

Literacy And The Mother Tongue

In any literacy teaching project, the choice of the language to be taught is of paramount importance. Highly complex human and cultural factors are involved in this learning process, whether for the child, the continuity of whose effective, cognitive and psycho-motor development it is the guarantee, or for the adult, for whom literacy training will only be motivating if it leads on to greater participation in the political, economic and social life of the community to which he or she belongs.

Literacy teaching in the mother tongue has a head start, since the pupil begins with an already acquired knowledge of the language. Literacy teaching in a foreign language makes learning the mechanisms of reading and writing considerably more complicated, since it introduces difficulties inherent in the acquisition of new vocabulary and of new ways of thinking.

What is a mother tongue? The "mother" in the term has no "genetic" or "biological" connotations, but relates to the linguistic community in which a person is born and brought up. A mother tongue is the prime means of expression of an ethnic group and is the instrument of the socialization of the individual within the basic social unit, usually the family.

According to their status or their function, mother tongues become community or vehicular languages when they are

also used for inter-ethnic or inter-community communication. They are called "national languages" when they constitute the language of the entire nation or of its main ethnic components. From this point of view, the linguistic situation on our planet is extremely complex, since, including dialects, there are thought to be between 3,500 and 9,000 languages in the world, distributed over some 200 sovereign states.

Mother tongues and national unity

Very few countries are strictly monolingual. The situation of multilingual countries varies according to their history, their social and economic context, and the ethnic composition of their populations. The relationships between local languages, the functions they fulfill, the status it is desired to give them and the educational aims of the society all influence the definition and implementation of language policies.

The adoption of a common language can obviously, promote national unity. Many decision makers are convinced that the encouragement of several languages militates against such unity, and the risk of accentuating cleavages between communities and the danger of being left outside the

main currents of knowledge and information flow are often invoked to justify the choice of one or a restricted number of national languages, even, perhaps, a foreign language, as official languages.

Monolingualism continues to be perceived as a major element in the founding of a nation. Yet what heightens disension is not so much the plurality of languages as the conflicts of interest that they express. A plurality of languages should be seen as an enrichment and as the reflection of a plurality of cultures.

The substitution of interdependent relationships for ties based on domination contributes greatly to national integration. Apart from ensuring the development of widely used languages, the coexistence of several mother tongues guarantees better mutual understanding between cultures.

For sociological and sometimes psychological reasons relating to history, and in particular to the colonial past of some countries, certain languages have become devalued because they are considered unsuited to express the complexities of the modern world. Still hovering between the oral and written forms, they may indeed find it difficult to cover

the vast and changing field of contemporary science.

The coexistence of several languages necessarily raises the question of their "parity" or "equality". Theoretically, all languages are of equal value and are intrinsically capable of expressing the same realities and of developing — it is in being used that they develop and become refined. In practice, however, their true position depends upon the status accorded to them as well as the functions they fulfill and the fields in which they are used. In this respect, true equality between languages is impossible. But is it even necessary? In a plurilingual context the aim should rather be to achieve complementarity of roles and functions.

Those who decry the use of mother tongues in literacy work invoke economic and technical arguments, pointing out that, in a society with no basic infrastructure, it is difficult to bear the cost of the operations necessary to integrate these languages into the educational system.

It is true that to publish textbooks and primers in languages that are in the course of becoming established raises a number of material and technical problems. The phonetic and grammatical structure of

languages that have only recently acquired a written form involves the use of graphic signs and printing characters that demand a technical competence rarely available in the countries concerned. These, however, are difficulties that can be reduced by the use of informal teaching methods and simplified printing techniques.

Between these two extremes — making use of all a country's languages, which is practically and financially impossible, or adopting a single language (often a foreign language), which is culturally and politically unacceptable — there lies a third way: that of a graduated multilingualism, in which the emphasis is placed on certain languages, yet without neglecting the development of the others.

Within a given national unit, at least two linguistic levels can always be distinguished, that of the individual's mother tongue and that of the main, official language of the state. Sometimes there may be three, four or even five levels, corresponding to an equivalent number of languages which it is desirable to know. However, mastery of the first language, the mother tongue, or of the variant that replaces it, remains the decisive step in the individual's linguistic development.

The teaching of the mother tongue leads to an uncomfortable dilemma: attaching too much importance to local languages can be a handicap with regard to economic and scientific matters, but to ignore them is to condemn them to regression. The dilemma resolves itself, however, if the primary objective is to encourage the emotional development, the self-discovery and concern for the future of the person learning to read, rather than to ensure the acquisition of a socially and functionally dominant language.

Different approaches

The mother tongue may be used as the vehicle of education at all levels of the educational system. It may enjoy exclusive status, but in some cases it is used up to a certain level and then replaced by another language. In other cases, it is used for the teaching of certain subjects only.

Sometimes the mother tongue is the subject, but not the medium, of teaching. Literacy work with adults is often carried out with a partial use of the mother tongue.

Some national languages are not equipped to perform effectively all the functions re-

quired in a complete education. In these cases, enrichment of the language becomes part of the task of literacy and post-literacy work.

In most of the multilingual countries of Africa and Asia, in which the language spoken in the family circle is often not that used by the authorities or in schools, literacy work is usually conducted in the local languages. When these languages have only a recent written tradition, literacy work marks the transition from the oral to the written, with all that implies for specific modes of perception and reflection.

Clearly, these countries are attempting to create and maintain a social, economic and cultural climate favourable to the written word including the greatest possible stimulation and incitement to written expression.

One of the essential functions of those engaged in literacy work is to produce, acquire and manage teaching materials in the national languages and mother tongues. Some of this material is printed, some is produced for the modern media (radio, television, audio-visual display) and some for the traditional media (theatre, folklore, various types of games). Libraries, fairs, exhibitions, listening

groups, study circles and action groups are set up to make these materials available and to encourage the largest possible number of people to use them.

The newly-literate must be placed in an environment in which they are constantly faced with the challenge of the written word. Printed material alone is not enough. The newly-literate must be involved in activities which are too complex for them to rely on memory and oblige them to use written communication. Most of the French-speaking countries of Africa are thus trying to familiarize their civil servants and development personnel with the written forms of languages used in literacy work. They are encouraging the use of these written forms in technical and administrative documents, road signs, advertisements and the labelling of goods, as well as the diffusion of books, brochures and newspapers written in these languages.

The purpose of these measures is to overcome reservations about, if not disdain for, the languages used in literacy work on the part of officials most of whom are the product of a different educational system and who normally use another form of communication such as a European language (in this case French). They also help to demarginalize the newly-literate by offering them a written environment in which they feel secure.

Courtesy : Unesco

KERALA, a sliver of land between mountain and sea, has been declared the first totally literate state in India.

One of the neo-literates, 51-year-old Ayisha Chellakode, made the announcement before thousands in Calicut. A poet sang at the celebration: "At this sunset today, we see the sunrise of glowing letters, enlightening the minds of millions in our Kerala."

The statement said that on that day, April 18, 93.66 per cent of Kerala's population between the ages of six to 60 was literate.

The definition of total literacy, as set by the National Literacy Mission (NLM), is that 90 per cent of people in the six to 60 age group should be able to read (at 35 words a minute), write (at eight words a minute), do simple arithmetic and know some basic facts about health and environment.

Kerala has gone far past these norms. It is now determined to bring into the fold the remaining 800,000 illiterates, mainly tribal people, itinerant fishermen, plantation workers and the very old. It has also begun a "post-graduate" programme for the neo-literates, intending to make them read a special newspaper and abridged classics and discuss more complex ideas about health, environment, work and electoral responsibility.

Amazingly, Kerala's achievement has been brought about entirely by volunteers working in a vast, grassroots-level movement.

Other states are now looking at the Kerala experience and hope to achieve the NLM literacy target by 2000.

The Kerala movement is called Akshara Keralam. It started when Ernakulam was declared the first totally liter-

HOW THE PEOPLE SET THE PACE IN LITERACY RACE

India has scored a major success in its first efforts to raise its level of literacy. In just one year, the National Literacy Mission, formed only in 1988, has raised the literacy level in Kerala state to an astounding 93.66 per cent in the 6 to 60 age group. Gemini News Service reports on an achievement it is hoped will now spread to the rest of India. by S. Muthiah

ate district in India in February 1990. That had been achieved by a 100 per cent voluntary movement.

This resulted in a government pledge to make the remaining 13 districts of Kerala literate within a year of starting a programme.

Tens of thousands of volunteers carried out a statewide

survey which revealed that a little over two million people in the six-to-60 age group were illiterate.

The volunteers began work on this target group by June 1990. By this April, nearly 1.2 million had become neo-literates. To accomplish this, nearly 250,000 people were involved and only Rs80 million spent

against an initial estimate of Rs325 million.

The team included district resource people, 30,000 master trainers, and tens of thousands of volunteers cutting across age, sex and sectarian affiliations, were trained on the job.

Volunteers included government officials, young matriculates, secondary school drop-outs and local council members.

The 1,400 government officials worked long and erratic hours. Local bodies collected large amounts to buy teaching aids — spectacles, slates and chalk, for example. Numerous people lent their houses for use as classrooms.

Instruction was given in many ways, beginning with the traditional *kala jatha* — song and dance drama. There were group singing, literacy festivals, study visits, discussion groups and village parliaments.

Meanwhile, volunteers taught groups of 10 the three Rs in their native Malayalam. Health, nutrition and environmental issues were discussed and women's rights were impressed on the learners.

The learners then staged literacy marches to encourage others to join the programme and cultural programmes to show what they had learned.

They scribbled campaign news and literacy slogans on special "literacy walls."

A project director said educated young people seem to have invented a new social role for themselves. Many have gone beyond teaching and are involved in local projects, like building village roads.

The neo-literates are happy that they can now read names on buses, railway timetables and signboards, and read and write letters.

Kerala did have a head start, compared with the rest of India. It has been the seat of several important Hindu religious reforms.

There is a long history of missionary activity and the Maharajah of Cochin and Travancore, whose kingdoms combined at independence, were progressive and responsible rulers.

In 1941, when India had a literacy rate of 17 per cent, the Kerala figure was 41 per cent. In 1961, female literacy in India was 13 per cent, but in Kerala 39 per cent.

Some 42 districts of India have now taken up the literacy challenge. Medinipur in West Bengal, where alone there are 200,000 illiterates, is one. Bardhaman, in the same state, is another. If there is success with these new areas, then the National Literacy Mission, founded only in 1988, could well reach its initial target to convert 80 million illiterates in the 15 to 35 age group, into functionally literate persons by 1995.

If that happens, much credit would go to what Ernakulam district started and Kerala refined. — GEMINI NEWS



Student mixing a solution at a practical class at Jahangirnagar University.

JU Students Face Transport Problem

Our JU Correspondent

STUDENTS, teachers and employees of Jahangirnagar University are facing an acute transport problem.

The Jahangirnagar University was originally planned to be a fully residential university. But as it does not have enough dormitories for its about three thousand students, and residential quarters for all teachers, a sizeable number of students, teachers and employees have to shuttle between Dhaka city and the university campus everyday.

At present there are six buses (including three hired buses) for students, one bus for teachers to ply between the university campus and Dhaka city. On working days six trips are arranged each way to carry students to and from the university.

Alfaz Hussain, lecturer in the department of English said the demand for transport has

been increased because even those students and teachers who are provided with accommodation in the university campus have to come to Dhaka city for shopping and recreation. Some students come to the city also to do private tuition to meet their educational expenses.

He says the only way to solve the transport problem is to increase the number of university buses for the 30-kilometre trip from the university to Dhaka city.

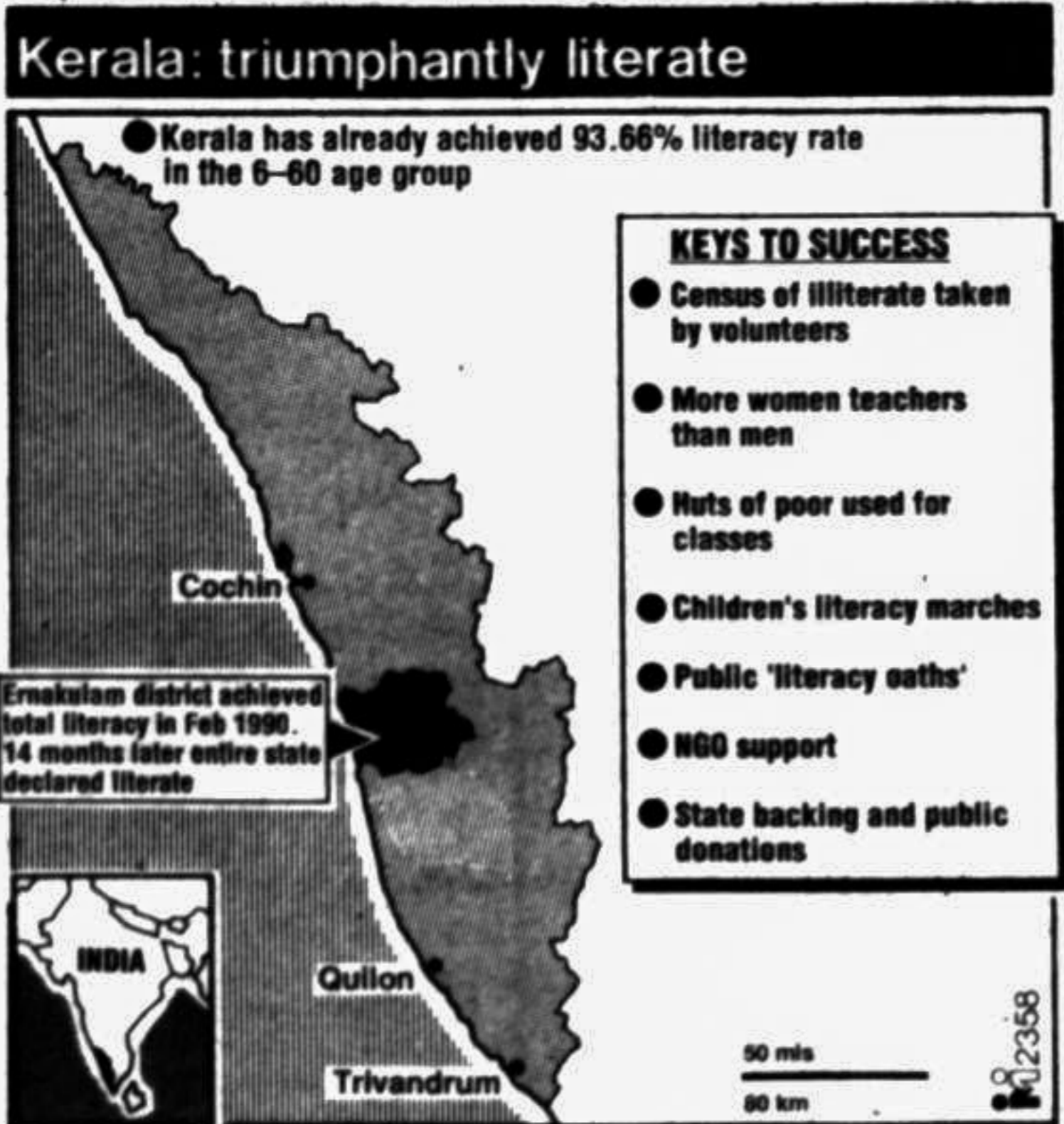
A university employee unwilling to be named said they are provided with two bus trips a day. But students also crowd their buses. And often there are altercations between students and university employees as the latter find their seats filled.

A student leader of the university feels that the problem of students do not get adequate attention as there is no

representative of the Jahangirnagar University Central Students Union (JUUSU) in the transport section of the university. The suffering students have no voice, he said.

The student leader who wished not to be named said that the university spends Taka 880 to hire a bus for a trip to the university and back to Dhaka a day. Instead of renting buses the university could buy some vehicles to save money and strengthen its own transport arrangement, he said.

Due to shortage of buses male and female students of the university have to travel the distance from Dhaka city to the campus by overcrowding the buses. Sufferings of students multiply whenever any of the three buses belonging to the university goes out of order due to mechanical trouble.



Awakening Through Literacy

by Kamla Mankekar

IF Durg district of Madhya Pradesh, with average illiteracy at 87 per cent, achieves its goal of total literacy in 1992, the credit for it would go to its people.

The enthusiasm of the unlettered, the volunteer teachers, organisers of "jathas" and Jagriti Kendras (awakening centres), has to be seen to be believed.

In far-flung villages, men and women at night tread dusty lanes and deserted fields with kerosene lamps in hand to join literacy classes held in courtyards, verandahs and 'chaupals'. They literally burn the midnight oil to perfect their letters and memorise numbers; volunteers leave their hearths and homes when the rest of the family retire after the day's labour and go to Saksharta (literacy) centres to supervise the work and draw up lists of the aids required — roller boards, chalk sticks, slates, pencils and primers.

The people of the area talk with reverence about a former district collector, Vivek Dhand, who had initiated the campaign and fired their imagination for a better future through literacy. He had explained the empowering role of literacy and focussed on three components of development, awareness through reading and writing, health

through immunisation of children and well-being of the people through protection of environments. If they educated their children, each village could produce not one but many district collectors, he told his audience.

In Bemetra block of the district, a youth gleefully narrated how the collector had actually sought the villagers' advice for solution of the area's problems.

Next to Bemetra is Nevagarh block, where 80 per cent of the men and 94 per cent of the women in the 14-45 age group are illiterate. The current Saksharta Andolan (literacy campaign) here has reached a feverish pitch.

Navagarh is about 105 kilometres from Durg town, across a flat unending wasteland through which meanders an uneven road. Not a patch of cultivated land can be seen for miles; hardly a living being stir on the scorched, brown earth; Kikar, and occasionally a banyan tree grow sparsely by the road. But as one nears Navagarh block one becomes aware of some sort of orderliness. There are more trees along the highway, mud plastered huts are neat and one can locate handpumps in larger clusters of dwellings. Along the highway, white-washed stones are splashed with literacy slogans and squares have been cut in tree

trunks to engrave the literacy logo of a child in a circle.

The villages of the block — Pratap Pur, Daganrya, Gadhamore, Bhikampur and scores of others — come back to life long after night enshrouds the countryside. After finishing the day's chores womenfolk wash, change and pick up their satchels with slates and primers to walk to literacy centres. Men, young and old, after the last few puffs of 'chillum', join the class instead of gathering at the street corners to gossip which many a time earlier had led to faction fights.

I met Budhrum of Gadhamore in the village Mukhtiya's house where the latter conducted literacy classes every night. A strapping young lad of twenty, Budhrum had scrubbed himself clean but his only garment was an old dhoti; he wore a charm strung in a strip of cloth round his neck. The class started at about 9.00 p.m. but Budhrum had arrived an hour earlier to practise additions and subtractions. Budhrum worked as a labourer in a nearby township; he had joined the literacy class two months ago and had already completed the second primer. His letters were beautifully formed, like fine calligraphy, and his reading, though slow, was flawless; Budhrum was excited; he had

learned to write his name in English. His employer's school-going son had taught him. He would like to learn English, Budhrum said, but first he wanted to finish the third primer, acquire a Ramayan and read Sunderkand, the fifth Sapan.

Another of the students at that centre was Mukharam, a 16-year old cowherd. He frequently missed his class but even then he had finished his first primer in one month. He often had to drive cattle to nearby towns he explained, but promised to be more regular in his class in future.

Pratappur village prided itself on the largest number of learners compared to other nearby villages; one centre alone had more than fifty, taught by half a dozen volunteer teachers. The class was held in the village Chaupal and the voices of student repeating their lessons could be heard from a distance. The students clustered around half a dozen kerosene lamps in groups formed according to the proficiency level attained. To demonstrate their proficiency women wrote their name, and that of their village, the health rules taught to them and proudly held up their slates for the visitors to see.

There were smaller classes too, where Sakshar (literate) housewife, or a school-going

girl, would unroll the blackboard, bring the lamp out after others of the household retired for the night, and the women of the mohalla would then come for their lessons.

One such class was taken by a 60-year old woman who had twice been elected to the village Panchayat. She taught with the discipline of a seasoned teacher.

However, the pride of Navagarh block is Krishan Gopal, a 10-year old 4th class student of Daganrya village. Krishna Gopal walked two and half kilometers each way to attend a secondary school in Bhikampur. When literacy workers surveyed Daganrya, they found that almost the entire population was illiterate. There was no one literate enough to be trained to conduct classes. Krishna Gopal offered help. He started a literacy class with four persons within days, many more joined. Now the class has more than seventy persons.

Saksharta Abhiyan in Durg district, as in other areas, started with Jathas (processions) led by singers and voluntary workers; street plays, skits and musical recitals were organised in villages by drama troupes. Chhattisgarh, which forms part of Durg, is known for its musical talent; Teejanbai, the renowned Pandiyar singer, comes from this area.

BRAC's Innovative Edn For Girls

Fertility and the level of female education are closely and inversely related; the higher a woman's level of education, the lower her fertility. World Bank surveys have shown for example that in three of Latin America's most populous countries, women who have neither paid jobs nor primary school education have more than twice as many children as working women who finished secondary school.

Bangladesh Banks 107th in literacy among 131 countries; 85 per cent of rural women are unable to read, write or understand numbers at a functional level. Although 80 per cent of the population lives in rural areas, 70 per cent of government investment in education goes to the urban areas. The total fertility rate is 5.1.

Recognizing the need to increase the opportunities for education among the rural poor and especially to girls, Bangladesh's largest non-governmental organisation, the Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee

(BRAC) developed in the mid-80s, a highly innovative programme. Called the 'Non-Formal Primary Education' (NFPE) programme, its specific aim was to reach the 44 per cent of 8-10 year olds outside the government school system.

The programme favoured girls and by late 1989, nearly 70 per cent of the pupils and 75 per cent of the teachers in 2,500 BRAC schools nationwide were female. This is in sharp contrast to the government schools where 88 per cent of teachers are male. Village parents appear to be more willing to send their daughters to school if the teacher is female: a female teacher provides an important new role model for the girls.

Employment as a teacher gives a village woman both income and a status. Most of BRAC's women teachers are between 20 and 30 years old and many have children of their own. All have at least nine years' schooling. There is

some evidence that women teachers are more receptive to family planning; only about 2 per cent have become pregnant since the schools were set up in the period 1985-89. An important part of the curriculum is a social studies programme which focuses on health concerns, including population and the problems of early marriage.

In the three years of the NFPE programme 95 per cent of its graduates passed exams allowing them to enter the fourth grade in public schools.

BRAC went on in 1988 to develop a second educational programme, this time for 11-12 year olds who have never attended school. This programme had 920 experimental schools by the end of 1989 and again nearly 75 per cent of students were girls.

The low-drop out and high attendance rates for these schools are similar to those achieved by the younger children.