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# **Real options for policy and practice in Bangladesh**

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## **Real Options for Policy and Practice in Bangladesh**

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### **Introduction**

*When you see some ashes,  
let them fly,  
You might find a pearl*

(Bengali proverb)

The terms of reference for this study are ambitious and include information on a broad range of themes including definitions of literacy, evidence of improvements, the inclusion of language and gender, the role of government and civil society, and evidence of innovation in policy and practice. While a number of recent publications attempt to answer some of these questions in relation to the chronology and development of adult literacy programmes in Bangladesh (e.g. Chen 1983, Jennings 1990, Rashid and Rahman 2004), there is no source that can answer all these questions in full. Other texts written in Bengali (such as the historical records of Sandwhip) are not in print and are hard to access. Despite the long tradition of adult literacy in Bangladesh, and the large extent of public mobilisation and government support, there is not a definitive source book that can provide answers to all these questions. That is rather unfortunate when we consider the fact that adult literacy programmes have, since the mid 1970's become a significant force for change and accepted social institution in Bangladeshi society. One reason for this lack of detailed record, and something that I will discuss briefly in this paper, is the way in which such records are contained in institutional memory, and the memory of committed individuals rather than in any systematic record. That does not mean that the information is missing, but it does present some methodological problems in accessing and verifying such information. Not least because many of the individuals who were significant in setting up adult literacy programmes in Bangladesh are either very elderly or have deceased, and many of the younger people involved in the adult literacy moment don't have access to such longer term experience.

As I was lucky enough to have conducted some interviews with some notable individuals in 1997 and 1998, I thought this would provide an opportunity to extend the time frame of analysis, and wondered whether such an analysis might shed some light on the questions to be addressed in this paper. After some reflection, and re-visiting this interview data and my own records, it became clear that many of the most significant developments in adult literacy programmes in Bangladesh (e.g. methodological learning and development, issues of language and script, institutional development), are now outside the memory of most people working in the field, and certainly beyond the 3-5 year historical frame of analysis and archive of most development organisations. So I began to wonder if this longer-term perspective, sifting through the archive, and people's narratives on adult literacy, might produce a few pearls of wisdom, that might somehow inform future policy and practice. This information helps to answer the TOR for this paper – for example, to understand why literacy has been defined in a particular way, to highlight the links between literacy and other development programmes, to understand the development of literacy teaching methodologies, and to understand the particular contribution that adult literacy programmes have made in Bangladesh. I then conclude by linking this to the present day, and by highlighting policies that can make a difference.

The paper is therefore divided into three sections. The first uses interviews and some of the historical literature on adult literacy in Bangladesh to attempt to pick out the critical moments and changes in the development of the literacy movement. That includes a discussion of teaching methodology, and the emergence of patterns and policies of delivery. The second part brings the paper more up to date. It describes recent changes and debates in the policy context and a number of recent innovations in literacy teaching and learning. I am indebted to the individuals who have helped me to collate this historical record, and hope that I have done justice to the spirit and detail of their testimony. The paper then concludes in the final lesson by returning to the questions posed in the terms of reference, and suggesting some future directions for policy and practice.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The paper drafts from interviews conducted with Md. Ferdoz Khan, the late Rev John Hastings, and with Kazi Rafiqul Alam (Dhaka Ahsania Mission), and A.N.S. Habibur Rahman. These are referenced in the text by initials and the date of the interview.

## **Section 1: Adult Literacy Programmes in Bangladesh: A Historical perspective**

Adult literacy groups, are a established part of the institutional landscape in Bangladesh, and have gone hand in hand with the other significant innovations such as micro-credit schemes. They have, however, generally faced less critical scrutiny than other development initiatives. Like credit, adult literacy programmes have often been thought of as a ‘good thing’, but unlike credit programmes, there have been less in-depth studies into their effectiveness, or their impact on people’s lives. Yet, they were not always there, and the rural poor, have not always had access to such provision. In fact, from a historical perspective, they have only been widely available to the poor from about the mid 1970’s. The present form of literacy provision, ‘literacy groups’ for the rural poor became a widespread phenomenon in the 1970’s and 1980’s, and since then, despite the established legitimacy of such provision, there has been a on-going struggle to persuade government and the donor community to dedicate sufficient funds and support to literacy programmes. That remains the situation today, as campaign groups such as CAMPE continue advocacy on literacy with government.

The emergence of literacy programmes can be looked at in terms of three historical periods that I shall briefly describe. First, there was a period of gradual development from the night schools in colonial Bengal from 1918, to the changes brought about by the Bengali language movement in the 1950’s to the Bangladesh war of liberation. These early programmes were few and far between, lacked support, and were methodologically naïve. They tended to be taken up by middle classes, adolescents and men rather than being mass literacy movements in the typical sense. This provision was generally promoted by, and dependent on the commitment of a few individuals, rather than being a significant provision by government. Then, following the war of liberation in 1971 there were many radical changes in Bangladeshi society that included a greater commitment to educational provision, and ‘relief efforts’ for the poor. This period saw a great deal of innovation, a gradual institutionalisation of adult literacy provision within government and the NGO sector, and later, the mechanisms of standardisation, delivery and monitoring that we still see today. That period saw the first mass literacy programmes provided by government and the growing NGO sector. Finally since 2001, Bangladeshi literacy programmes have

entered a new phase which may be characterised in terms of greater standardisation and government regulation, and perhaps also less scope for innovation within the NGO sector. At the same time there is once again, some uncertainty about the commitment of government to the provision and support of adult literacy programmes following the closure of the Department of Non-Formal Education.

Before I go on, let me make a brief comment about the meanings of literacy and illiteracy in Bangladesh. Literacy – at least for adults relates to two inter-related factors. The first factor is about social status – what it means to be called ‘literate’ or ‘illiterate’. The term ‘literate’ does not have a simple translation in Bangla language - and in many respects the concept does not exist in the same way as it does in the West. Many people (women, the rural poor) have low social status, and although they are able to use literacy – that is, to read and write, they do not consider themselves to be literate (Maddox 2005). In fact they will deny being ‘literate’. The term ‘shakkhar’ which is used by development agencies implying literacy, literally means ‘to sign’ (i.e to sign ones name, in contrast to someone who signs with their thumb (‘tip shoie’). But many people (particularly women) don’t have sufficiently high social status (or rights) to count themselves as ones who sign. However, if you ask people if, and what they can read and write (‘leka pora’) they will say that they can, and do. I have observed many people during my fieldwork who regularly use literacy, but who don’t consider themselves to ‘be’ literate.

The second sense that we can look at in terms of the meanings of literacy is through people uses of literacy – their literacy and numeracy practices. Many (particularly women) deny (i.e. under-report) their literacy abilities and practices, since they are proscribed from using literacy by their family, or because they don’t want to tell others about how they use literacy (Maddox 2001). This fact relates to the pervasive vulnerability of the rural poor (Hulme and Shepherd 2003, Maddox 2005 and forthcoming). If you ask people what they read and write, they are likely to give a range of answers – including Koranic reading in Bangla and Arabic – many of which are literacy practices that would not be recognised by a census enumeration. This illustrates the weakness of census as a measure in these contexts, and highlights the importance of household survey’s such as the innovation of UNESCO with ‘LAMP’. These methodological and conceptual issues and debates are well known in the

literacy field. For many people in Bangladesh attendance, or completion of primary schooling acts as a proxy measure of literacy – and that same proxy measure is also frequently used in statistical studies in human development at an international level – which rather complicates the issue. With this in mind it is hardly surprising that literacy rates in Bangladesh (and elsewhere in South Asia) are often hotly contested and debated. This is most clearly seen around the time of publication of census figures – where there is a craving to do away with the complexity of meanings and practices and to come up with a single, uncontested measure. Unfortunately, such a measure does not (and in my opinion cannot exist), since it is entirely dependent on the definitions being used, and the methods for data collection).

The Bangladesh Human Development report notes that the adult literacy rate increased from 29% in 1981 to 39% in 1991; *‘Progress in basic education was truly impressive in the nineties as the matched figure [for adult literacy] increased further to 42 percent in 1994 and 57 percent in 1998’* (Bangladesh Human Development Report 2000 p83). The government (MOE) statistics claimed that the adult literacy rate was 61% by 1999 (ibid. p83). These statistics have been widely questioned, and a number of small scale household surveys in Bangladesh have also challenged the census and government survey figures and suggested that literacy rates are considerably lower than those that appear in national statistics, and the global monitoring report (CAMPE 2003).<sup>2</sup> In any case, the adult literacy figures consistently indicate a large gender disparity (that is not matched by current school enrolment), regional variation, and rural-urban disparity (BHDR 2000, CAMPE 2003). While the 1990’s saw consistently high rates of adult literacy provision, supported by government (through the Department of Non-Formal Education, DNFE) and the INGO community (including the World Bank), it nevertheless seems likely that school attendance is the primary source of improved literacy rates. However, the social benefits of those literacy programmes may be considerable (e.g. in legitimising women’s literacy as a social practice, and helping the rural poor to become literate, encouraging parents to enrol their children), and so simple comparisons with statistical impact may be counter-productive. I now turn to the early literacy

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<sup>2</sup> The GMR (2005) gives 1990 figures as 34.2% (44.3 male, and 23.7 female), and 2000-2004 figures as 41% (50.3 male and 31.4% female). The CAMPE Survey (2003) gives the figures (age 11+) as

programmes in order to show how significant that period was in the Bangladesh literacy movement. As it will become apparent, many of the significant developments (e.g. in methodology, and institutional and human capacity for delivery) took place before 1990.

### **The early programmes 1918 – 1971**

The early period was not heavily supported by government, but relied on the voluntarism of a few committed individuals. One of the difficulties with archival work, is that it may present history from an elite perspective. Archival accounts are invariably partial, and normally written from the perspective and interests of the social elite. This is no doubt the case with the history of the adult literacy movement in Bangladesh, which tends to be charted in terms of the activity of men who were committed to the field, and influential to its development. Such accounts tend to ignore the experience and voices of the illiterate poor, and also tend to ignore the role of influential women activists. However, I do feel there is a value in looking at these accounts because they tell us something about the early programmes, and seem to suggest certain lessons that might inform our present activities. I have pieced together this account based on interviews with some of these influential people, and with their written records and memories of that early period.

Such influential characters included HGS Bivar, a colonial administrator who ‘stayed on’ after 1947. Bivar set up a centre for adult literacy provision (the East Pakistan Adult Education Co-operative Association) and died in 1962. There were a number of other men who were influential in this early phase. They include Akter Hamid Khan who was influential in setting up the Academy for Rural Development at Comilla where the so-called ‘Comilla method’<sup>3</sup> developed, also Assan Ullah, a member of the Indian Education Service who retired in 1929 and founded Dhaka Ahsania Mission in

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41.4%. The 2002 Statistical yearbook for Bangladesh gives literacy figures of 55.5% for male, and 43.4% female and also notes large disparities between urban and rural areas.

<sup>3</sup> Although popularly known as the ‘Comilla method’ the approach was one of integrated community based development – modelled on cooperative activity - rather than a literacy teaching method per se. The literacy instruction methods at that time were modelled on Laubach’s approach and are not considered to me as effective as the later primer based methods (e.g. innovated by BRAC, FIVDB etc). There are likely to be many failings with this early literacy teaching (including delivery mechanisms, training models and human capacity in this field. The materials did not engage significantly with the lives of the adult learners – they were depoliticised and overly technical in orientation).

1935, and more recently one of my interviewees, Fredoz Khan who became the director of public instruction, in the education directorate prior to 1971, and who later wrote many of the early adult literacy materials and was influential in the first government mass literacy campaign under General Ziar Rahman.

There are a number of ways that we can look at adult literacy programmes in the early period. One is to focus on the activities of these individuals, another is to look at institutional development and the wider social context, and finally, we can look at the literacy approach and the methods used. Contemporary discussions of adult literacy tend to be dominated by technical questions, and as a result ignore the cultural and political context in which they take place. They rarely recognise the significance of individual people (broadly speaking, human capital and human agency perspectives). If we look at the Bangladesh experience, it becomes clear that each of these perspectives is significant – and this perhaps suggest that a similar approach might be beneficial in contemporary policy and practice. This argument can be illustrated with a few examples.

In my interviews one of the themes that seemed to emerge is importance of the support that key individuals provided to the emergent adult literacy field, particularly in this era that was characterised by voluntarism, rather than institutionalised government support. For example, HGS Bivar is frequently mentioned people's accounts. In my interviews with Ferdoz Khan, he comments on how influenced he had been by him.

*“In 1953 or '54 an old gentleman came to see me, he told me that his name was Bivar, and from that day on we became very good friends.. He told me about his work,... he used to come quite frequently... and invited me to visit his centre somewhere in Elephant Road... That way I became keenly interested in this adult education, I think Bivar was responsible for that... he gathered around him.. a number of dedicated young men and women. He engaged them in the literacy programme. Mostly it was located in Dhaka. At that time the percentage for literacy was quite low (20%) and he developed some charts and textbooks also for literacy programme, and also a committee and so on... But he was doing it all alone. All alone. He didn't receive any substantial help, either from government, or from other organisations” (F.K. 13.11.97).*

Bivar himself, had previously met Frank Laubach (another significant pioneer in the literacy field), and had been influenced by him, and adopted the Laubach 'method'. The method was based on an approach that linked the sound of letters to the shape of objects in people's life (e.g. the shape of a tree, a knife for cutting fish, a vine etc)., and promoted the 'each one teach one' idea that new each person who is, or becomes literate should teach another person. Bivar's organisation has apparently published some 24 books in adult education and taught literacy to 10,000 people before his death in 1962.

While it is tempting to think that this account of prominent individuals is simply a elite narrative, one of the things that leads me to think that these people were in fact very influential, is that when they died, or left Bangladesh, their initiatives often stopped. This may be a characteristic of charismatic leadership (such as the kind that faced Nijera Shikhi after the death of their founder, Rev. John Hastings), but it also highlights the fact that such initiatives – including methodological innovation were (and perhaps still are) heavily influenced by the commitment and talent of individuals. It is worth noting that REFLECT, a more recent methodological innovation was also an initiative developed by very committed individuals (David Archer, and colleagues at Action-Aid Bangladesh, with the support of Paulo Freire), rather than government action. Ferdoz Khan described the impact of Bivar's death on his literacy centre: *“He died in 1962, and immediately with his death, the whole thing.. as if.. collapsed. Because the country at that time was not prepared for a programme like this so everybody was indifferent.”* (F.K13.11.97). As Ferdoz Khan argued, the government programme was working in some areas (particularly in Sylhet) but was small scale could not yet be considered a mass literacy programme. *“All of this was mainly initiated by individuals”*.

A similar case is the influence of Akter Hamid Khan, who set up the Academy for Rural Development at Comilla (in semi-retirement) and founded the Comilla Method. He had been a government administrator, and retired from government to dedicate himself to social work.

*“He had a very broad programme, aiming at improvement of the lot of poor people, and there he also included the mass education programme, especially*

*the adult literacy programme. It will be in the 1960's .. I was quite close to him.. actually he did, I should say, a wonderful job... He even in some villages, he encouraged them to establish co-operatives and embark on programmes to improve their lot... On this model the government established two or three more academies in rural areas.. at his insistence I agreed that the adult education section should be transferred that to Comilla in his office. It was part of the education directorate, but located in his office. We were very happy about the way in which the work was being done..” (F.K interview 13.11.97).*

Kazi Rafiqul Alam of Dhaka Ahsania Mission also mentioned that the academy of rural development established the ‘Comilla method’ and that they had produced more than 60 adult literacy materials, although there is limited information about the success of the program (K.R.A. 5.11.97). This Comilla based activity is also discussed by Rahman and Rashid (2004) who emphasise a more collective institutional agency, rather than the role of specific individuals:

*‘In 1962, BARD conducted a seminar on the role of adult education in rural development.. In the following year a powerful Ministry of Education was established in Comilla to enhance adult education. This division developed primers, charts and post-literacy materials to run adult literacy centres. .. This adult education initiative, which became popularly known as the Comilla Approach, continued for fifteen years, during which time it achieved significant results in the Comilla region’ (Rahman and Rashid 2004:164).*

A couple of points are worth making about this early period. First, there is the point, that because there were no traditions of mass literacy programmes in Bengal, and then East Pakistan, most of the notable activity and innovation was the result of committed individuals and the organisations that they founded. A similar argument can be made about later programmes, except that following the liberation war and independence there was a gradual institutionalisation of adult literacy programmes, a greater commitment for funding from government, and growing regulation of what was to become an important field of education. A second point is that despite the effort of committed individuals, these early programmes (like those elsewhere) had few experienced staff, relied on local improvisation, or the use of school teaching materials, and as a result were much less successful than the programmes that followed. The bigger social and historical picture is also relevant. The Bengali language movement in the 1950s shaped language policy in education so that Bengali language and script were adopted. That had not previously been the case. During the

period between 1947 and the late 1950s state building processes in Pakistan had promoted the use of Urdu in East and West Pakistan, and had considered the adoption of Persian or Arabic script for writing of Bengali. This was much resisted, and after independence the country adopted a policy of ‘monolingual nationalism’ in which Bengali was promoted as the language of instruction.

Following the war of independence there was a changed social and political climate in which the ‘spirit’ of the independent nation meant that there was a desire to do something for the people, and an increased recognition of people’s rights and opportunities in education (K.R.A. 5.11.97). This is an important point to note, since the widespread support and legitimacy for literacy programmes of the 1990’s (including women’s secular literacy) was heavily influenced by those social changes and a commitment to a new form of citizenship, development and nation-building.

### **Expansion, Innovation and Regulation (1972 – 2001)**

In the years immediately after independence there was a significant growth in interest in adult literacy programmes. There was a national literacy campaign shortly after independence (Rahman and Rashid 2004:165). However, at first these programmes were mainly taken up by youth and men from the middle classes (H.R. 31.10.97), and the methods and materials used were still unsophisticated. A more significant change occurred after the famine in 1974 when many NGOs began working in the literacy field. This can be seen as part of a new economy of aid. As part of ‘relief’ efforts, the focus shifted from individuals to a ‘community’ approach, and provision that focused on women as a target group (H.R.. 31.10.97, and K.R.A. 5.11.97). Participation in adult literacy programmes sometimes became a conditionally for further ‘relief’ - a practice that has continued within the NGO community who often link literacy provision to group membership. Nevertheless, these new activities led to a rapid expansion in adult literacy provision, particularly for women, and some significant innovation and institutional development followed. The literature on the period picks out some of the key programmes and developments that I shall briefly discuss.

BRAC (Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee), one of the largest NGOs in the country began a literacy programme in the 1970’s using the Comilla method. Their

experience is documented by Chen (1983), and is also discussed by Nussbaum (1993) and Jennings (1990). They found that the methods were not suited to the women in their programmes and revised them. These methodological difficulties haunted adult literacy programmes in the 1970's and they faced poor results. In 1980 these problems were still evident. The materials being used were often unsuited to adults and were still influenced by Laubach's earlier approach. In 1980 the government under General Zia Rahman supported a large scale adult literacy programme. This was discussed during my interview with Ferdoz Khan who after his retirement in 1977 became an active advocate for adult literacy, writing several books on it and a number of literacy primers and training documents. He described how he influenced that national campaign.

*“He (General Zia Rahman) was enthusiastic. I thought there was an opportunity. I developed the primer, my aim was to teach adult illiterates literacy, within a very short time. So keeping that in view I embarked on this work,.. it was more or less on the Laubach method. So I developed this book (primer) then experimented with that on two illiterate groups at the teacher training college here, two groups were collected there every day, this helped with completion on the book. That book.... had 21 graded lessons.. and each lesson with three one part is a reading part, another writing, and finally counting... each lesson to be covered (all) within a span of half an hour to 45 minutes – all these three parts. President Zia Rahman became keenly interested in this book .. he printed it in 12 million copies, and by that time his programme spread almost in all unions (smallest administrative unit) of the country. And simultaneously I wrote another book (methodology of imparting literacy),..that book was also printed in 2 or 3 million... I was very happy. Actually, it was in the year 1980.. he gave me a presidential award, for this work of mine. Unfortunately he was murdered in 1982. Now the next president who was also an army man (Ershad) was quite highly educated.. and highly polished, but you see somehow he didn't like this adult literacy programme” (F.K. Interview 13.11.97).*

The ironically named CRASH programme, a mass literacy programme (in the campaign model led by government) did not have the benefit of later methodological innovations that BRAC had developed, nor the understanding about integrated rural development that was being developed within the NGO sector, and as a result the programme was not as successful as those that followed. The CRASH programme is widely considered to have been relatively unsuccessful, although I am not aware of any systematic evaluation of the programme. Dhaka Ahsania Mission, one of the most active NGOs in the Bangladesh literacy field, continued using the materials that

had been developed by Ferdoz Khan until the mid 1980's. Later in the 1980s Dhaka Ahsania Mission developed their own materials, and Friends in Village Development Bangladesh (FIVDB) developed a primer influenced by a Frierean methodology following a pilot study by James Jennings and ANS Habibur Rahman (see Jennings 1990). The primer is similar to those that were developed elsewhere in South Asia (particularly those used in Nepal).

Before then there was no real attempt to make adult literacy materials relate to people's lives. The Freirean inspired materials presented 'generative' themes, words and sentences and contained pictures that were designed to reflect the lives of the learners. Post-literacy materials were also developed on this model, and were influenced by the on-going development of adult literacy programmes and adult learning approaches at a regional and global level. These primers, like the earlier ones were designed in sets, and included standardised and staged models of literacy and numeracy content. There was little flexibility or scope for local innovation. However, despite that and the criticism that followed about the lack of participation and overly structured primer based approach (Archer and Cottingham), the materials and methods were a significant improvement on those used earlier, and they continue to be used today. The new primers were designed to reflect their lives of their learners and to stimulate critical reflection (Jennings 1990). Although the dialogic method inspired by Freire may not have been wholeheartedly practiced in literacy groups, the materials were seen as acceptable to most learners. This is reflected in increased levels of participation and completion. The early programmes were plagued by high levels of drop out even where they were supported by committed organisations such as BRAC (Chen 1983, Nussbaum 1993). The expansion of adult literacy provision in the 1980s and 1990s also involved an increase in institutional knowledge and expertise, and the emergence of structured models of training and programme support. During the 1990s the government supported literacy programmes by running its own programme, and by funding indirectly via the NGO sector. This growing professionalism in adult literacy built on the innovation of the 1970s and 1980s, but the apparent success of these new innovative approaches also led to a greater level of standardisation.

Since the 1970's a number of important changes occurred. From the small scale literacy programmes at the beginning of the century, a tradition of mass literacy had been developed. This must in part be considered the result of the many dedicated men and women who supported these early initiatives, particularly when government support was lacking. The literacy activities in the late 1970's and 1980's had been experimental and rather ad-hoc. Later a growing standardisation emerged including a national curriculum, clearly defined expected outcomes, clarity over lesson timing and the establishment of training models and institutions (K.R.A. Interview 5.11.97). This increasing standardisation modelled on 'good practice' went hand in hand with the institutionalisation of adult literacy provision in the country, and to a certain extent mirrored the development of adult literacy elsewhere in South Asia. One of the factors that should be recognised is the fact that mass literacy programmes, particularly women's literacy programmes had become an established activity within the country, with a mass support, experience and feeling of legitimacy at the grass-roots. The idea of women's literacy (as an activity and a right) had been established, as had the 'institution' of adult literacy, and the 'literacy group'. An institution that is now part of the popular experience of people right across the country, and in many of the poorest and most marginal communities. At the same time, this increased regulation and standardisation brought with it a number of challenges that I will discuss in the next section.

## **Section 2. Innovation and Standardisation: Competing Forces?**

In this section the paper considers methodological innovation, and the broader social and political context in which it takes place. As I have suggested in the last section, as mass adult literacy programmes developed and were supported by government, the institutions of regulation and decision making within the education ministry also developed. Where the field had previously been highly influenced by committed individuals and small organisations, the increased level of support from government perhaps led to a rationalisation of the field, with government taking on a broader role than was the case previously. This is commendable in a number of ways. For example government, worked effectively with donors and the NGO community during the 1990s to finance, train and run adult literacy programmes (Rahman and Rashid 2004). However, this increasing regulation (combined with the policy commitment to

bilateral aid within the donor community) perhaps brought with it certain challenges and risks. For the purpose of this paper I will define them as being a) methodological, and b) political.

## **2a) Methodological Challenges**

With the growing standardisation of literacy programmes around models of ‘good practice’ in the 1980s and 1990s the scope for improvisation and innovation was perhaps less than it had been in the previous era. This can, in part be explained by the fact that many people working in the literacy field were aware of how much literacy materials and programmes had improved, and were keen to maintain those improvements. This is clear if we look at the widespread continued use of the primers that were modelled on the FIVDB based on the earlier work of Jennings and Rahman, even in the face of heavy local involvement and international pressure to adopt the new REFLECT methodology. The REFLECT methodology (see Archer and Cottingham 1996, Archer 1996, Riddel 2001) had been piloted in Bangladesh. Despite this, government, and many within the NGO community had, and continue to have reservations about the approach while it grew massively in terms of international influence. The REFLECT method (one might say approach) was an innovation based on a combination of ‘regenerated’ Freirean methodology, participatory rural appraisal and gender theory (Archer and Cottingham 1996). Piloted in Bangladesh, Uganda and El Salvador, the approach was widely supported by the donor community (particularly DFID), and now has a global influence. The method involves PRA activities (mapping, matrices, lists) for social analysis and encourages collective social action and problem solving. It did not use a primer in the conventional sense. In retrospect, many of the initial claims for Reflect as a effective adult literacy teaching methodology were perhaps over-stated, and some programme evaluations suggest that it under-performed in terms of literacy and numeracy instruction (Riddel 2001). However, the approach has evolved over time, and when sufficient attention is paid to the engagement and inclusion of practical uses of literacy and numeracy, the approach seems capable of producing similar levels of literacy attainment as primer-based approaches, but with arguably higher levels of empowerment (Fiedrich and Jellema 2003, Archer 2003). As advocates of Reflect would claim, the approach has

challenged traditional thinking about literacy and drawn greater attention to power-relations and the dynamics of social inequality (Archer 2003).

What is a little surprising then, is that Reflect has not been more widely supported by literacy practitioners in Bangladesh, and that the literacy primer remains as the dominant form of adult literacy instruction. What then, are the possible explanations for the lack of wholehearted support for the REFLECT methodology? Let me sketch out some possible explanations. First, as we know, the more experienced adult literacy practitioners in Bangladesh will know of the costly mistakes that were made in some previous programmes, and the impact that such mistakes have on the lives of learners. As a result, they may be more risk adverse in their attitudes than people who have not had such experience. That perhaps explains the level of caution over adoption of a new approach, and their reluctance to be won over by the powerful rhetoric that accompanied the launch of REFLECT. The literature for the approach was also particularly aggressive in criticising the use of primers, which had become a cherished aspect of Bangladeshi programmes: *'The one almost universal feature of adult literacy programmes world-wide is the "primer" in one shape or another (and most primers have very similar shapes and forms). Even radical literacy programmes often depend on the primer. If most literacy programmes have failed then perhaps abolishing the primer may be one of the keys to success'* (Archer and Cottingham 1996:10).

It may be that the caution of some practitioners was well placed as they were not convinced of the efficacy of the REFLECT approach. In retrospect, it appears that despite the strengths of the approach, it is not the panacea for adult literacy than the donor rhetoric and promotional materials might have originally suggested (Riddel 2002, Fiedrich and Jellema 2003). Having said that, one additional explanation for this reluctance can be explained by the degree to which primer based methodology, and the fixed curriculum that it entailed had become institutionalised within systems of funding, training and monitoring. As such, the example perhaps tells us something about the difficulty of innovating new approaches and techniques within such an environment. There have in fact been a number of innovative developments within the adult literacy field in Bangladesh, some of which have been mainstreamed by the established programmes. Examples of this are the innovative materials and delivery

mechanisms of Nijera Shikhi (Cawthera 2003), an approach that built on the experience of the late Rev John Hastings and Laubach's 'each one teach one' approach. The Nijera Shikhi programme used small, simply written primers that were designed to be used for self-learning and peer-based teaching. The programme was low cost and drew significant amounts of its funding from the learner's themselves and their communities (Cawthera 2003). This built on the knowledge that many adults make use of informal, community based networks for learning literacy. The programme was promoted as a 'people's movement' in the 1990's (echoing the language and pride in the Bangla language movement of the 1950's).

There were a number of other significant innovations in the 1990s. The 'Reading for Children' activities supported by DFID and developed by Save the Children USA in collaboration with some of the key NGOs working in the adult literacy field (Bangladesh Development Society, ActionAid Bangladesh, Dhaka Ahsania Mission, Friends in Village Development Bangladesh, and Grameen Shikkha). The innovative approach, which should perhaps have been translated as 'reading with children' built on the understanding of practitioners about the practice of parents (particularly mothers) reading stories with their children, and the possibilities for the children's and parent's literacy (SCF USA 2001). It provided a large set of story reading books suitable for parents to read to their children. This marked a significant shift away from the norms and content of 'functional literacy' programmes and a recognition of the value of building on existing social practice. Mahmud and Maddox (1999) also aimed to build on existing literacy practices. They conducted action research with adult literacy groups based on a social practice model of literacy and numeracy, similar to that which Rogers (1999) termed the '*real literacies approach*'. They found that conventional primers could be modified or supplemented to include texts and words that people wanted and needed to write in their daily lives. They asked literacy groups to identify the particular texts and practices that they wanted to engage with and learn. The approach was later to be developed further and applied in Nepal in the DFID funded Community Literacy Project (see <http://www.clpn.org>), but has had limited application in Bangladesh. There has also been innovation in development of community learning centres, such as the 'Ganokendra' of Dhaka Ahsania Mission. These multipurpose centres support a range of activities including those of literacy and post literacy. Such innovations seem to indicate that REFLECT was not an

isolated example, and given sufficient support, there is still scope to further develop and enhance adult literacy programmes in Bangladesh.

## **2b) Adult literacy Programmes and their Broader Socio-political Context**

Despite the advantages of increased institutionalisation of mass adult literacy programmes in Bangladesh, seen from a longer-term perspective there are also some risks. These risks, despite the examples discussed above, include a possible decline in the scope and encouragement for innovation. The review of early experience highlights the fact that it was the commitment and innovation of key individuals and organisations, as well as broader political and social changes that helped to develop and promote adult literacy programmes. We cannot assume that government led delivery alone will necessarily provide a continuity of support or scope for innovation that was evident earlier. Rather, the longer-term historical evidence suggests that new political regimes often changed or discontinued support for initiatives that were somehow connected with the activities of the previous government. This may, have been one of the reasons why the new government changed the policy and delivery mechanisms of adult literacy from 2001 (Rahman and Rashid 2004), and then abolished the Department of Non-Formal Education. Until then the government had promoted and managed adult literacy delivery by the Department of Non-Formal Education. This longer historical analysis illustrates the fact that both the main political parties have supported adult literacy programmes, and have grounds to feel proud of their commitment, and that it should therefore not be regarded as a partisan activity. The case for changing the previous system of delivery (much of which took place on government's behalf through NGO sector) and the adopting a Total Literacy Movement<sup>4</sup> approach following the Indian campaign-based model is by no means clear, particularly if we consider the benefits of delivery that is linked to broader development activities such as micro-finance and income generation (Oxenham et al 2002). The government of Bangladesh did experiment with the TLM approach prior to 2001, but there is little evidence that the approach was successful. The orientation to 'eradication' of illiteracy in short periods of time within Total Literacy Movement (Bangladesh) and Total Literacy Campaign (India) is not borne out by evidence of

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<sup>4</sup> On the Total Literacy Movement in India see Karlekas and Rao (eds) Paradigms of Learning, Delhi. Sage.

long term ‘residual illiteracy’ that is intimately connected with chronic poverty and persistent gender inequality (see Saldanha 1999). This highlights the need for sustained interventions across a range of sectors, rather than short-term campaigns. Writing on research conducted in Bangladesh, Maddox (2005) highlights some of the practical difficulties in demonstrating the efficacy of literacy programmes.

*‘One of the assumptions made by many literacy programmes in Bangladesh and elsewhere, is that literacy is a ‘development’ activity, and that literacy acquisition, like schooling is a public process associated with national development. In contrast with these public development narratives, I found that subaltern literacy practices were often conducted in privacy due to the risk and vulnerability associated with the activities involved... Such vulnerability is rarely recognised by development agencies that mistakenly believe that people will be happy to discuss literacy use, as a politically neutral development activity.. for women in Bangladesh, the application of literacy skills, and the development of new practices is often contested, and is an inherently risky business that involves ‘challenging patriarchy’ in the negotiation of new social roles and identities’ (Maddox 2005:126-127).*

This highlights the need to see adult literacy programmes as significant interventions in human development, rather than equating them in statistical terms with children’s schooling. This is also supported by Mitra and Rahman’s (2002) report that documents the profiles of adult literacy learners and highlights their social and economic vulnerability. These findings have significant implications for policy; Government and the donor community who may want to link adult literacy to poverty reduction and the Millennium Development Goals, but lack the mechanisms to research and verify such impacts. As a result they may feel that they have insufficient information to support adult literacy interventions. The large-scale monitoring systems of literacy programmes designed in the 1980s and 90s were not sufficiently sensitive, or in-depth to measure and record such changes to people’s livelihoods and wellbeing.

Finally, if we look at the emergence and development of adult literacy programmes in Bangladesh from the longer-term perspective, it becomes clear that large scale political and social changes have had a significant impact. This is not only clear in the case of Bangladesh, but is clear from factors affecting large-scale programmes in other countries. Successful adult literacy programmes are often associated with large-scale political and social change, and new orientation of people to their rights,

citizenship and people's aspirations. Supporting such change may require more than efficient mechanisms for adult literacy delivery. It also requires a significant commitment to the goals of social development and equality at the national and international level. This paper has shown this commitment has been provided by many people working in the adult literacy field in Bangladesh. However, the current national and global commitment to the adult literacy component of the EFA goals is less convincing. This global and donor commitment to adult literacy is likely to be one of the key factors that impact on Bangladeshi literacy programmes in the future, particularly if literacy programmes are more explicitly linked to poverty reduction and the Millennium Development Goals.

## **Conclusions**

What conclusions can be drawn from this discussion? What we have seen is that over time the people's understanding and expectation of 'adult literacy' has developed in an institutional sense, both in terms of establishing the 'literacy group' as a legitimate and important social institution, and in terms of the mechanisms and norms guiding the delivery and management of adult literacy programmes at a national level. We have also seen a change in the roles of government and the NGO sector with a greater degree of standardisation and regulation from government. With this standardisation greater numbers of people were able to access adult literacy classes, but the standardisation and mechanistic approach to training and delivery may have also contributed to a reduction in the scope for new innovation, and perhaps also resulted in groups with particular needs and interests – for example ethnic minorities, and the chronically poor who are not such active and organised members of NGOs becoming excluded. Over the years the government of Bangladesh has taken a significant role in supporting adult literacy programmes. In terms of integrating literacy initiatives into wider policy reduction strategies there remains a lot of work to be done, particularly since the benefits of adult literacy learning and use may be hard to research. This is a particular consideration for women, the poorest groups, and ethnic minorities, who may be reluctant to express their needs, or to discuss the impact and uses of literacy in a public context. This suggests that new systems of monitoring and evaluation should be developed that are more sensitive to such factors.

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