

New Life Given to Vocational Courses

New courses — from computers to baking, etc. — are designed to attract many high school students into vocational education. by Prakash Chandra

pairs — are designed to attract students into vocational schools.

The National Policy on Education had hoped to divert 10 per cent of students into the vocational stream. This did not happen. Now the eighth Five-Year Plan wants 12 to 15 per cent of students to take up vocational courses.

Another scheme is designed for school dropouts, a sort of non-formal vocational education. It will be free of the usual run of papers and examinations. Indeed, it has been suggested that students provide services to communities and earn while they learn.

The third scheme is more elaborate. Experts have designed six to eight courses

based on regional needs. About 150 courses have been identified so far.

For example, in the north-east where settlements are scattered, tribals must be persuaded to go to schools which offer skills like operating small machines, making handicrafts and repairing TV sets. Even bee-keeping and farm machines maintenance will be used.

In both rural and urban areas, automotive is popular. So are baking and confectionery courses in Haryana state. Girls who graduate from embroidery and tailoring courses now manage their own training shops as well as boutiques.

A pilot project will involve 2,000 vocational schools.

Another 4,000 vocational schools will be built within five years. One hurdle in the way of these schools is financial as each costs a little over 23 million rupees (US\$600,000). Land will have to be provided by the government.

These schools will offer courses which are more of a pre-vocational programme designed to enable students to pursue more advanced professional courses.

The vocational courses are designed for students who cannot continue their education beyond high school. Recent labour studies have shown hundreds of thousands of students enter the job market. But they can only be employed in unskilled jobs.

Students who are unable or cannot afford to go to college are among the disadvantaged and vulnerable social groups, especially in rural and isolated areas, who lack access to formal education.

According to the UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP), the region's high school students doubled from about one-quarter to one-half over the last 25 years.

"At the same time, the number of people with access to technical and vocational training, while increasing, has remained small," notes ESCAP in a paper prepared for the Fourth Ministerial Conference on Social Services and Social Development.

The region has made considerable progress for several decades in extending basic education and literacy to all sections of society," ESCAP notes. "Nevertheless, progress has been slower than anticipated in many countries. Shortages of qualified teachers, classroom space and educational materials have hampered efforts to meet the target of universal primary education in the region.

— Depthnews

Landless Women Find Haven in Grameen Bank

The Grameen Bank not only lends money to the poor, it is owned by the same poor people it lends money to. And the repayment rate is 98 per cent. by R. Meena

In Asia and the Pacific organised by the UN International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD).

How does the Grameen Bank work?

The name has grown to be synonymous with poverty and rural women, and this is true not only in Bangladesh where the bank is shaping the lives of one million landless people, 92 per cent of whom are women.

Several other Asian countries and many more around the world have adopted or are adopting the Grameen Bank concept to help the rural poor.

KUALA LUMPUR: At almost any conference on poverty and rural women, one name often stands out above any other — the Grameen Bank.

When a person wants to borrow from the bank, it will ask him (in most cases, her) to form a group of five people.

After she has formed a group, the bank will discuss with them the rules and procedures. It will explain that not all of them will get loans at the same time.

They have to choose two, and preferably the most needy, among themselves to obtain loans first. The group will be asked to observe that they use the money appropriately and make repayments promptly.

Grameen Bank is the small man's — or rather woman's — bank. It operates in 23,000 of 68,000 villages in Bangladesh through 900 branches.

Grameen not only lends money to the poor, it is owned by the same poor people who we lend money to," says Dr Muhammed Yunus, founder and now managing director of the bank.

The people become shareholders of the bank by buying one share which costs US\$3 each.

On average, the bank gives out loans ranging from US\$75 to a maximum of US\$180. Dr Muhammed takes pride in saying that the repayment rate is over 98 per cent.

Dr Muhammed was recently in Kuala Lumpur during the Consultation on the Economic Advancement of Rural Women

Grameen, Grameen always goes to them", said Dr Muhammed.

All the banking transactions will be done in that meeting in their own neighbourhood.

"We give prominence to people. You are the boss. You stay where you are. I come to you. So if you want to shout at me, you can shout at me, because I'm alone," says Dr Muhammed.

If I have not brought something, it's my fault. You are in command of the situation. The confidence builds up faster."

Dr Muhammed says that it took a long time to build up the confidence because at first people thought Grameen was joke.

They wondered why anybody should give them money when they did not have anything to offer in return. Moneylenders gave money in exchange for land and other assets.

It is for this reason, said Dr Muhammed, that Grameen stood out as the real bank among banks.

"Other banks look like charity outfits for the rich. The rich and powerful, if they don't pay, nobody can catch them. They can get away. They don't care."

"They know these institutions are for their benefit and they take advantage of that; whereas the poor, they see this as the only opportunity they've got," Dr Muhammed says. — Depthnews

Sri Lankans Debate Their Divorce Laws

by Harold Pieris

The present divorce laws are based on the concept of matrimonial fault — that is, adultery, malicious desertion or incurable impotence at the time of marriage; or proof of seven years of de facto separation of the parties.

A committee appointed by the Ministry of Justice has recommended several amendments. It states that the sole ground for divorce should be "the irretrievable breakdown of the marriage."

The committee has outlined a more equitable approach to the disbursement of matrimonial property. Recognising that a woman often has to give up a career to allow her husband to pursue his, it has suggested that non-monetary contributions such as keeping house and rearing children be taken into account by the court.

Evidence of this would be adultery; malicious desertion; two years' continuous separation of the spouses with mutual consent to dissolve the marital relationship; five years' separation as sufficient evidence of the breakdown of the marriage; and lastly, mutual consent as an alternative method of obtaining divorce without a waiting period.

The concept of matrimonial fault, the committee adds, has been rejected or modified many years ago in West European legal systems.

The committee has also recommended the establishment of Family Courts which

could look into all matters of matrimonial and child custody, to reduce the time and cost of litigation. At present, these matters are handled by various courts like the District, Magistrate's and Appeal courts.

Any liberalization of the present laws, it says, would cause great financial hardship and a denial of justice to women and children. "In Sri Lanka, it is a man who seeks a divorce for the sole reason that he wishes to contract a marriage with another woman. Sometimes a husband sues for divorce, since he wishes to marry his young secretary."

The association slates the official committee "for slavishly following the West" without paying due regard to the cultural background, social values and the economic position of Sri Lankan women. It points out that even in the West, certain Roman Catholic countries like Italy, Portugal, Spain and Ireland are stricter in their divorce laws than others.

The women lawyers believe that divorce by mutual consent should not be permitted except in cases of extreme hardship. "A divorce by consent without a waiting period would encourage people to embark on marriage without much consideration and enable them to call it off on frivolous grounds," they say.

The association points out that in Sri Lanka women in the rural areas and in the lower working class sector are socially and economically disadvantaged. Most of them have not had the benefit of higher education and are not qualified to hold high-paying jobs.

Consequently they do not have the resources to seek legal advice. — Depthnews Asia.

Many of the recommendations have been welcomed as reasonable — except, notably, those that would radically liberalise divorce. Hotly debated, for instance, is the item which would allow divorce on mutual consent without a waiting period.

The Sri Lanka Women

Lawyers' Association, after studying the proposals, has put many interesting points to the government.

The British group further recommended a waiting period of at least three years during which it should be made mandatory that the dispute be referred to trained family counsellors, without the assistance of lawyers. Divorce proceedings would commence only if reconciliation were ruled impossible by the counsellors.

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Househelp and Battered Maids

Even market forces and inflation have long ago overtaken the floor pay proposals, and women now work for less than P500 or P600 a month.

Village poverty ensures a steady supply of househelps for urban families. by Perla Aragon-Choudhury

Domestic help is a job open to exploitation and abuse. It fetches wages way below the minimum daily pay for other types of workers. The minimum pay is around P130 (US\$4.82) in Metro Manila.

And it projects and increases in the number of women working as domestics for household for urban families.

people from rural to urban areas.

In a study done in 1987 on the working and living conditions of domestic helpers in Metro Manila, the Bureau of Women and Young Workers found that economic necessity serves to ensure a supply of househelps for urban families.

Most came from big families, averaging eight members, whose livelihood is agriculture-based. The mean monthly family income was only P636.22. Their parents, most of the interviewees said, were landless farmers.

Work overload was a recurrent complaint of the helpers who were interviewed without the presence of their employers. Other adverse conditions cited were maltreatment, delay in pay, low pay, salary deductions, strict employers and mischief by naughty children.

Mostly it is the daughters who do, and the very young ones, too. Of the 175 helpers studied, 83 were in the 15-19 age bracket, another 44 were in the 20-24 age group. The mean age was 23.

Almost all of the respondents were unmarried, and had either finished the elementary grades or had gone to high school. In fact, 16 revealed that they had come to Manila to study but ended up working because of inadequate financial support.

That the househelps are schooled, said the study, shows the relatively high literacy rate of the country due to compulsory public elementary education as well as the high value attached by Filipino parents to the education of children.

On the other hand, it could also mean that the school system has failed to equip rural youth with the technical skills for using local resources productively. Thus they are prompted to seek work in the city.

Under the aborted tractor scheme only 134 machines were imported instead of the planned 702 because of an acute shortage of foreign exchange.

Government was further squeezed by the failure of local councils to pay for the tractors they were allocated: the tractors cost US\$283,000, of which only US\$31,000 has been paid to the government.

Their urgent financial needs are met by salary advances, and they are considered family members by extension, said the study which also interviewed 39 employers in

20 residential areas and the owners or representatives of all 38 licenced recruitment agencies then operation in Metro Manila.

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A majority of both the workers and employers agreed that domestic help — who comprised 33.9 per cent of all service workers at the time of the survey — should organise themselves. They should also be allowed to organise for the protection of their rights.

Organising would promote their welfare, be a venue to discuss problems with each other, serve as a bargaining unit with their employers and unite the househelps' ranks.

But although there was fairly popular recognition of organising as a basic right, few were aware of the Labour Code provisions crucial to such.

The workers had to be told by the researchers that they have a right to free elementary education as minors, and to just and humane treatment free from physical harm.

As a first step toward organising, the study recommended information and education campaigns about the rights and privileges of helpers, coupled with financial and technical help in organising.

The study also suggested regular adjustment of wages to the rising cost of living, until the workers are able to do the bargaining themselves.

Other measures to protect the workers were the provision of social security coverage, tapping of non-governmental groups to help provide employment options and training schemes to prepare them for more gainful jobs as the country industrialises.

At the third level, women with a degree of literacy who know something about agriculture take advanced training classes or study in local agricultural schools, and are awarded the certificate of

In a hut in Huangzhuang village in north China's Hebei Province, 270 hens in a metal chicken coop. A nearby hut houses more than 500 chickens pecking at feed.

The birds belong to Li Yinzhi, 45, a former midwife, who earns 5,000 yuan (US\$940) annually — or about 3,800 yuan more than her worker husband — from the average daily yield of 176 eggs.

Li, who began raising chickens two years ago and now also grows wheat on land she contracts from the village, is part of the changing face of rural China.

Over the past decade, increasing numbers of male farmers have left the land to work in businesses or seek their fortune in cities under China's commodity economy. Their places have been taken by the women who remain. Now women account for 70 per cent of China's farm labour.

To help the women develop farming skills, the All-China Women's Federation and government departments such as the Ministries of Agriculture, Forestry and Water Resources in 1989 initiated a five-year programme entitled "To Learn and to Get Rich."

Li, who finished junior high school took part in the programme. She learned chicken husbandry at the village's training class, and in her spare time reads agricultural books and magazines.

The programme consists of literacy and technical classes followed by competitions designed to increase production. Coordination groups headed by the women's federation administer the programme at the local level.

"Practicality is our policy," says Yang Yanyi, vice chairman of the All-China Women's Federation. Training includes classroom lectures, fields visits, demonstrations by agrotechnicians and radio lectures.

The courses are provided in three levels in accordance with each woman's level of education, Ms Yang explains. At the first level are basic literacy courses followed by technical classes, while at the second level women with some education study agricultural techniques.

But "it is the honour more than the material reward that the farmers treasure," says Li Meijiu, deputy head of the Hebei Women's Federation. "They are happy that their contribution is recognised."

Annual national awards are likewise given to 100 women experts and 30 advanced co-ordinators groups on International Women's Day, March 8.

The Women's Federation

cooperate with 13 other government departments to offer other services.

In 1989, the Women's Federation of Gaocheng County, Hebei province launched a Patriotic Women Saving Campaign, encouraging women farmers (who usually control the family's finances) to deposit money at the county's agricultural bank. In return, the bank extended credit to the farmers.

Gaocheng County, which has a contract for cotton output with the central government, has also tapped women farmers to fulfill the output.

Changji Village of Gaocheng County has bought large tractors, harvesters and water pumps to help relieve the women farmers from heavy labour.

The role of women farmers in developing rural production and the commodity economy is acknowledged by administrations at every level, says Ms Yang.

For example, the head of Cixi County in east China's Zhejiang province has called women farmers the "decisive factor" in the county's increased cotton yield which ended a five-year running low yield. The provincial leaders of Jilin in Northeast China credit women farmers with the province's first-ever success in achieving self-sufficiency in meat in 1990.

"Gone are the days when the women had to ask their husbands for money," says Ms Yang.

According to the Women's Federation of Hebei province, 80 per cent of women participants in the programme "To Learn and to Get Rich" are acting as head of the family or now stand on an equal footing with their husbands.

Because of their wider responsibilities, the women have less free time and better opportunities to earn smaller families, Ms Yang says. Few will force their children to quit school. "Social circumstances have improved to some extent," she points out.

Regarding women's emancipation, Ms