

# Infusing New Life into Literacy Efforts

by Mahmood Aminul Islam

## Boost for Some, Warning for Others

The by-elections being held today is something akin to a public opinion poll — though in limited areas only — on the performance of our leading political parties. Major parties contesting for the 11 seats are BNP, AL, JP and Jamaat.

For the ruling BNP the by-election results will amount to a minivictory on its performance in power. People's perception of BNP's transformation from a party in the opposition (against the Ershad regime) to one in power will be reflected in the way the voters turn up to elect BNP candidates. Given the history of Bengalis to generally vote against the ruling party, the BNP has a difficult task. But it can and has made the case that though it was in power it did not enjoy the full prerogatives of an elected party since all powers continued to be concentrated in the hands of the President. The argument is valid and the public must consider this factor in passing their judgement. Like all elected parties the BNP also has achievements up its sleeves as it has failures — the situation in the campus being the principal one among them. However, there has been no indication so far of any major shift in public acceptance of the BNP as compared to before.

For the AL — the main opposition party — the by-election presents an opportunity to test its popularity with the people. Having been caught totally by surprise by its defeat in the February election, it was expected that AL would improve its campaign tactics and not make the mistakes that had cost it so dearly the last time. Whether it was successful in overcoming those mistakes we will know only after the election results come out. Is the AL chief's raising the issue of rigging in the election in several of her recent speeches any indication of what she is likely to say if the outcome should go against her party?

For the discredited Jatiya Party chairman, the by-elections at Rangpur is his last opportunity to prove that he is still a factor in national politics. If his party is able to retain all the four seats being contested there, it will be a sure indication of his continuing popularity. In case of defeat in all the four seats, it will mean the permanent eclipse of Ershad as a political factor. Anything in between will perhaps help to linger his memory for a while.

If the ruling party should lose more seats than it had before, it will serve as a warning to perform better. If, on the other hand, the gain is bigger it will be a very helpful boost to the Prime Minister. It will strengthen her hands to go forward with more speed and boldness in some areas that need her urgent attention.

The significance of the current by-elections is that, for all concerned, it will serve as an early warning if they are going the wrong way or as a useful boost, if they are doing the right things.

THE International Literacy Day which is observed every year on 8 September is a sad reminder that there are today about a billion people in the world who are illiterate. This is all the more sad because the map of illiteracy closely coincides with the maps of poverty, malnutrition, ill health and infant mortality concentrated in the developing countries. Hence in the typical case, the illiterate is not only unable to read and write, but he — and more commonly she — is poor, hungry, vulnerable to disease, and uncertain about the future.

According to Bangladesh census of 1981, 78.20 per cent of the population aged 5 years and above were illiterate. Based on the latest figures published by Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics there are today over 60 million illiterates aged 5 years and over with women forming two-thirds of the total.

Many of us who are educated and well placed in life feel a moral responsibility to free the country from the curse of illiteracy. If we look back, we find that as early as 1909, a programme to establish night schools for educating the adult was started in this sub-continent. But it failed to make much headway due to lack of political will and strong public support under an alien rule.

During the 50's sporadic attempts were made to launch adult education programme through private efforts. We are all familiar with the name of Mr Divar, an Englishman and a retired member of the Indian Civil Service who established a literacy centre in Dhaka in 1956. He was also directly involved in the formation of East Pakistan Adult Education Co-operative Society. In 1964, literacy drive gained some momentum through its inclusion in the Village-AID programme, but the programme itself was abolished in 1960. In 1964, a pilot project for adult education was started under the Pakistan Academy for Rural Development in Comilla (now BARD). It continued in a halting manner in some selected areas till 1980 when a national mass education programme to make 40 million people aged 11-45 years literate in course of five years was launched. As the programme was gaining momentum it was terminated in 1982 after the assassination of President Ziaur Rahman under whose initiative the campaign was started. Attempts were made to revive the programme in 1984-85, and an action plan was drawn up and the Ministry of Education in collaboration with UNESCO and UNDP. But it was not followed up. In the vacuum many NGOs started functional literacy programme in their areas

of operation, integrating it with other development activities. In the process they gained valuable experience in the development of literacy and post literacy materials, the training of facilitators and supervisors, curriculum development and monitoring and supervision. The NGOs thus represent a useful resource which a national programme can utilise.

### Present Status

The present status of the literacy programme in Bangladesh is that the government announced a 3-year mass education programme in 1987 to be implemented during 1988-90. The stated objectives were to increase the literacy rate among the 11-45 age group of population, and establish a viable institutional/organisational framework for the implementation of a national literacy programme suitable for the present as well as the future. In the first year, 64 upazilas — one from each district — were to be selected, and 60 centres catering for 40 learners each were to be set up in each of those upazilas. By the third year all the 460 upazilas were to be covered. Besides, NGOs assisted by govt. subventions were to make an additional 2,34,000 adults literate during

the life of the project of 3 years. Assuming a drop-out rate of 33% a total number of 1.3 million adults were to be made literate. The programme went into full implementation in October 1989, and to-date it has been extended to 27 upazilas with a plan to add another 16 upazilas in the coming year. Early assessment shows that only a fraction of even this small programme could so far be implemented. With the recent change in govt after the general election, launching of an expanded mass education programme is being talked about.

The foregoing history of adult education does not give much comfort to the planners and implementers of the future programme. The main flaw of this unsatisfactory performance have been the lack of political will and determined efforts excepting for a brief period of 2 years in early 80's when the only national campaign for mass literacy was launched. The success of adult education programme in Tanzania and South Korea proves the point.

### Tanzania Experience

In 1961 at independence the illiteracy rate in Tanzania was 75%, a figure, close to that of Bangladesh. While introducing the first 5-year develop-

ment plan the Tanzanian President Mr. Nyerere gave a clear policy directive in May 1964 saying that adult education should get priority over education of children because of the former's immediate impact on the economy. This was a political decision which was spelt out in the Arusha Declaration of 1967 adopted by the Tanganyika African National Union (TANU). In December 1970, the President made a second appeal to the nation on behalf of adult education following which TANU resolved in September 1971 that illiteracy should be eradicated from all over Tanzania in a period of four years for every one above the age of ten using functional literacy approach.

# A Further Boost for Central Asian Studies

by a Special Correspondent

PARIS — After a long period of neglect, Central Asian studies are coming back into their own, a process assisted by organised international gatherings and tours.

The revival of international interest comes at a significant point in the history of the region. The recent momentous political changes in the Soviet Union could well result in the creation, or recreation, of whole nationalities and fully independent states in Central Asia. The more that is known of the area, in all fields of learning and inquiry, the better.

The neglect can be traced back to the ending of British imperial rule in India. Another factor favouring the decline was Moscow's obsession with security in the region, which effectively placed it "off limits" to many scholars and scientists. For a revival, "openness" (or glasnost) was needed; and this of course has come about, gradually but steadily, in the Gorbachev era of reform.

A welcome contribution to the renaissance of Central Asian studies has come from a project known as the "Integral

Study of the Silk Roads: Roads of Dialogue," consisting of voyages and journeys of discovery and rediscovery. A third stage of this project, a two-month expedition across the steppes of Soviet Central Asia, was successfully completed on June 18.

The project was devised by UNESCO, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation headquartered here in Paris.

Equally successful and exciting were the two previous stages: a journey from Xi'an to Kashgar across the deserts of China in 1990; and a five-month sea voyage between Venice and Osaka that finished last March.

Scholars and scientists from more than 24 nations took part in the third expedition, which extended from Ashkhabad in the Turkmenistan Republic to Alma Ata in the Republic of Kazakhstan — a distance of more than 12,000 kilometres.

Forty-four foreign specialists were able to work for two months alongside 45 Soviet scientists; visit sites they had only known previously through publications; participate in two

international seminars at Khiva and Alma Ata; and discover the traditional cultures of these regions.

At the end of the expedition, the scientific team submitted 16 project proposals, ranging from the conservation of some 30 sites along the route, to the publication or popularisation of knowledge on Central Asia and the establishment of centres for Central Asian studies, to the Silk Roads secretariat.

One of the aims common to all these proposals is the promotion of international co-operation and the possibility for specialists on the region to work together.

Thus, a data bank and satellite liaison system, co-ordinated by UNESCO, will be developed by the Soviet Union and all the countries participating in the Silk Roads project. The participants have also stressed the need to share the information generated by the project with as large a public as possible.

Apart from these concrete results, the expedition provided an opportunity for scientists from different disciplines and nationalities to exchange ideas and compare their work.

As a young Soviet archaeologist, Gregori Semenov, pointed out, "this expedition has proved a unique intellectual and human experience that has allowed us to present our work to researchers from other countries and other domains, and at the same time carry out a thorough rethink of the general direction of our work and a broadening of its base."

For many of the visiting scientists, the expedition was their first trip into this part of the world. "This voyage is a dream come true," declared Swiss art historian Dr Monica Stucky upon her arrival in Ashkhabad.

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movements might eventually compel gradual socialization of capital to a great extent — a process which is already visible. But if Marxism has to survive into the 21st century it must be able to address properly new issues which are already in the horizon like human rights, environment, feminism and spiritualism.

Last but not the least — the left as well as a good number of liberal democrats make a blistering attack on Gorbachev for at least appearing to play a subservient role to the whims and will of the group of 7. Their prime charge is Gorbachev is leading the Soviet Union in to the fold of international finance capital or market dominated by the west.

Thus jeopardizing balance of power and virtually abandoning worldwide progressive and democratic movements. What they categorically forget — world market was and still is an integrated one even before, during and after Stalin. Isolated development is a fantasy. Interaction, cooperation and struggle with finance capital in spite of all its sinister manipulations can develop backward regions of the world quite rapidly. At the same time integration of market and capital can also accelerate the integration of labour and democratic forces globally. Hence their is nothing wrong or to be excited about over any temporal adjustments or mutually beneficial long ranging cooperation however embarrassing it might appear. Progressive movements everywhere will have to build themselves on their own strength and capacity without depending upon any big brother.

Finally, with all given constraints Perestroika's achievements are already remarkable. Very pragmatic policies have led the Soviet leadership to call a halt to the cold war, reducing the possibilities of a nuclear holocaust to a great extent. Moreover process of nuclear disarmament has also begun. In absence of the Soviet threat how long can the west keep on justifying their war industry even to their own population? How long will the tax payers allow their resources to be looted by their own privileged ruling class in order to carry out foreign adventures? If the whirlwind of democracy can shake the foundations of Kremlin, it can also make the corporate oligarchy of the west accountable to the people of the world — it is only a matter of time.

The writer is a free lance researcher on land and agro related issues.

## To the Editor...

Letters for publication in these columns should be addressed to the Editor and legibly written or typed with double space. For reasons of space, short letters are preferred, and all are subject to editing and cuts. Pseudonyms are accepted. However, all communications must bear the writer's real name, signature and address.

### Talks on BTV

Sir, The talks and discussions conducted by BTV is of the "Radio" type, that is, with eyes closed, one could follow the programme by the ears only. The potentialities of the visual medium are not used.

Such programmes should use audio-visual materials and techniques, such as charts, graphs, drawings, insects, slide/opaque projectors, computer animation, sound effects, sketches, photos. Even a white board could be used by the speaker.

The talkers come prepared only with the script. As a matter of policy they should be instructed well in advance to prepare audio-visual presentations. The producer of the programme could provide technical advice, guidance, and assistance for preparation and presentation of the material.

### Traffic-jam

Sir, Have you ever heard about Kathalbagan jam? I have never seen any traffic police to deal with the situation. I have tried to enquire by sending my driver but failed to locate the source-point for the jam. But certainly there are reasons behind it, and ways to solve the problem. If it is the crossroads of Kathalbagan then traffic authorities should put a traffic police to control the movement. If it is the push-carts lying by the side of the road narrowing the passage, then somebody should arrange for removal of those. Parking by the side of the road should be prohibited in case it is the cause of the jam.

Munira Khan  
23, Green Road, Dhaka.

### Boundary wall

Sir, For the last several years, Bangladesh Agricultural Institute (College), Sher-e-Bangla Nagar, Dhaka has been approaching the authorities to get a fund for the construction of its boundary wall. At present, there is no boundary wall of the college. As a result, outsiders easily enter the campus. There is no security of the college properties, residential halls and quarters. The number of theft cases during these years have increased alarmingly. Even the police personnel faces trouble during security operations because the campus is not protected by concrete boundary walls. Trespassers, often destroy or damage experimental plot, fruit and flower trees and plants.

Even almost all schools in the city of Dhaka have their boundary walls but it is a matter of great pity that Bangladesh Agricultural Institute being the country's oldest educational institution has yet to have its boundary wall.

M. Zahidul Haque  
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## Data on Population

The Rotary Club of Metropolitan Dhaka deserves a pat on the back for its plan to set up a population data bank in every village of Bangladesh. One assumes that it will take years to cover the whole country and that the organisation will need considerable manpower and substantial funds to make a success of this unique venture. We believe, it has both — plus patience — necessary for giving a sound concept a practical shape.

Information is an essential tool for bringing about almost any kind of social change. This is particularly true in the case of population planning and more so in a country like Bangladesh where vastly illiterate masses are reluctant to provide basic data about themselves for researchers. This means, like researchers, policy-makers often work in an information vacuum, relying on guesses, sample surveys and out-dated second-hand sources.

Even in recent past, organisations working in population-planning bodies had problems not only in obtaining all the relevant data but also in securing reliable statistics even on such basic questions as the overall population growth, changes in the age structure and trends in migration from rural areas to urban centres.

We had hoped, as we had mentioned in one of our editorials, that the authorities would use the last census to fill in the gaps in our information about our people. In our view, it was not enough to know the number of births and deaths in the country or in a particular district, about child mortality or the changing longevity of people. To obtain a complete socio-economic picture, an essential ingredient in population planning, it was also important to know more than we do today about the state of rural health, the education sector, the distribution of incomes and even about ownership of land. For instance, it is generally assumed but seldom proved with the help of reliable statistics that over 70 per cent of our people live below the level of absolute poverty. The statistics produced by the last census have neither proved nor disproved this assumption.

The Rotary Club probably knows that it has undertaken a challenging assignment in planning the setting up of population data banks in Bangladesh. Let it be ambitious enough to embark on its own data collection, instead of relying on existing official statistics, on a wide range of subjects. In this connection, the Club is in a position to rely on assistance of fellow-Rotarians in other countries where similar ventures have been successfully accomplished. In short, the Rotary Club of Metropolitan Dhaka should treat this project as one of immense value to researchers, opinion-makers and even government leaders, in the field of population planning in Bangladesh.