

Education Watch 2002

Literacy In Bangladesh
NEED FOR A NEW VISION

Overview of the Main Report

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Campaign for Popular Education

Introduction

The theme of *Education Watch 2002* is the state of literacy in Bangladesh. We are pleased to bring out this report in the first year of the United Nations Literacy Decade, 2003–2012, proclaimed by the United Nations with the motto “ Literacy as Freedom.” This study is based on the premise that literacy is a question of right of people and that it is necessary to address the absence of credible benchmarks in Bangladesh for the literacy status of the population.

Literacy is a question of right of the people.

This *Watch* establishes a benchmark for literacy status in Bangladesh.

Background and Methodology

The study aimed to answer the following questions:

1. What proportions of the population are at different levels of literacy?
2. How has literacy been acquired by the population?
3. What use is being made of literacy skills?
4. What knowledge/ skills do people perceive as relevant for post-literacy learning activities?
5. What are the possible socio-economic correlates of literacy?

The literacy status of the population was determined by administering a literacy test to a stratified random sample of the population 11 years and above. A purposefully designed test instrument was used for the first time in Bangladesh on a nationwide sample to assess the national literacy situation - in contrast to the "self-reporting" method used in the population census and various household surveys. The test consisted of items on four essential skill components of literacy - *reading, writing, calculation and use of these three skills (3Rs) in practical life situations.*

Four skill levels, based on a composite score for items in all the four skill components, used in the survey are *non-literate, semi-literate,*

literate at the initial level and literate at the advanced level. Those whose scores fell in the range of scores either for literate at the initial or advanced level were designated as literate.

Definitions

The following definitions of literacy and different levels of literacy skills were used.

Literacy: *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.*

Non-literate: *Lack of ability to decode alphabet, recognise words, write words and count objects; and, therefore, inability to use literacy skills in life situations.*

Semi-literate: *Ability to recognise and write some words, to count objects and use numbers at a very basic level; extremely limited use of the literacy skills in life situations.*

Literate at the initial level: *Ability to read and write simple sentences in a familiar context; possessing skills of four basic rules of arithmetic; limited use of these abilities and skills in a familiar context in life situations.*

Literate at the advanced level: *Ability to read and write with fluency in varying contexts; competency in four arithmetic rules and mathematical reasoning; ability to use these skills in everyday life and independently in further learning.*

The Literacy Test and Other Instruments

The literacy test was developed through consultation with the experts and pilot testing in six rural and six urban sites. Statistical analysis of pilot data and item selection procedure ensured reliability of the items in the final test. A total of 24 items equally distributed by skill areas were in the test instrument. The columns below are the skill areas tested by the literacy test. The rows represent three levels of skills: *semi-literate, literate at initial level, and literate at advanced level.*

Reading	Writing	Numeracy	Application of 3Rs
Two words with three alphabet characters in each	Two words familiar in everyday life	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Counting objects. Finding out a missing number 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Recognising time Recognising left and right on a picture
Two sentences related to everyday life	Two sentences in a familiar context	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Simple subtraction Simple multiplication 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Knowing different sides of a map Ability to write own address
A comprehension passage containing environmental messages followed by two questions of MCQ type	Describing an object with five sentences	Problem solving needing skills of <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Subtraction and division Multiplication and division 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ability to prepare a simple balance sheet Absorbing message from a billboard

Besides the literacy test instrument, three other questionnaires were used: (a) a household survey questionnaire, (b) a questionnaire for education, socio-economic and other information of the respondents, and (c) a questionnaire for information about the community.

The Sample

It was decided to draw samples from the rural population of six administrative divisions and the urban population of metropolitan cities and municipalities. Samples for the eight strata were selected by a four-stage random sampling of upazila, union, village and household in the rural areas, and municipality, ward, mahallah and household (the first stage was skipped in metropolitan cities) in urban areas. An adequate sample size for drawing valid conclusions for each stratum with male and female breakdown was taken. It was calculated that literacy test of 768 individuals is needed for a valid estimate, totalling 12,288 (768x8x2) for the eight strata in the national survey.

The study covered all the 64 districts in the country. A total of 3,840 households from 268 villages/mahallahs were surveyed where

19,705 individuals lived. Of these individuals, 14,274 were aged 11 years and above, of which 13,145 could be brought under literacy test (52.2 percent females and 47.8 percent males). Household size, proportion of population aged 11 years and above, and distribution of population by years of schooling calculated from the household survey data were found comparable with other recent studies including previous *Education Watch* studies.

This *Watch* covered all 64 districts, 268 villages/mahallahs, and 3,840 households.
A total of 13,145 individuals participated in literacy test.

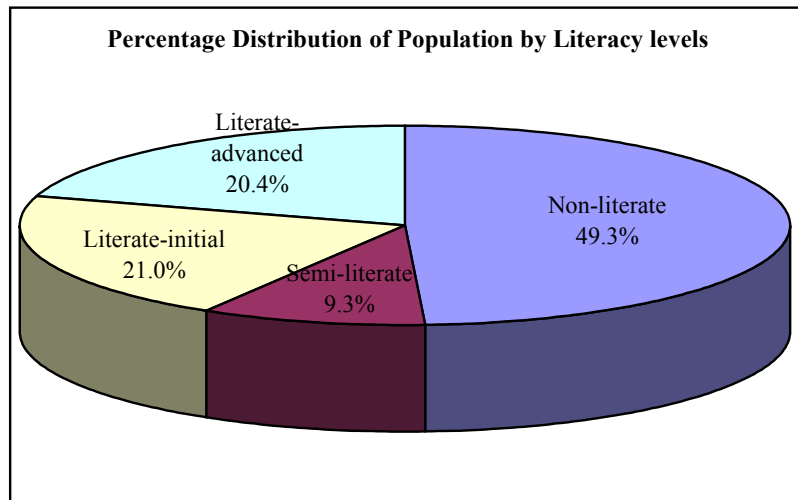
A strict quality control protocol was applied to collection and recording of data, assessing responses to the literacy test, and analysing all data. Reliable as well as valid estimates of the literacy status of the population could be generated through this study.

Summary of Findings and Conclusions

Major conclusions from the findings of this study are summarized below regarding the literacy status of the population, means and methods of acquiring literacy, and people's perception and expectations about literacy.

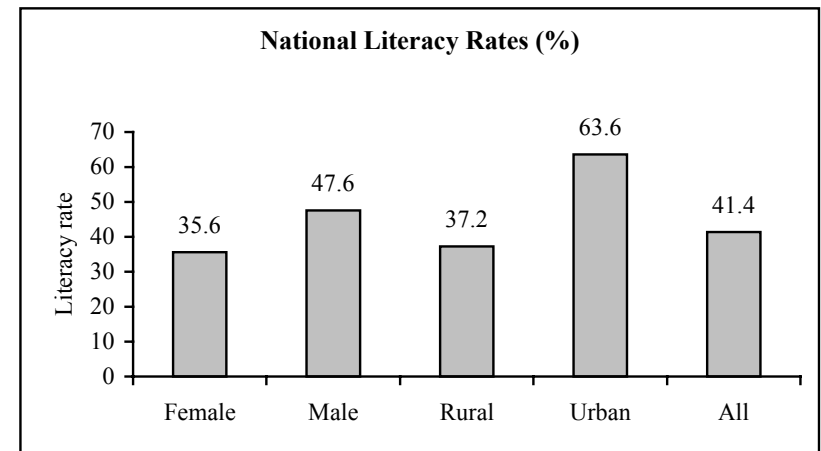
1. *Definitive assessment of literacy.* The findings of the study present definitively the status of literacy of the population and benchmarks for future efforts in literacy based on the application of scientific and objective research methods. *For the first time in Bangladesh, a purposefully designed literacy assessment instrument was used on a nationwide sample, adequate to draw conclusions about different levels of literacy achievement of the population with breakdowns for gender, age, geographic location, and a number of other socio-economic attributes.*
2. *Literacy status determined by test administered individually to a nationwide sample.* The overall literacy rate of 41.4 percent for population 11 years and above is considerably lower than the

officially announced statistics regarding literacy rate, but is consistent with other recent findings, such as, other recent surveys, the sample survey result of *Education Watch 2001*, and the trend of progress between decennial population censuses. (Results of the most recent census in 2001 remain unpublished.)

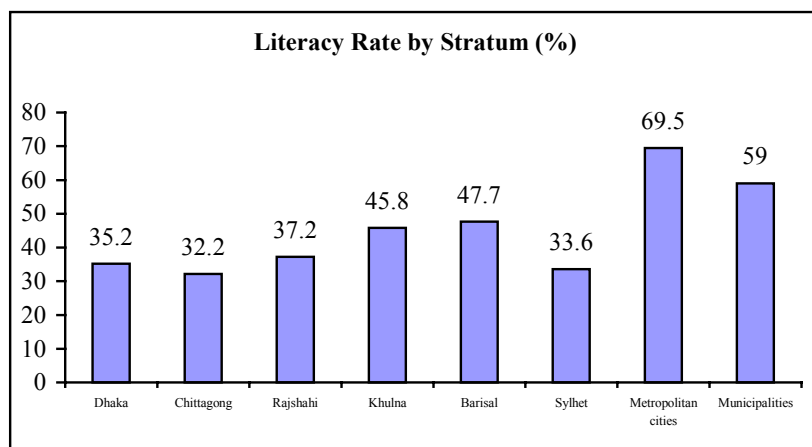


3. *Over half of the population “non-literate” and ten percent “semi-literate,” but still below initial literacy.* In the non-literate category, three quarters scored between 0 and 10 on a hundred- point scale. The ten percent, who scored between 25 and 50 and classified as semi-literate, could make use of their skills in extremely limited ways, if any, in life situations. All of these people, the majority adolescents and youth, have passed the primary education age. The younger among them need “second chance” nonformal basic education, equivalent of primary education; the older ones can benefit from literacy courses that are of high quality and linked to continuing education opportunities.
4. *A picture of large gender and other disparities.* The literacy status of the population manifests large disparities in terms of gender, socio-economic attributes, and geography. Most pervasive is the disadvantage of girls and women and most pronounced is the urban- rural gap. If literacy is seen as a means of overcoming socio-economic divisions, and promoting social mobility, clearly much

remain to be done. However, gender equality in literacy rate for the age-group 11-14 years reflects the result of recent progress in this respect in primary education. For other groups and strata in the sample population, perhaps some progress in respect of gender equality could be detected, if comparable data from the past were available.



5. *Only one-in-five with self-sustaining literacy skills.* The advanced level in literacy skills, a level of self-sufficiency that permits people to apply the skills effectively in their life situations and use the skills on their own for further learning, has been achieved by only 20.4 percent of the population. The socio-economic impact of literacy and use of literacy in improving the quality of life and enhancing the prospects in livelihood are likely to be seen with people reaching the advanced level. The population with only initial literacy, 21 percent of the 11 years and above group, is not in a position to take advantage effectively of the benefits that literacy offers in personal self-realization and collective social and economic development. *It should be noted that initial level of literacy, according to the criterion used in the survey, is truly “initial,” as a review of the items in the test used in the survey will show.* This group requires further and continuing learning opportunities for improving and using its literacy skills.



6. The principal means of acquiring literacy, according to the survey, is primary education and schooling beyond primary education. However, the survey shows that only a prolonged exposure to primary and secondary education assures acquisition of literacy skills and their sustainability. Of those who had a full five-year cycle of primary education, 35.6 percent were not literate even at the initial level. Close to hundred percent literacy either at the initial or advanced level requires attendance in school for 10 years, i.e. completion of five years of secondary education. *The conclusion is not that literacy skills can be acquired only with long years of schooling. This situation is rather a very disturbing commentary on the quality of education in the country.* Those who attended nonformal primary education programmes, 97 percent achieved literacy on completion of five years, compared to around two-thirds doing so in government and government assisted primary schools and ebte dayee madrassas.

About 36% remain non-literate or semi-literate even after completing five-years cycle of primary education.

At least 6-7 years of schooling with present standard was required to have a sustainable literacy rate of 80%.

7. *Minor impact of non-school means of acquiring literacy skills.* Non-school means of acquiring literacy, such as, literacy courses and campaigns, according to the survey, have not been effective. Less than four percent of the respondents reported that they used exclusively non-school means of literacy learning including TLM and learning at home. Only 3.5 percent of this population actually achieved literacy. Among those who said they attended only TLM courses as a means of acquiring literacy, only 1.3 percent were found to be literate. The total stock of literacy in the population as well as the literacy outcome for individuals is usually the result of a combination of different means and modalities, such as, attendance in school for some years, participation in literacy courses, and self-learning. *Adult literacy programmes of the type prevalent in Bangladesh, TLM being the principal one, as exclusive means of acquiring literacy, seem to have a minor impact in improving the literacy status of the population.* This is not necessarily an indictment of adult literacy programmes in general. But this situation clearly speaks for caution and need for professionalism in designing such programmes and the need to look at complementarity of means and application of quality criteria in these programmes.

Non-school means of learning including government-run Total Literacy Movement (TLM) had an insignificant impact on overall literacy situation.

8. *Two main uses of literacy - personal communication and helping children in their study.* Use of literacy skills is a function of the level of skills acquired and real and perceived opportunities for their use. Based on responses to questions about use of literacy, it can be said that overwhelmingly, people used literacy skills for personal written communication and to guide and help their children in education. They also used literacy for reading for information or pleasure and found its use in work situations. Most people did not seem to use their skills to seek information or knowledge for improving their living condition and quality of life. More of the people with advanced skills used literacy in work and

occupation-related situations and to seek knowledge and information for improving quality of life than those with initial skills. More women used their skills for personal communication and helping their children in schoolwork than men. The low use of literacy for improving daily life situations and quality of life in general is probably related to availability of relevant and plainly written reading materials that are found useful and attractive by readers, especially those with the initial level of skills.

Literacy Rates of Different Sub-groups

Adult population (15 years +): 38.8%
Elderly population (60 years +): 19.3%
Female headed households: 39.7%
Urban slum: 19.7%
Non-Muslims: 47.8%
TLM villages/mahallahs: 42.1%
Non-schooled parents: 22.3%
No access to mass media: 21.6%

9. *Perceived needs - livelihood skills, community learning centres and special women's programme.* Almost three quarters of the literate population and 80 percent of those with advanced literacy expressed the need, by way of post literacy and continuing education programmes, for learning opportunities related to income-earning skills and improving livelihood. About half of the respondents, in both the groups with initial and advanced literacy, saw the need for multipurpose village or community learning centres as well as special continuing education programmes for women. Library/reading rooms and education about legal and human rights have not been accorded a high priority by respondents - possibly due to their negative experience and judgment in this regard or lack of familiarity with these, rather than their rejection of the intrinsic value of these learning opportunities.
10. *Greater priority needed to multipurpose community centres and women's special programmes.* Livelihood related learning

opportunities is clearly a strongly perceived need, but this begs the question how this need can be fulfilled effectively, especially when more of the literates have literacy skills only at the initial level. Effective models on a large scale for this purpose do not exist. On the other hand, multipurpose community learning centres and special programmes for women designed to sustain and improve literacy skills and promote their use in life situations exist in many developing countries. While post-literacy and continuing education programmes with a focus on income-earning skills have been initiated with donor support, the other expressed needs have received insufficient attention from policy-makers in Bangladesh.

Policy Implications

The findings of the study and the various statistics from the survey about the state of literacy in the country show the results of past efforts, but also hold important lessons and implications for future policy and priorities in this regard. It is clear that the goals set regarding literacy within the framework of Education for All to "eradicate" illiteracy by 2004 or 2005 are not realizable and that the rapid progress reported to have been made toward this target is not real. In fact the premises underlying the goal of "eradication" are questionable. The study lends support to the concept -- as has been argued since the 1960s by Paulo Freire and others and re-asserted by the Education for All objectives from Jomtien (1990) and Dakar (2000) and the International Conference on Adult Education in Hamburg (1997) -- that literacy is a *process* of developing skills and knowledge and applying these in life rather than an *event* that ends with awarding a certificate after a two hundred hour course.

Jomtien and Dakar objectives have recognised the futility of the analogy of *eradicating* a contagious disease with a mass vaccination campaign and the complexity of enabling adult populations on a mass scale to acquire a level of literacy skills that make a difference in their lives. The objectives and strategies for Education for All set in Jomtien and reviewed and renewed in Dakar have - (a) underscored the importance of a broad concept of basic education and the need for creating the conditions and opportunities for life-long learning in which development and use of literacy skills are embedded, and (b) set

relatively modest goals for adult literacy targets for 2015 (UNESCO, World Education Forum: *The Dakar Framework for Action*, is 2000).

The Dakar Goals adopted in 2000 endorsed the target for each country of reducing illiteracy by half by 2015, urging each country to begin from where it stands and undertake a serious and determined effort. At the same time, the Dakar goals require countries to achieve a much faster progress towards the target of universal primary education of acceptable quality for children and to remove gender disparity in education, thus building the foundation for self-sustaining and functionally effective literacy in society.

Policy implications arising from the findings and conclusions of the present study relate to conceptualisation of literacy efforts, the need for making literacy activities an integral part of a comprehensive vision for nonformal and adult learning, the mutual complementarity between formal education and life-long nonformal learning, and programme strategies that reflect the policy premises.

1. *A combination of quality primary education, nonformal basic education for adolescents and youth, and a network of nonformal and adult education programmes is essential to combat illiteracy.* The study provides a strong endorsement for an approach to struggle against illiteracy that combines effective primary education of acceptable quality, nonformal basic education equivalent to primary education for adolescents and youth as a "second chance," and demand-based literacy courses for youth and adults as a part of a network of adult and nonformal learning programmes. An integrated and comprehensive approach for literacy and continuing education can lead to sustainable and functional literacy skills that respond to needs of individual fulfilment and social and economic development.
2. *The state of literacy in the country is a strong indictment against the poor quality of primary education and schooling in general; major improvements in primary education is essential to make progress in literacy.* As the study shows, of those who have completed five years of primary education, one-third are without literacy skills; and it takes ten years of schooling to ensure that a population group is close to 100 percent literate. The disturbing situation in primary education revealed in the

present study re-confirms the poor learning achievement of students in primary schools reported in *Education Watch 2001* and other studies. The struggle against illiteracy cannot be won and the personal and social benefits of literacy cannot be realized until a very substantial improvement is achieved in the quality of primary education, which is the principal means of improving the literacy status of the population. The aim should be to enable a person to achieve sustainable and functional literacy skills by the time one completes three years of primary education.

3. *Fixed duration campaigns to carry out literacy courses on a mass scale are not effective.* Campaigns of fixed duration with a focus on mechanical acquaintance with alphabet and targets for declaring districts as "free from illiteracy" do not reflect an understanding of literacy and how it can make a difference in lives of people. The overwhelming burden of evidence from international experience is that a broader scope of objectives in terms of functionality and sustainability of skills and links with opportunities for use of skills in real-life situations are essential ingredients of effective programs. Vision and plans for the future must take into account this lesson from accumulated experience. An expanded view of learning objectives also suggests a more integrated programme approach combining in a flexible way basic literacy, consolidation of literacy skills, and their application through involvement of learners in development activities, including income-earning activities and learning specific skills for that purpose.
4. *A strong demand exists for post-literacy training in income-earning skills, but no model exists for meeting this demand successfully on a large scale.* Contribution to poverty alleviation has been a key rationale of the government for the basic literacy initiative and its follow-up with a restricted concept of continuing education focusing on income-related skill generation. This narrow view of literacy and continuing education raises two kinds of questions: (a) Skill training can lead to better earning only with ancillary support and creation of necessary conditions, such as access to credit, management advice, market information, and links with potential employers, which normally fall beyond the purview of the educational

programmes, and (b) Poverty is not just a matter of income. Improvement in health and nutrition and protection from diseases, knowledge and practice of family planning, priority to children's education, status of women in family and community and their participation in economic activities outside home, information and knowledge of government services and people's claim to these are only some of the factors that affect in important ways people's economic well-being and quality of life. A network of broadly conceived and locally adapted literacy and nonformal education programmes, therefore, is likely to have the most impact on poverty. This is corroborated by a high priority accorded by the survey respondents to multi-purpose community learning centres and special continuing education programmes for women.

5. *Besides the literacy objective, a wide spectrum of learning objectives, complementary to basic literacy and necessary for sustaining and improving literacy skills, need to be served by nonformal and continuing education programmes, which should form a new vision of literacy and continuing and life-long learning.* The learning objectives not given sufficient attention in current public sector NFE efforts include:
- a) early childhood development and pre-school education;
 - b) nonformal alternatives for children not able to participate in formal schools;
 - c) second-chance opportunities for basic education for older adolescents, not enrolled in school, or drop-out, (except for a small basic education project for children engaged in child labour);
 - d) life-long learning opportunities for personal fulfilment, acquiring new productive skills and life-skills, enhancing knowledge and skills as a citizen and community member;
 - e) nonformal training in vocational, entrepreneurship and employment-related skills; (some of these are anticipated in the newly launched post-literacy and continuing education projects); and
 - f) enhancement of the *informal* learning environment through wider availability of reading materials, information dissemination and encouragement of cultural expressions in the form of reading rooms, multi-media centres, and self-learning and interest groups in the community.

6. *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 to have all or most programmes managed by an NFE agency in the public sector such as DNFE. Many of the activities can be carried out by private sector, NGOs, and community organizations with appropriate financial incentive and technical support from the government and other sources. There are choices to be exercised regarding who among potential providers of services should have what responsibility and how all can contribute to meeting the critical and diverse learning needs of people. A larger role for various non-government actors would mean that the role of a government agency such as DNFE will be more of a professional organization working in the areas of developing overall policies and priorities, creating supportive and facilitative mechanisms, providing finances and helping mobilize resources. It will also set, working with non-government providers of services, quality norms and enforce these through overall monitoring and assessment, and generally help promote and protect public interest.
7. *It is necessary to follow a policy of affirmative action and target the disadvantaged and marginalized sections of the population with strategies that address their specific needs.* Gender disparity in literacy remains persistent and pervasive. Ethnic and linguistic minorities, slum dwellers and the ultra-poor who continue to be outside most education programmes are difficult to reach. Specialized and more directly targeted projects would be required for these groups. Gender issues need to be addressed both in respect of management structures as well as pedagogical aspects. Special attention is needed to ensure that a higher proportion of women than at present are in management, supervisory roles, and training and learning materials development. A sensitive approach is needed to make programmes inclusive and appropriate in learning content and teaching practices in respect of people with disabilities. Social mobilization efforts need to be directed specifically at overcoming traditional attitudes regarding gender, disabilities and ethnic and cultural differences.

8. *The National Plan of Action (NPA) should reflect a broad vision of a learning society and life-long learning and, at the same time, become an active planning document of the government.* The National Program of Action for Education for All in line with the Dakar Framework for Action needs to reflect a vision of a comprehensive basic, nonformal and adult education approach with demand-based and flexible literacy and continuing education programmes as important components. It should be based on a credible assessment of progress made in literacy and results achieved from recent literacy and nonformal education programmes. The NPA should be linked to planning and budgeting of development activities and not remain a statement of noble intentions.

It is the expectation of the *Education Watch* team that the findings and conclusions of the present study, based on a nation-wide sample survey undertaken specifically to assess the literacy status of the population, will establish the benchmarks for literacy rates and end any remaining confusion on this subject. It is also hoped that the results of the study will be used to shape a new vision and develop future plans for literacy, continuing and lifelong learning.

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