

# **Basic Functional Education Programme: An Analysis of AIOU Efforts for Uplift of Rural Illiterate Community**

**By**

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## **Development: With or Without Education?**

Pakistan is a developing country with an agrarian economy. According to the *Economic Survey*, 1998, the estimated population of Pakistan was 139.04 million with a growth rate of 2.7 percent per annum. The general standard of living and the overall scenario of socio-economic development present a dismaying picture. This is, by and large due to an over-whelming increase during the last few decades. Like any other developing country of the world in general, and those of the Asian region, in particular, an over-whelming majority (about 68 percent) of its population is living in rural areas. Obviously, for that reason, any effort to gear up development process in the country must primarily concentrate upon the uplift of the rural areas.

It is an established fact that, other things remaining the same, conservation of resources and a judicious use thereof is an essential pre-requisite for paving the way for development of an area. Similarly, the level of education of the people of a country is one of the most potent factors which creates an awareness among them about the significance of the resources and thus develops a positive attitude towards the preservation of the same for development. In this way, the level of education does contribute towards the development of the country. But the hopelessly low level of literacy, particularly in the rural areas (about 18 percent) of Pakistan is adversely affecting the overall development. Efforts have been made during the past decades to bring about socio-economic elevation among this part of the population. Accordingly, leaving aside the very few exceptions, the whole of the rural population, has got an extremely low standard of living.

In the context of Pakistan, especially in rural areas, it can be safely hypothesised that the situation is further aggravated by the unprecedented population increase in these areas. Because of their illiterate status, by an large, people in the rural areas generally do not have the capacity to understand and analyze the

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problems emanating from population increase. These problems may pertain, inter alia, to food, agriculture, health, education, housing resources etc. Their ignorance about population related issues and concepts like family size and standard of living, disease control, water-resource management etc. is continuously having an adverse effect on their overall pace of development in spite of their hard labour put in by them in their day-to-day life activities.

It is well said that a constant factor can never be a cause of change. Obviously, we cannot afford to defer development efforts indefinitely with the remote hope that one day our rural masses would be educated and then they would contribute towards the development of the country.. It, therefore, does necessitate to devise innovative measures to popularize population and environment related concepts among the people who are not literate. Consequently, this state of affairs led the experts in the field to explore some non-conventional methods and techniques to launch development efforts. The point intended to be conveyed here is that adult education and literacy per se need not necessarily be taken as essential components of a training programme aiming at the propagation of development related concepts among illiterate masses. Chris Duke puts beautifully that such programmes imposed from outside often give birth to unintended consequences such as consolidation of land holdings, dependence on imported produce and further deterioration of the lot of the poorest people. So the realization that without motivation and participation development misses the mark, leads to a new emphasis pertaining to a complex set of questions about literacy, functional skills and community participation and mobilization.

The past history of not only literacy programme, but even of those coupled with skill training in Pakistan is more than enough to reveal the fact that people have lost their confidence in such undertakings. Not only that most of them are definitely not interested in literacy per se, but even literacy as a means of fostering development in rural areas is also looked at quite skeptically. This has led the rural people leaving exceptions aside, of course, to think and declare literacy of no use. The reasons for such an attitude on their part are not far to seek. Literacy per se cannot solve their persisting problems of poverty, illness, unemployment and the like. One of the UNESCO reports about Pakistan has rightly stated that although acquisition of knowledge is recognised as desirable, acquiring literacy's not generally considered a felt need in rural areas. The adult farmer in a village is not interested in attending classes in the literacy centres. He does not see any direct benefit from his becoming literate. Added to this is the urge to put children aged five and above to work either in the fields or in some other occupation of economic return.

In view of these facts, there was a dire need to recast and redesign the strategy for promoting these concepts without over-emphasizing the acquisition of literacy for that purpose. This may also be known as ultra-literacy approach. The AIOU developed and adopted this approach under its Basic Functional Education programme. Before we go further in this regard, a thorough analysis of the approach looks to be quite pertinent here.

## **Basic Functional Education Programme**

The Allama Iqbal Open University (AIOU) took the lead in this regard and designed its Basic Functional Education Programme (BFEP) after the design of the ODA-funded Functional Education Project for Rural Areas (FEPR). Under the FEPR, formal and informal surveys were conducted during the early stages of the project to familiarise the field staff with the local communities to introduce them to the projects aims and methods and to gain an in-depth understanding of the needs, priorities, constraints and capability as potential learners. This research helped a lot in making decisions about the selection of appropriate course topics and methods. The FEPR was closed up at the end of its third year period in June 1985 and its place was taken by a continuing university programme known as BFEP on 1<sup>st</sup> July 1985. The BFEP was based on the concept of development without bothering the people about literacy for which they are seldom motivated. The programme tended to by-pass literacy and teach needed skills to the rural people which can help them solve their day-to-day problems faced in agriculture, health and nutrition. Population, child care and the like which are very significant aspects of development.

The BFEP, to begin with, was started by the AIOU in the “Barani” (rain-fed) area in tehsil Kharian of the Punjab province. Contrary to the situation in plain areas, agriculture is not the mainstay of the economy of the people living in this topography. Since land-holdings in this area are scattered and do not yield sufficient crop, people of the area are earnestly interested in learning skills and techniques which can help them earn more money and thus improve the standard of living of their families. Accordingly, the strategy aimed at teaching agricultural skills to the illiterate people without bothering them for literacy. Concepts relating to population education, environmental education, livestock vegetable growing and the like were also included in the contents for imparting training to the target people.

## Major Objectives of the BFEP

Major objectives of the BFEP may be mentioned as under:

1. To help the rural masses learn and put into practice the things which will be of functional use in the everyday life for improvement of their economic condition, general health, social conditions and standard of living.
2. To implement a strategy appropriate to rural areas which can be replicated and extended to different main cultural regions and also extend the out-reach system of AIOU into educationally deprived areas.
3. To develop more courses based on the felt needs of the people and to carry out field-testing in order to assess their suitability.
4. To collaborate with government and non-government agencies concerned with rural development and act as a resource centre for other organizations.

## Training Strategy

It may be pointed out that in the BFEP approach, there is no regular face-to-face instruction by trained/qualified teachers/instructors or other staff of the AIOU. Rather, it makes use of non-formal techniques to pave the way for rural development without bothering the people for literacy. This ultra-literacy training strategy as developed by the AIOU, and then adopted as BFEP, consists of the following stages:

### 1. Needs Assessment

The most basic step in this approach is to assess the felt needs of the people of the area with the help of a number of instruments like interview schedule, inventory, observation etc. Trained staff of the AIOU visits the target area according to a notified schedule and collects relevant data about the diversified needs, interests and problems of the people living in the area. The AIOU staff does this basically on the initiative of different agencies collaborating with the AIOU. The list of these agencies appears in a later section of this article.

### 2. Development of Training Materials

Curriculum experts of the AIOU, in collaboration with experts from relevant Nation Building Departments and other agencies, identify learning objectives and select the most appropriate training material for the target

people in the light of their felt needs. As already mentioned above, this is an approach which completely by-passes literacy for the purpose. Therefore, the material, so developed, is audio-visual in nature and consists of a number of flip charts containing pictures, the description of which is contained in an audio cassette that goes with it at the time of instruction. As a strategy, material in skill-training is prepared integrating concepts pertaining to the problem under attack.

### 3. Formation of Learning Groups

Formation of learning groups is an important stage in the series of training activities under the BFEP. The learners, i.e. the individuals with low level of literacy (ILL's) or with no literacy at all, are organized into groups for providing training to them. This is known as "Out-reach System" of the AIOU. As a matter of fact, very few of the group members happen to be semi-literate whereas most of them are usually illiterate or with very little literacy.

Learning groups are formed after visiting different villages. During these visits, the village elders and other influential people are consulted so as to fix a time and day for motivational meetings prior to group formation. Such meetings are generally attended by 30-50 people in which team members from the AIOU and other agencies participate and discuss the benefits of such programmes for the people of the area.. Those who generally feel convinced of the usefulness of the skills are arranged into a group.

### 4. Selection and Training of Group Leader

After the learners are organized into groups, they nominate/select a group leader from amongst themselves. For six learning groups, there is one Group Assistant Supervisor. He is supposed to handle the learning process as per instruction given in the audio cassette. For this purpose, he is provided extensive training in a number of skills like the following:

- group handling,
- motivation techniques
- handling the audio cassette player
- handling the flip charts
- introducing concepts to the learners
- handling discussion of the learners, etc.

Five such supervisors are attached to one field worker who is an employee of the University. One field worker, in this way, looks after the training of about 600 learners.

#### 5. Delivery Mechanism

Immediately after the group has received his training, course meetings are supposed to start twice a week. The methodology of instruction is mainly based upon the use of audio cassettes prepared in local dialect. Since the target people in such programmes are illiterate, also takes place in the local dialect. The group leader, who is supposed to have learnt the use of the equipment, operates the cassette which explains the flip charts one by one. In this way, the cassette and the charts go together.

#### 6. Discussion Sessions

There is also an in-built mechanism to ensure discussion among the learners on the topic/skills presented to the learners. As guided by the cassette, the group leader conducts the discussion on the relevant concepts. He/she ensures the participation of individual members in such a way that each one of them is likely to internalise the total content of the session.

Here a mention also needs to be made of fact that the Assistant Supervisors are also usually present in the course meeting which provides necessary guidance to the group leader and the learners. This helps to solve their learning problems on the spot.

#### 7. Distribution of Handouts

Handouts pertaining to the concepts and skills under discussion are distributed amongst the learners towards the end of each meeting. A "Handout" is a single sheet of paper on which all the illustrations of the flip charts on a specific topic are reproduced in miniature form. With the help of these "handouts", the learners may revise/recall the information given in the cassette/s pertaining to a particular course aiming at teaching relevant concepts skills to the rural semi-literate or even illiterate people. This also helps the target learners to establish a sort of relationship between the discussion in the group meeting and the concepts/skills being imparted to them. In this way, in addition to recalling the discussion, it also promotes a

sort of motivation for becoming literate. This is, however, a bye-product and not the main objective to be achieved.

Since such courses are especially designed to meet the training heads of rural masses with low level of literacy at all, practical demonstrations occupy a very crucial place in the whole process of training. According to the intervals as provided for in the recorded cassette, the group leader, or if he does not have much technical knowledge about the topic under discussion, the expert or a representative of the relevant nation building department also arranges for a practical demonstration of the skill so as to provide a concrete and living situation to the learners for learning a particular skill. For example, concepts and skills pertaining to poultry-keeping, tree plantation, house-hold affairs, child care etc. may be clarified to them through on-the-spot demonstration. Opportunities are also provided to the learners to perform the skills in the presence of other co-learner thus making the acquisition of skills fairly perfect and relatively permanent.

### **Collaboration with other Agencies**

As it can be judged from the above, the BFEP is basically a community up-lift programme. For that matter, the AIOU has been offering this programme in collaboration with a number of agencies. These agencies include the following:

1. UNICEF
2. Agha Khan rural Support Programme
3. Pak German Based, Peshawar
4. Ministry of Religious and Minority Affairs
5. All Pakistan Women Association
6. Islamabad Capital Territory
7. Ministry of Local Government and Rural Development Programme
8. Save the Child Fund
9. Catholic Relief Services
10. Rural Development Foundation
11. World Vision
12. Society for the Welfare and Rehabilitation of Children, Services Hospital, Lahore
13. GTZ, Peshawar
14. USAID

The practice has been that these agencies identify the area and provide sponsorship for developing and launching BFEP programmes according to the felt needs of the people of the area. Rest of the academic and technical input is provided by the AIOU.

The AIOU has so far imparted training to more than thirty thousand illiterates by using this technique in the programmes run by it through its own resources. The AIOU, in addition to running this programme for the people residing in the specified areas, has also been offering skill training programmes in the prisons located in cities including Rawalpindi (Adiala Jail), Lahore (Kot Lakhpat Jail), Multan, Bahawalpur, Sahiwal, Faisalabad, Gujranwala. The total number of illiterates training by the AIOU, in collaboration with different agencies goes well above the figure of one hundred thousand. This is in addition to the number trained by the AIOU already mentioned above.

It is, however, a point of great concern that the performance of such a useful programme has suffered a lot due to certain financial and administrative reasons. The situation, therefore, does call for immediate measures to reactivate the same.

### **Use of BFEP to Promote Population and Environmental Education**

Though, along with other development oriented concepts like the population and environment related concepts were present in the content imparted through this approach, yet it represented only a modest attempt in this regard. The situation, therefore calls for designing and planning the programme at a massive scale for popularizing these concepts among the target people at large. Following content is proposed to be taught to them through those approach:

- Meaning and nature of population
- Factors of population change with special reference to rural areas
- Benefits and hazards associated with large and small family size
- Family as basic unit
- Income generating skills
- Gender roles and responsibilities
- Marriage as a social institution
- Values and attitudes
- Food and nutrition
- Health and sanitation
- Child care
- Resources and their types
- Conservation of resources
- Balance between population and resources



The list given above is only suggestive and leaves much to be desired. Several other concepts may be identified relevant to the specific situation obtaining in the identified areas.

## Conclusion

Development oriented programmes based on the said approach, like the BFEP, are highly significant for the uplift of rural areas not only because they would help people understand population and environment related problems and generating more income for better standard of living, but also because of their usefulness in preparing people to successfully adjust to new technological developments taking place in the remotest areas with their implications for environment. This would also help them a better exposure to the rural illiterate/semi-literate population to numerous similar developments including the hazards associated with the same. This would help them cope with these rapid changes in a more befitting manner.

We can sum up by re-emphasizing that in a country like Pakistan with agrarian economy, there is a dire need to address to the real and living issues and problems of the illiterate and semi-literate rural people. If planned realistically and implemented effectively, this strategy can go a long way in expediting the process of disseminating population and environmental education concepts which, in turn, would facilitate rural uplift in a short span of time and bring all the fruits of latest developments and inventions to the door-steps of the hither-to deprived part of population. It can also motivate people for acquiring adequate literacy level which may help them to steer effectively in understanding and overcoming their day-to-day problems in an effective manner. The quantum of the problem is so big in Pakistan that there is lot of scope to strengthen such efforts and help the people change their lot.

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