets. In that case the adibashis, ethnic groups, coastal people will get priority.

A Roundtable on, "State of Literacy in Bangladesh - Challenges and Prospects" was organised by the Campaign for Education (CAMPE) and The Daily Star on 2 September, 2010. The roundtable was attended by Mr. Motahar Hossain, State Minister, Ministry of Primary and Mass Education as the chief guest and other distinguished personalities including teachers and educationists. We publish important excerpts of the discussions.

-- Editor.



NFE project, a teacher gets a very meagre salary per month such as BDT 500 or 650, which is even less than the income of a day labourer. With this little salary, no commitment is expected from them. We have to integrate culture with education. Culture should be reflected in education.

Mohammad Mohsin, Advisor, Early Learning, UNICEF Bangladesh

UNICEF along with BBS made a survey named "multiple indicator cluster survey" which has identified some pockets. Resource should be distributed more to areas where illiteracy is high. We should go for programme approach rather than project approach. In our country, trainers usually have 6 months training and after that a follow up training of 3 months. However, this is not sufficient. We have to build up training centers for them. The materials of NFE are not good. Planning should come from the

assessment for Basic Competence' where we observe that these crash programmes did not work.

M. Hafizuddin Khan, Trustee Board Chairman, Transparency International-Bangladesh

We have problems in our formal education system along with non-formal education. We have heard a lot about education policy. It has been implemented. Where is the output? The process of new project has already been started. Is it going to be another TLM or total loss of money? The literacy programme should be comprehensive and be taken up in consultation with all.

Professor Zillur Rahman Siddiqui, Former Advisor, Caretaker Government, Bangladesh

Removing illiteracy of 36 million people is not possible overnight through crash programmes. Our previous experience suggests

Dr. Badiul Alam Majumder, Country Representative, The Hunger Project, Bangladesh

I want to share an experience, which is in Gazipur. Before the TLM, we (the Hunger Project) worked with the Gazipur district commissioner in eradicating illiteracy. We got good responses and many volunteers worked with us. It was a massive movement. When the TLM came, money spoiled everything. This is the output of money driven approach. I can assure you that volunteer based program can achieve success. Ehsanul Houque has written a book which makes a person capable of reading newspaper within 3 or 4 weeks. We are spreading it throughout the country. This is high time that we should think out of the box. We do not need 3000 crores taka. We need a small amount of money for every union. We are talking about the armed forces but why not the Student League? They should stop fighting among themselves and join with others in the literacy campaign. We need literacy movement to consolidate our democracy.

Professor Salma Akhter, Director, Institute of Education and Research

In fact, I was thinking how we could involve the students. With the help of this generation, we can make a national brigade. We should make institute of mass and adult education in universities. We do not need a uniform model for every group rather than we should make different plans and different materials for different target groups. Government should identify the indicators of education.

Kamol Sen Gupta Deputy-Executive Director, CODEC

I am a field worker and I work in coastal areas. The fishermen used to tell me that they may be illiterate but they are not uneducated. They are doing business and they are sending their children to school. Previously it has been observed that in the time of a new project some new NGO emerge with the help of some bureaucrats. But, the honest and good NGOs are not recognised for their work. CAMPE as an experienced organ should come forward for the work.

Abul Momen Regional Editor, The Daily Prothom Alo

I will not tell those people illiterate rather than they should be called underprivileged. We have a lot of survey on that but we need some good research. Again, after the crash program the people do not have any scope to utilise their knowledge. Therefore, some appropriate literature should be made for those people. We can divide the entire country based on five regional languages and literature or newspapers have to be published on those languages. There can be hall rooms or auditoriums in every union where women and children have separate days for their participation and in that way a practice will be continued in every family.

Rasheda K Chowdhury, Executive Director, CAMPE

The whole campaign of literacy should be decentralised and the local government bodies in cooperation with non-government organisations should deal with illiteracy while the government



We can associate the students, students' political groups, and the armed forces with the literacy campaign.

Tapan Kumar Das, Programme Manager, CAMPE
Our previous experience of Total Educational Movement shows that it fails to eradicate illiteracy though the government declares those project areas illiteracy free. When we talk about the standard of literacy or constitutional obligation of literacy, we should clearly define what is literacy.

Dr. Shamsuzzaman Khan, DG, Bangla Academy
I want to emphasize on UNESCO's credo of linkage between education and culture. Curriculums should take into account local traditions.

Prof. Hannana Begum, Former Principal Eden College
I want to raise a question that if ensuring literacy is a constitutional obligation then why literacy the programme is project based? Government should consider literacy as a continuous approach rather than a one-off approach. Again, Local government should take the lead of implementing education at grass root levels.

Prof. M.M Akash, Department of Economics, University of Dhaka

We should accept a limited connotation of literacy to keep with the realities. Incorporating life-skills based education in literacy programme is ambitious. It is better to have full concentration on literacy issues rather than wide-ranging programmes. There should be only one primary school for a radius of two to three kilometers. The government should prioritise the pockets where the people are the most deprived, like ethnic communities.

Professor Mesbah Kamal, Dept. of History, University of Dhaka

We should set a realistic goal and the timeframe may be up to 2020. Following the poverty mapping, we should target poverty pockets. As an example, we can talk about the sweeper's community. They are ignored in the literacy campaign. We should recognise education as a fundamental right in the constitution. It is the state's responsibility to educate its people. Another point, in the multilingual context it is important that learners should be given an active choice about the language in which they want to learn. The government should allocate more budget to education. In

local government and the NGOs will work as helping hands. Central government should not control but coordinate with the local governments.

Dr. Shafiqul Islam, Director, BRAC Education Program, BRAC

A specific target, age group, and standard education should be set before going for any new campaign. Media can play a vital role in that part. We have very little research on education compared with the other South Asian and South American countries. We can integrate technology by providing the learning materials through internet, multimedia etc.

Dr. Siddiqur Rahman, Professor, Institute of Education and Research

Everything is decided by the bureaucracy. We should keep in mind that literacy is a part of primary education. The traditional system is like that we are bringing some people in the name of NFE and providing them education for 9 or 12 months. In that case, there is a question of sustainability. After couple of months they forget what they have learnt. They should be given scope to utilise their knowledge. The government can build recreation centres in every village where people can have access to newspapers, booklets on agriculture and health and internet. There should be extensive discussion on the government's plan regarding literacy, otherwise it would be another waste like the TLM. We can integrate the degree students who will have a teaching session for 6 months before their final exams. We can also involve our armed forces in this programme.

Professor Muhammad Ibrahim, Chairman, Centre for Mass Education in Science

We have had a lot of discussions, and two things look problematic to me. First, supply driven things will not work. People are now too busy. Therefore, the solution should be demand driven. We have already integrated formal education with technical education and find a good response because it is connected with their livelihood. We have seen the extreme level of supply driven policy in TLM. District Commissioner or Police Super sends some trainers and after that the Prime Minister announces the region as illiteracy free. Until and unless you can create intensive demand drive, there will be no output of crash programmes. Education Watch has done a survey named 'As-

that local governments along with NGOs should do the work. The government has to give proper training to the teachers and prepare the curriculum in line with the country's culture before launching any program.

Brig Gen Shahedul Anam Khan, Editor, Defense and Strategic Affairs, The Daily Star

Armed forces can be an active force in the literacy programme. In fact, when I was in command of an independent formation 25 years ago I tried to establish a practice where our soldiers had to provide teaching in primary schools in their village during their yearly leave at least for half that period. It proved to be an effective example. The soldiers are S.S.C pass and unit education instructors are B.A pass. Therefore, they can easily apply their teaching skills at the primary level.

Jyoti S. Gomez, Director, KARITAS Education Program

I want to restart the programme as a movement. In 1973, Bangabandhu announced 35 thousands schools as primary schools where private initiatives played a vital role. Even today in Bangladesh, there are so many good educational institutions that have been established by individuals. Previously we have seen that in the time of different projects some NGO emerge overnight. Experienced NGOs should be given the task. They can utilise their strong network throughout the country. Even they can propose for any change in the education policy after doing their research. We have to make the network of NFE stronger than before.

Farah Kabir, Country Director, Action Aid, Bangladesh

I want to press forward the issue of the right to education as a constitutional obligation. In the case of obligatory primary level education we found successful government initiative after it was recognised in the constitution. If the government really wants to improve the condition, then new infrastructure is not needed because we have plenty of cyclone centres and primary schools. However, we have to develop the number of trainers. In the villages there are four teachers for every 250 students who usually teach all the subjects. One facilitator should be there for 30 students. Bangladesh television (BTB) along with the Open University can arrange different programmes for the trainers. We have to allocate resources based on demographic and economic variation. The government should allocate 6% of total GDP for education.

leads the campaign as the planning, co-ordinating and monitoring authority. Activities should be movement-based not project-based. We can use information technology to build up better communication system for the literacy programme. However, success will depend on political commitment of the government. We are looking forward to a significant declaration from the government in this regard on the coming Literacy Day.

Mr. Rezaul Quader, Director General, BNFE

The government is successfully continuing two projects named 'How to Reach' and PLC through NGO's management. We have followed a transparent selection process of the NGOs. Our mapping shows that around 3.23 crore people are illiterate between the age of 11 and 45. We have formulated special policy for the three hill districts based on their cultural heterogeneity. TLM programme was not absolutely a losing project as it helped boost enrolment in primary schools. Bangladesh won award from UNESCO for this achievement. We have also achieved good results from PLC -2 project in Naryangang district. Now the project extends to Meherpur, Jhalokathi, Barisal and Potuakhali. We need more budget, more transparency and more commitment to education as a fundamental right.

Mr. Motahar Hossain, Hon'ble State Minister, Ministry of Primary and Mass Education

To call attention to education sector three more ministries have been formed out of the single Ministry of Education. We are trying to coordinate effectively. We have to go ahead following the trial and error method. Japan, Germany, and Turkey are successful examples in front of us. Funding becomes a major issue for implementing such programmes. The government is preparing an action plan and would start the literacy programme next year involving all. So we can hope for a good accomplishment.

Mr. Kazi Rafiqul Islam, Chairperson, CAMPE

To achieve our goal we have to set up a national independent authority, encompassing government, nongovernment organisations, and civil society, to work as a united national force. India has made a good use of this coordination. Another two points to be emphasised are efficient manpower distribution at different levels and flexibility of the curriculum concerning diverse realities.