

Feature

Development

A Guiding Light for Tomorrow's Path

by Aasha Mehreen Amin

CHILDREN are the living buds of the future, the extinctions of our dreams and the hope of any nation. Yet according to a UNICEF report, the average child in Bangladesh is one suffering from poverty, malnutrition, various health hazards, and poor access to education. The result is a disconcerting number of orphaned, homeless, destitute children and children living under very difficult circumstances. As far as literacy is concerned, among the 45 million children under 15 years of age, only about 24 per cent could read and write a letter — a 1981 census reports. After ten years, with an unchecked population growth, this percentage has remained virtually unchanged. If these are the odds against the future of Bangladesh, it is no wonder that the face of our nation holds an expression of eternal despair. But amidst such discouraging statistics clouding our dreams there is a flame of hope blazing against all obstacles. This flame is Surovi — a long cherished dream of Syeda Iqbal Mand Banu.

Established in 1979, the main objective of this institution is enriching the lives of deprived children, a goal that complements the UN declaration of the rights of child in 1959. Surovi started with one student who used to work in Syeda Iqbal Mand Banu's household. Today Surovi offers education and training to over 3000 children. In the twelve years of constant struggle, the

India Tries to Tackle 'Anti-social Forestry'

DESPITE an attempt to learn from previous mistakes and find acceptable ways of forest management, a US\$58 million Indian project which breaks new ground by giving people a say has run into criticism — for ignoring forest dwellers, reports Steve Percy from Karnataka.

The Karnataka Forest Department's British government-backed conservation scheme divides the forest into two outer zones which will serve local fuel and fodder needs and be jointly managed by the people and the department; a zone for commercial logging; and a 6,000 square kilometre (2,300 square miles) core which will be left undisturbed.

The joint management innovation is welcomed by many non-governmental organisations (NGOs) as a move away from India's 'anti-social forestry' policies based on encouraging wood-based industries and excluding the people.

Criticism focuses on the project outline description of the logging zone and the ecological park as "without dwellers". Retorts Dr Anant Kabbur, who heads a federation of NGOs working with Karnataka's rural poor: "There is not a square kilometre in the Western Ghats where 'tribals' don't live".

He and other critics are worried that the more than 30,000 tribal people who live in the Western Ghats, a mountain range in southern India, will lose their long-standing customary rights and be excluded from the central area of the forest, where they collect fruit, honey and other produce.

Few people trust the Forest Department, which blames the people and their animals for deforestation. It recently evicted Soliga tribals from the project area by driving elephants through their huts. —PANOS

Uganda Fights Cassava Virus

UGANDA is fighting the spread of a virus which Agriculture Ministry research officer Professor George Mukibi says "is threatening the country's food security", reports David Musoke from Kampala.

Cassava output increased nine per cent to 3.5 million tonnes in 1989 because of additional hectare, but Mukibi warns that half the crop could be lost unless the cassava mosaic epidemic is halted.

First identified in Uganda two years ago, the disease is spread by white flies and by planting affected stems. There is no known cure, and the only way of eradicating the virus is to burn contaminated plants and plant only disease-free stems.

Says Mukibi: "The problem is that most farmers in rural areas do not know that they can spread the disease further by planting infected stems."

The Agriculture Ministry has launched a drive to teach

institutions has expanded to four branches in Dhanmondi, Mirpur, Kamrangir Char and Gulshan. It plans to increase this number to 10 this year and 25 next year.

Surovi's first priority is to provide children with free education from the elementary level to class eight. The syllabus corresponds with that of any public school. Along with free books, notebooks, stationary and occasionally lunch, the students also get a complete set of uniform to ensure that

deserving students have the opportunity to continue their education ever after class eight. Surovi gives stipends for high school, college and university education.

To develop the students' spiritual and cultural thinking, Surovi emphasizes an religious teaching and training in singing, dancing, painting, recitation and physical education or sports.

The teachers are very dedicated and judging from the results of such training, true perfectionists of their profession. This is reflected in the numerous awards and trophies that decorate the office of Surovi's head quarters in Dhanmondi. When the children sing their voices are perfectly synchronized. This set of cultural training has enabled them to take part in sports tournaments, television and radio programmes and various cultural shows.

Their performances have been praised by the Shishu Academy, Rotary Club and Shilpkala Academy to create enthusiasm among the students. Surovi celebrates its foundation ceremony every year whereby awards are given for class results, behaviour, music and overall performance.

Apart from its programmes to help children, Surovi has

also given shelter to poor families during floods and other natural disasters, arranged special emergency squads to supply relief materials to remote areas in Bangladesh, distributed warm clothes to the distressed during winter and rehabilitated hundreds of handicapped persons.

By now one may begin to wonder how are all these programmes financed. The answer is astonishing as the dedication behind such efforts.

Starting from maintenance costs of the school premises, payment of staff, books, stationery to giving the children free lunches — practically all expenses are paid from the

personal expense account of Surovi's founder — Syeda Iqbal Mand Banu. Besides selling her jewelry to initially establish the school, she has donated her own home in Dhanmondi to be used as so the school premises.

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