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Literacy for a Learning Society: A Collective Effort with Broader Vision Needed

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Abstract

Based on the application of a purposefully designed test of literacy skills on a nationwide sample, the Education Watch established a benchmark for the literacy situation of the population 11 years and above in Bangladesh. Over a hundred investigators, half of them women, collected data and administered literacy tests on 13,145 people from 3,840 households in 268 rural and urban communities in all 64 districts in October and November 2002. Statistically valid and reliable estimates were made of literacy rates for the population 11 years and above and 15 years and above, as well as, separately for females and males, urban metropolitan centres and municipal areas, and rural areas of six divisions. The policy implications of the findings are also presented at the end. It is expected that the findings of this Education Watch would end the prevailing confusion about the literacy status of the population in the country and serve as the baseline for future planning and assessment of progress in literacy, nonformal education and lifelong education.

Introduction

This year marks the beginning of the United Nations Literacy Decade (2003–2012). The motto of the decade is “Literacy as Freedom.” The freedom to access the world of knowledge and information and to communicate freely with written words is taken for granted. The present reality is that more than 800 million people in the world do not know this freedom (UNESCO 2000). Majority of these people live in the developing countries – almost 400 million in the South Asian region (Haq and Haq 1998).

Bangladesh made progress in access to basic education, especially primary education, during the decade since the adoption of international EFA (Education for All) goals in Jomtien, Thailand in 1990 (WCEFA 1990). About 80 percent of the primary school age children are currently enrolled in schools, of which three quarters complete the full five-year cycle of primary education (Chowdhury *et al* 2002a). Gender parity in enrolment has been achieved simultaneously (Chowdhury *et al* 2002b). However, attendance of the students in classes and skills and quality of teachers remain seriously deficient, and thus overall achievement of the learners is far from the expectation (Alam and Haq 2001, Nath and Chowdhury 2001). Progress in enrolment has not been matched by improvement in quality of education.

Besides the provision of primary education through formal and non-formal means, there are other small and large-scale initiatives in youth and adult illiteracy. These include local initiatives by social organisations, literacy centres of the national NGOs, and literacy courses implemented by community and non-government organisations with assistance from the government Directorate of Non-formal Education (DNFE). In addition, the government launched a Total Literacy Movement (TLM) in 1994 with the aim of removing illiteracy from the country within a decade (Hussain 2000). According to DNFE, some 17 million people have participated in literacy programmes during 1994 to 2000 (Ahmed and Lohani 2002). As a result of all these activities, the government claimed that by 2002, two thirds of all adults in the country have become literate (*The Daily Star* 2002). Without an independent evaluation seven districts have been announced ‘free from illiteracy’ (JBIC 2002). Scepticism about the claim about achievement in literacy rate is widespread (Ahmed 2002).

Major source of literacy statistics at the national level is the decennial censuses conducted by the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics. The definition of literacy has changed during last sixty years; however, the mode of collecting information remained the same. An individual able to read and write a simple letter in any language has been considered as literate since 1981. Reported literacy is recorded through population censuses by asking an adult member of a household to report about the literacy skills of all members of his/her household. The *Education Watch 2001* also generated literacy statistics at the national level through sample survey using same definition and technique (Chowdhury *et al* 2002).

The evolution of concepts and practices in measuring adult literacy shows how it moved from measuring “simple literacy” to assessing a broad based “functional literacy”

(UNESCO 1957, 1962, 1995, OECD 1962, 1996). A dichotomous view of literacy (i.e., designating one as either literate or illiterate) is a popular one which remains the basis for much of literacy measurement as in censuses and surveys. Moreover, 'self-rating' is also another feature of dichotomous measurement. The view of literacy as a set of continuous skills has been adopted widely in recent years and assessment on the basis of a continuous scale has been conducted in a number of countries. These are carried out through sampling of the population. OECD sponsored International Adult Literacy Survey and the Assessment of Functional Literacy in Cambodia are two recent examples of such initiatives (Darcovich 2000, Hamilton and Barton 2000, Ministry of Youth Education and Sports Cambodia 2000).

The findings about the literacy rate from *Education Watch 2001* reinforced the prevailing view among concerned citizens about the need for clarifying the definition and establishing benchmark statistics about literacy. Thus an in-depth exploration of the state of literacy in the country was undertaken in *Education Watch 2002*. This paper presents summary of this exploration. The specific aims of this investigation are to estimate the proportions of the population that are at various levels of literacy, how literacy has been acquired, what uses are being made of it, and what the perceived expectations in post-literacy activities are. The socio-economic correlates of literacy have also been analysed.

Research Method

Definition and test development

The research team reviewed the definitions used for literacy nationally and internationally. It also examined existing curriculum of formal and non-formal provisions in respect of literacy objectives, and considered the socio-cultural context of the country and its current development stage. The research team agreed that proper importance should be given to functionality and effectiveness of literacy skills and their use in the community. The following definition of literacy was adopted for this study:

Possession of skills in reading, writing and numeracy related to familiar contents and contexts and the ability to use these skills in everyday life in order to function effectively in society.

For the first time in Bangladesh, literacy situation in the country was assessed through administering a literacy test on a nationwide representative sample of population 11 years and above – in contrast to the 'self reporting' method used in the population censuses and household surveys. Based on the above definition, a purposefully designed test instrument was developed through a pilot study. The test consisted of four essential skill components of literacy – *reading, writing, numeracy and use of these three skills in practical life situations*. A total of 24 question items were in the test, six for each component.

Measuring literacy

Recognizing the continuum of literacy skills and taking a pragmatic approach to conducting the assessment and to communicating the results in a policy relevant language, it was decided to categorize the population by four levels of literacy skills, viz., *non-literate, semi-literate, literate at the initial level* and *literate at the advanced level*. Total score of the literacy test was 100, equally distributed by skill components. The test instrument was designed in such a way that those falling in the category of literate at the initial level and literate at the advanced level could be designated as literate. Besides the literacy test instrument, three other questionnaires were used to collect demographic, educational, socio-economic and community-related information of the respondents.

Sampling

A four stage sampling strategy was adopted for the study, which allowed gender segregated valid and reliable estimates for six administrative divisions, metropolitan cities, and the municipalities. A total of 13,145 persons aged 11 years and above taken from 3,840 households of 268 villages/mahallahas in 64 districts were given the literacy test. Over 100 research assistants, half of them female, administered the test and collected necessary information. The test was administered in October-November 2002.

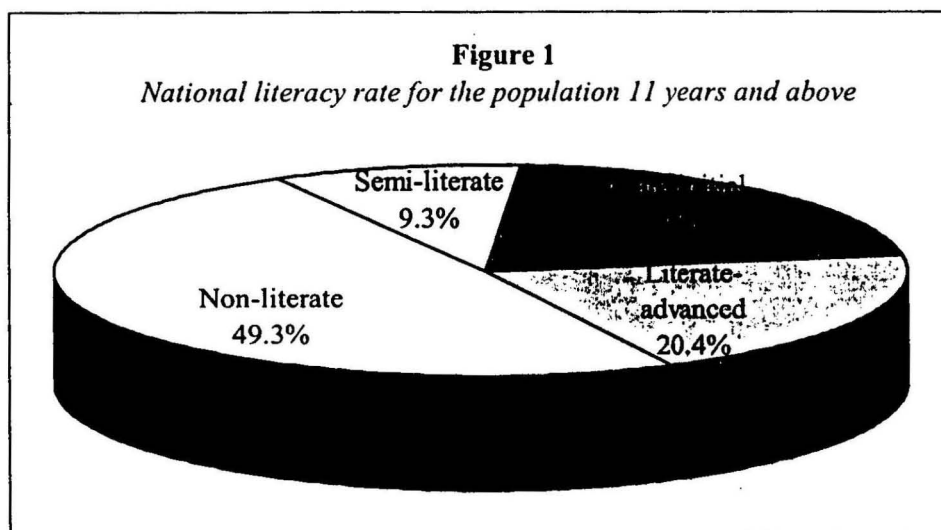
Data quality

A strict quality control protocol was applied to collecting and recording the data, assessing responses to the literacy test, and analysing all data. Assessment of quality of data through post-enumeration check revealed that data quality was good. Selection of items using the pilot study data ensured the reliability of each item. The reliability coefficient of the whole test was found to be 0.94.

Major Findings

The literacy test revealed that 41.4 percent of the population 11 years and above in Bangladesh are literate – 21 percent at the level of initial literacy skills and 20.4 percent with advanced literacy skills (Figure 1). Of the respondents under literacy test, about a half (49.3 percent) did very poorly (receiving less than a quarter of the total score) and was categorized as non-literate. Another 9.3 percent were semi-literate indicating that these people did not cross the threshold of minimum acceptable level of skills to be qualified as literate. People in the category of the non-literate and semi-literate did not have literacy skills that were useable in any practical way in life situations.

It is estimated that the population of Bangladesh 11 years and above is 92.8 million. The numbers falling into various literacy categories are as follows: 45.8 million non-literate, 8.6 million semi-literate, 19.5 million literate at the initial level, and 18.9 million literate at the advanced level.



The females lagged 12 percentage points behind the males in the literacy league table; the rates were 35.6 percent for the females and 47.6 percent for the males. Only 13.3 percent of the females and 28.1 percent of the males had advanced level literacy skills. The literacy rates for rural and urban respondents were 37.2 percent and 63.6 percent – with a difference of 26 percentage points. Such gap was seen both at the initial and the advanced level. A wide gap in the literacy performance of the respondents of different stratum was found. The respondents of the metropolitan cities did very well followed by those of municipalities; the rates were 69.5 percent and 59 percent respectively. Only a third of the respondents of rural Dhaka, Chittagong and Sylhet divisions were literate (Table 1). Less than a fifth (19.7 percent) of the urban slum residents were literate.

The literacy rate of the adult (population 15 years and above) was found to be 38.8 percent at the national level – 2.6 percentage points less than the literacy rate for population 11 years and above. The females lagged behind the males in all the eight strata (six rural divisions, metropolitan cities and municipalities).

Parental education, especially of the mothers, religious affiliation, occupation and income, access to communications media, and community infrastructure had strong correlation with the literacy status of the population. Three quarters of the people whose mothers have some education (classes I to V) were literate, whereas 70 percent of those whose mothers have no education were illiterate. Thirty eight percent of the households in the country have no literate person; in fourteen percent of the households all members are literate.

People acquired literacy skills in various ways, these include formal and nonformal primary schools, Total Literacy Movement (TLM), government assisted and NGO run centre-based approach, and receiving instruction at home. Primary education was found to be the principal means of acquiring literacy. However, even after five years of primary education, one-third of the children remain non-literate or semi-literate. This is a very

serious indictment of the quality of primary education in the country. Although it is expected that three years of schooling should be enough for achieving sustainable literacy skills, it is not the case for Bangladesh. The literacy rate was only 30.4 percent among those with three years of schooling. Nonformal primary schools were found to be more effective than the state owned as well as state-supported primary schools. It was found that six to seven years of schooling with present standard is required to achieve a sustainable literacy status for 80 percent of the population.

Table 1
Literacy rates of different subgroups of population

Sub-groups	11 years and above			15 years and above		
	Literacy	Initial	Advanced	Literacy	Initial	Advanced
Bangladesh	41.4	21.0	20.4	38.8	18.5	20.3
Female	35.6	22.3	13.3	32.0	19.2	12.7
Male	47.6	19.5	28.1	46.3	17.8	28.5
Rural Bangladesh	37.2	20.6	16.6	34.5	18.0	16.6
Urban Bangladesh	63.6	23.1	40.5	61.5	21.5	40.0
Rural Dhaka Division	35.2	20.0	15.2	32.1	17.7	14.4
Rural Chittagong Division	32.2	20.7	11.5	30.5	18.2	12.3
Rural Rajshahi Division	37.2	18.3	18.9	34.4	15.4	19.0
Rural Khulna Division	45.8	23.7	22.1	42.7	20.9	21.7
Rural Barisal Division	47.7	25.5	22.2	45.8	23.3	22.5
Rural Sylhet Division	33.6	20.3	13.3	30.4	17.5	13.0
Metropolitan cities	69.5	20.5	49.0	68.2	19.7	48.5
Municipalities	59.0	25.1	33.9	56.4	22.8	33.5

It was observed that exclusively non-school means of education including the Total Literacy Movement (TLM), and learning at home have a minor impact on overall literacy situation in the country. The literacy rate was 42.1 percent in the TLM implemented communities and 40.6 percent in other areas. The literacy rate for 11-45 years age group, which is the main targeted age group for TLM, showed practically no difference between TLM communities and the nation as a whole. The average literacy rate in the districts declared as 'free from illiteracy' was 48.2 50 percent; whereas for the other districts it is 40.8 percent.

Major uses of literacy skills, as expressed by the respondents, were personal written communication, reading documents and helping children in study. A good number of the literates also used their literacy skills to read books, newspapers and magazines for information and enjoyment, and in occupations and workplaces. Majority of the literates

perceived the need for training for occupational skills development. Special programmes for women and community education centres were demanded by about half of the literates.

Conclusion and Policy Implications

Literacy is a subject rife with symbolism and emotions. In the modern world, the incapacity to master the written word is a symbol of backwardness and underdevelopment for a society and an individual. We have seen, therefore, promises and efforts of governments and politicians to get rid of this unwelcome symbol. This probably explains repeated attempts to launch campaigns and movements against illiteracy in our part of the world and elsewhere. Almost all have been disappointing, but the politicians seem to fail to learn their lesson.

Historical experience shows that these campaigns have succeeded only in a few countries such as the former Soviet Union, China and Cuba, where these have been an essential component of an overall social and political revolution. In a few other countries, such as Tanzania, Nicaragua and Ethiopia where initial successes were claimed, but these petered out with the derailment of the respective revolution, depriving the educational movement its nourishing energy. (Deiner 1981, Jennings 1990, UNESCO and UNDP 1976)

Symbolic or not, education, and by the same token literacy, has come to be recognized as a human right by constitutional provisions of many countries and by international treaties. Literacy, as the tool for learning, is the core of any educational process, and thus the foundation for social, economic and personal development.

It is essential to go beyond the symbolism and to achieve real progress in literacy as the core of educational development of a nation. With this end in view, the skills and competencies to be earned in literacy have to be such that they make a difference in the learners' life. These have to open the world of knowledge and information to the learner. These have to enable a person to communicate with written words, not feel helpless when a child seeks help and guidance in his or her own pursuit of learning, to read for the sheer pleasure of it, to look up knowledge and information that one needs every day, and to continue to broaden one's world of knowledge and learning. The respondents in the study saw these as the uses of literacy.

Literacy, therefore, has to be an essential part of lifelong learning; part of an effort to turn every community into a learning community, the whole society into a learning society. In the learning community and the learning society, everyone will have the opportunity to pursue learning according to one's needs and inclinations, and every one will contribute to creating learning opportunities for others, as UNESCO's Edgar Faure Committee report *Learning To Be* put it as early as in 1972 (Faure 1972). This is also the promise of *Education for All* goals adopted in Jomtien in 1990 and re-affirmed in Dakar in 2000 (WCEFA 1999, UNESCO 2000). With this broad vision of literacy and education, *Education Watch* designed its investigation of the status of literacy in Bangladesh. The

aim was to get beyond the symbolism and tokenism to gauge real achievement of skills that can be used in life and can be developed further.

Policy Implications

The findings of the study, in the view of the Education Watch Team, provided a rich harvest of policy questions and policy guidance regarding the future course of literacy, continuing education, nonformal education and lifelong education.

1. *A baseline for literacy.* The findings on literacy rates for the population 11+ and 15+, for males and females, for urban and rural areas and for different regions of the country, based on scientific sampling and administration of skill tests, establish for the first time reliable baselines for future planning and assessment of progress in literacy and continuing education.
2. *The need for a comprehensive approach.* The study confirms that a combination of quality primary education, nonformal basic education for adolescents and youth, and a network of nonformal and adult education centres is essential to combat illiteracy, effectively and sustainably.
3. *The poor quality of primary education.* The literacy results of primary education completers draw attention to the serious deficiencies in primary education and schooling in general. As the study shows, one-third of those who have completed five years of primary schooling are still illiterate and it takes ten years of schooling to ensure that all of a population group are literate. On the other hand, 97 percent of those completing 4-5 years of nonformal primary education are literate. The aim clearly should be to enable children to achieve sustainable literacy with three years of primary education.
4. *"One-size-fits all" campaigns don't work.* Campaigns of fixed duration with a focus on "token" literacy and targets for declaring districts as "illiteracy-free" do not reflect an understanding of literacy and how it can make a difference in people's life. An expanded view of learning objectives and a more integrated programme approach combining basic literacy, consolidation of literacy skills, and their application through development activities need to be adopted.
5. *Poverty alleviation calls for multi-purpose continuing education.* Narrowly focused standard skill training courses are not the answer. Skill training needs ancillary support and responsiveness to employment market which education providers cannot handle. No large-scale successful model of this type exists. On the other hand, poverty is not just a matter of income. Improvement in health and nutrition, knowledge and practice of family planning, priority to children's education, knowledge of and claiming entitlements to public services and so on affect people's well-being in important ways. A network of multipurpose community learning centres offering need-based locally adapted continuing learning opportunities are likely to have a greater impact on poverty reduction than poor quality skill courses detached from the necessary supportive components.

6. *A broad vision of nonformal and continuing education.* A wide spectrum of learning objectives, complementary to basic literacy and necessary to sustain and develop it, need to be served by nonformal and continuing education programmes. This should be the new vision of literacy, continuing education and lifelong education, all of which can help create the learning society. Present public sector nonformal education pays little or no attention to:
 - early childhood care and education and preschool education,
 - nonformal alternatives for out-of-school children,
 - second-chance basic education opportunity for the drop-out and the left-out,
 - lifelong learning opportunities for personal fulfilment,
 - locally adapted and market-responsive nonformal training in vocational, occupational and entrepreneurship skills,
 - enhancement of the informal learning environment such as access to multi-media centres, promotion of self-learning and encouragement of cultural expressions.
7. *Rethinking management of nonformal education.* Management of literacy, continuing education and nonformal education needs to be based on government-civil society partnership and decentralized enough to make it responsive to local conditions and accountable to the community. It is neither necessary nor very efficient for these activities to be managed by a government department, especially because the civil society including the NGOs, community organizations and the private sector have to play a major role in them. The role of a government agency such as DNFE can be that of a professional organization with facilitative and broad regulatory functions rather than executive functions.
8. *Affirmative action for the disadvantaged.* It is necessary for the government to promote and cooperate with all actors to support a policy of affirmative action, targeting the disadvantaged and marginalized sections of the population. Strategies and programmes that address specific needs of the different disadvantaged groups - such as the disabled, ethnic and cultural minorities, people living in inaccessible and remote areas - need to be developed and implemented. The dimension of gender should be a factor in all policy and strategy considerations.
9. *The National Plan of Action for Education for All must reflect a broad vision of a learning society and lifelong learning.* The NPA document prepared in fulfilment of the Dakar Framework for action for EFA should be based on a credible assessment of progress made in literacy and results achieved from literacy and nonformal education programmes. NPA should be linked to planning and budgeting of development programmes and not remain a statement of noble intentions.

The *Education Watch* study objectively assessed literacy status of the population through administering a literacy test on a nation-wide sample survey. Such an initiative is first of its kind in Bangladesh. It is expected that it would end the confusion about literacy rates in the country and will establish the benchmarks for literacy rates. Without blaming to anybody the results of this study clearly indicate a major national failure. Bangladesh

could not ensure literacy as right to over 60 percent of its population. It is the hope of the *Education Watch* team that the findings and conclusions of the study will be used to shape a new vision of and develop future plans for literacy, continuing education and lifelong learning. A collective effort is necessary to overcome the failure and to materialise the hope.

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