SOCIAL RESEARCH AND LITERACY CAMPAIGNS 1)

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The answer to the question how social research can help a literacy campaign depends both on the views the researcher has about the issue, and on the guidance he gets from the campaigners. The former, as a rule, is not familiar with all the problems posed by this specialised topic. In fact, the views propounded below are those of a social anthropologist who is no educationalist. They will therefore show biasses and plain shortcomings. Unless corrected, they may direct the investigation toward answers the educator-campaigner has not been waiting for, though he may be surprised by some of them.

Literacy campaigns are rarely heard of in modern society. More often they are staged in countries with a large proportion of illiterates. There they aim at introducing literary faculties where they did not exist before. They tend to produce a new type of citizen with new skills. It is expected to exercise those skills henceforth, often in the same environment. It is not certain therefore that the people will clearly see the reasons why they should learn to read and write. Indeed their original desire may actually weaken because of intensified use of radio, film and television. A necessary aspect of literacy campaigns will therefore have to be the proper motivation of the individual.

In any society there is, as a rule, a common opinion as to what should, through education, be handed down to the next generation. There is also agreement that education should prepare people (not necessarily the young ones only) for the anticipated form of life. Now strain or even conflict may be caused by the insertion of new subjects into education not in keeping with tradition, and by the attempt to teach people skills for which there had been little or no need previously.

Society must either adjust itself and create possibilities for the proper utilization of the newly acquired skills or else ignore or suppress them, possibly even cast off the new literates.

Reaction to literacy campaigns must be anticipated on two different levels, the individual one and the societal one. On both levels the very reasons which have resisted the expansion of literacy in the past may be

1) In the spring of 1962 the chief of the Unesco Mission in Iran envisaged the possibility of being invited to cooperate in the preparation of a literacy campaign. Just in case such a request reached him, he asked us to survey the ways in which social research might assist in the design for an expedient literacy campaign for Iran. A discussion paper was rather hastily prepared of which the following is a condensation.
present still, though perhaps dormant for the moment. Their presence is not improbable in countries like Iran, where although the literary traditions have a longer and shinier history than in most other civilizations, the majority of its communities have perpetuated themselves without the use of writing and reading. There is no reason to doubt their ability to do so in the future. The appeal of the campaign will therefore have to be very strong and appropriate.

As yet 85% of the Iranian people are illiterate. Their mode of life has little use for the written word. All communication, instruction, etc. is oral. Even business contracts, leases, etc. are often committed to memory only. This almost systematic non-utilization of written evidence (for whatever reasons) demands and enables quite a different behaviour and social intercourse than if such means were widely applied. We do not exaggerate when we surmise that to the non-literate society, corresponds a certain type of personality.

Literacy on an appreciable scale, bringing a new element into social relations, creates new possibilities of documentation and communication, and restricts the use of other practices. Not only the relations between individuals are affected, but also those between social units, institutions, associations and the like.

That two-way process of accommodation and adjustment will not effectuate itself, let alone develop along the desired lines once the innovation has been introduced. A process of some sort will originate but will require a conscious effort by those concerned.

The instances to support this view are many. There are societies that boast a fair percentage of literates, but for all practical matters have reduced them to the state of functional illiterates. There is East Pakistan of which I have seen something. Its census of 1951 states that 22% of the population is literate. Taking the demographic pattern into consideration (average lifespan about 30; children under ten account for at least one-fifth of the total population; education of women is notoriously and traditionally neglected), the given proportion would mean that about one in every three adult men must be literate. Unfortunately, this occupation-ally undifferentiated society (85% cultivators) has no scope for the faculties of reading and writing. Social life in East Pakistan largely operates on a sub-literate level. The situation is even aggravated by the circumstance that the literates feel themselves to be a kind of élite, above manual labour. To be sure, this attitude is enforced upon them; after all the family has not sacrificed so much for their education to want them to take up the same work. There are thus more than enough people who can read and write, they are side-tracked or expelled. The literate