Literacy Assessment Survey 2008: Towards Reliable Literacy Data

Recognizing the overarching need of reliable literacy data, Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS) - the national statistical organization - conducted the first national literacy assessment survey in Bangladesh, with technical and financial support from UNESCO Dhaka Office. The study. This is the first survey conducted by BBS where literacy skills of the respondents have been measured through conducting actual tests. This survey has been conducted with following the similar methodologies used in the Education Watch 2002 (Literacy in Bangladesh: Need for a New Vision) and Assessment of Literacy Status in Bangladesh 2005, and this can be considered as a continuation of these studies to provide basis for comparing the changes over time.

The Literacy Assessment Survey 2008 found overall literacy rate 49.7 percent for population 11 years. For the population over 15+ age groups, the literacy rate is found to be 48.8 percent. The difference between male and female literacy rates is small, where male 48.6 percent and female 49.1 percent. Female literacy rate for the first time surpassed male literacy rate, which may be considered as impact of several gender sensitive programmes undertaken by the government and other agencies.

The survey mainly aimed to answer the following questions:

- What proportion of the population in different age groups is literate?
- What is the proportion of population having different levels of literacy skills?
- Does level of literacy vary significantly between male and female and across the regions?
- What are the possible socio-economic correlates of literacy?

Four levels of literacy were defined as the following based on their competencies in literacy skills:

- **Non-literate**: Lack of ability to recognize and write alphabets, words, and numbers. Respondents in this category may score maximum up to 24.99.
- **Semi-literate**: Ability to recognize and write some simple words, to count objects, and numbers at a very basic level. Respondents in this category scores between 25.00 to 49.99.
- **Literate at the initial level**: Ability to read and write sentences, possessing skills of four basic rules of arithmetic and limited use of literacy skills. Respondents in this category scores between 50.00 to 74.99.
- **Literacy at the advance level**: Ability to read and write fluently, competency in four arithmetic rules, ability use the skills in everyday life. Respondents in this category scores between 75.00 to 100.

Out of these four levels of literacy skills, only two levels – Literate at basic level and Literate at advance level – have been considered as literates. While other methods of determining literacy rate, such as self-declaration used in census and household level surveys, may include the semi-literates in the group of literates.
Summary of Findings

Following are the summary of some key findings from the Literacy Assessment Survey 2008:

- Rural literacy rate (47.1 percent) is found to be much lower than that of urban areas (589.1 percent). However, a sharp decrease in literacy of urban adult males is observed. In 2005, literacy rate for urban males was 62.7 percent, which now stands at 56.7 percent.
- Advanced level literacy (30.2 percent) is found higher compared to initial level literacy (18.6 percent) in both rural and urban areas.
- Proportion of population at different levels of literacy varies across rural and urban areas of six administrative divisions. Literacy level of adults (15+ years) is highest in Chittagong (54.8 percent) and lowest in Sylhet (43.9 percent).
- The scores of respondent (maximum possible score was 100 and minimum 0) reveal relatively skewed distribution. The mean and median score at the national level is 49 for both male and female respondents.

LAS 2008 shows that regarding to literacy rate, females are ahead of males by 1 percent point. Male literacy rate was 49.4% while that for female was 50.2%. At initial level females lagged while at the advance level females were ahead of male by nearly 3 percent point. Male-female difference for all levels of literacy is small.
Male-Female Differentials of Literacy Rates

The literacy level of urban respondents was higher compared to rural respondents (Table 3-2). It is found that overall 58.1 percent respondents were literate and 41.8 percent of urban people were illiterate. While 52.8 percent was illiterate, 47.1 percent literates are living in the rural areas.

As regards rural areas the range was smaller, lowest was 41.3% for Barisal and highest was 54.2% for Chittagong (Figure 3-4). Urban literacy rates were very close between divisions except for Sylhet division. It was 51.5 percent in Sylhet and was between 55.5% in Rajshahi and 60.8% Chittagong.
Female literacy rates were higher in Chittagong, Khulna, and Rajshahi, lower in Barisal, Dhaka and Sylhet. However, the difference was small for all the divisions across rural and urban areas. The variation was observed between four levels of literacy across rural and urban areas of the 6 administrative divisions.

Literacy at both advanced and initial level was highest for Chittagong division. Next to Chittagong were Dhaka and Khulna division where initial and advanced level combined were very close to 49.5%. In Rajshahi, Barisal and Sylhet, both levels were close and combined were close to 45%. The Figure 3-5 depicts the differentials among divisions, rural-urban areas and by levels of literacy.