

## **Visit to the literacy movement in Kushtia District.**

I visited samples of the on-going literacy work in Kushtia in the newly launched 'national literacy movement' on 12 and 13 September, and was impressed by what I saw.

The first day I was met at the Shilpakala Academy of Kushtia by about 25 youth volunteers- both male and female - in the movement, most of them college students. Most of them are active in taking literacy classes in their respective areas using the method of Professor Ahsanul Huq, and reported very good success results. In general the learners are graduating to be able to read and write in about a month's time. The group expressed some worry about retaining the interest of the learners, looking for newspapers, books etc. to provide to the fresh learners to sustain their interest. I invited them to think creatively of inviting and encouraging the learners also to write with their newly acquired writing ability - letters, their own life stories and thoughts on various issues, etc. Old women in particular may be motivated if earnestly asked, to write about their life stories, their struggles against many odds, etc., to leave for posterity. Group sessions can thereafter be organised to listen to their accounts. New learners can also be motivated to write letters to relatives and friends in distant places, about their newly acquired literacy skill, and about other daily life's issues. This suggestion spurred the volunteers to start discussing such ideas, to creatively generate more such ideas, and to get away from the negative feeling on the question of sustaining the interests of new learners in practising their newly learned literacy.

The message that I tried to give them is that they should not wait for ideas and materials to come from outside to sustain interest of the new learners in cultivating their new learning, but should rely on their own collective creative imagination involving the learners themselves, their relatives and friends and the wider village communities for this purpose. I felt that the message did have a stimulating effect upon the volunteers.

There were a few youth in the meeting who had not yet joined the movement but had come with a curiosity to know more about this. A number of them seemed to have been stimulated by the discussion to initiate literacy classes in their own respective areas, some telling me that they would start this in a day or two.

The second day I was taken to a number of field sites to witness literacy classes in session. A room in a house in Kumarkhali village hosting literacy classes for 20-25 learners, offered by the owner of the house; another similarly given room in *Jogia Shabji Farm Para* where two student volunteers had contributed Taka 700/- each to buy a blackboard for the class similarly of 20- 25 learners; in another house of the same village another group of about 20 learners; another group in *Aruapara Chairman's lane* meeting daily for 1 to 1 ½ hours; another group in *Aruapara Anwar Islam's Lane*; and finally *Ershadnagar Jailkhana Mor* where 35 learners were gathering for six days a week in 2-hourly sessions. All of them were women's groups, but I was told that there are men's groups as well in other villages. In some of the groups I visited, women who had completed their own reading and writing skills were teaching others - a fulfilling sight to watch. On the average they said they were completing reading and writing ability in about a month. I asked many to demonstrate their skills by reading from Dr. Ahsanul Haque's manual and also by writing sentences on the blackboard, and there was no doubt that they had learnt, although some were slower than others in reading out and/or writing. Senior villagers gathered around us as we visited the classes, all seemingly approving the movement greatly.

The leading volunteers reported that there were many other villages and urban places where such literacy classes were being held, and that the movement was spreading. I sat with them outside the classroom in Ershadnagar. Syeda Habiba, head of a social organisation working with abandoned children and the *Buno* community in Kushtia who had accompanied me in this village trip also joined us in the discussion. She had no idea previously that such a literacy movement was going on in Kushtia, was greatly excited, and said that she would herself initiate literacy classes with many groups she was acquainted with. Our discussion with the leading volunteers underlined the assessment that Kushtia promises to be the first district in the country to "make it" – i.e. become a fully or near-fully literate district in the country, may be in one-to-two years' time [*unless the next 'democratic' government to come kills it or 'co-opts' it!*]. The youth volunteers told me that they have this target in their own mind and are active working out a strategy to accomplish it, adding that they wanted nothing from outside except encouragement and occasional visits by seniors of standing from outside. Not an altogether undesirable deal!

*[I was reminded of comments I have received on the literacy movement by a very distinguished and highly respected retired Chief Justice of the country's Supreme Court, and also by a number of participants in a discussion on the movement in a session of the 'pathak adda' organised by the ALRD at Dhaka, that the youth of Bangladesh are all 'spoiled' and anti-social and cannot be expected to engage in any such patriotic work. How wrong the Dhaka elite are in knowing our youth! And the distinguished Chief Justice – poor thing – you have lived an 'imprisoned' life dealing only with criminals – how will you ever know our patriotic youth unless you step down from your secluded den and seek them out!]*

Before I left Kushtia Syeda Habiba reported to me that she had had a discussion on the literacy movement with the Mayor of Kushtia who had also welcomed it, and had promised encouragement, and also support by way of providing space for holding classes in places where space might not be available otherwise.

I also met a senior journalist working for a Bengali Daily on 14 September when I was visiting the Tagore Kuthibari in Shelaidaha, and briefed him on the movement, inviting him to visit the movement and write on it, both by way of short columns for newspapers and also in-depth reports for publication elsewhere. He showed keen interest, and promised he would get in touch with Syeda Habiba, whom he knew personally, to work out a plan to visit the movement and write about it. Perhaps at some stage some poverty research agency like RIB might wish to get in touch with him to work out with him an undertaking to write in some depth for the *Gonogobeshona* bulletin on the exciting literacy movement in Kushtia.

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Postscript: About a week after returning from Kushtia I got a mobile call from Syeda Habiba, reporting that she has started literacy classes with 10 unlettered workers in Kushtia city, and is mobilizing volunteers for more.