

# What Cultural Centres Can Add to Your Knowledge

by Fayza Haq and S. Y. Bakht

CULTURAL centres of the foreign embassies are places where many people find an outlet for their extra energy and time. From teenagers to men in their sixties, from students to well-to-do business executives, people haunt these places at their leisure. Some come here to see regular film shows. Others hasten here to learn a language which may be of some use professionally or maybe purely for the fun of learning a language. Sitar concerts and piano recitals are held here. Plays are presented through these centres. Many flock here to listen to poetry recitations, and view art exhibitions. These places form venues for seminars on engineering and medicines, as well. Some people frequent this place so often over the years that this becomes a second home.

## Teaching French

The Alliance Francaise de Dhaka at Mirpur Road is perhaps one of the most popular foreign cultural centres in Bangladesh. This is due to its warm atmosphere and the number of facilities available for its members and patrons. Teaching of the French language is one of the main purposes of the Alliance. It has an extensive course of three years with four and a half hours per week. At the end of the first year students get the first diploma. After nine months one sits for the second diploma. After the end of another year one has covered Class VIII, by which stage the student can express himself quite fluently. There is also a crash course for future fellowship holders in which people study in six months what students normally do in two and a half years. It costs Tk 500 per term. The books are an extra expense. The are, in addition, some advanced classes which prepare students for a diploma for Alliance Francaise, Paris.

Apart from the routine classes there is a painting workshop for children aged 7 to 16 years. Artist Masuma Khan deals with the students for three to four months. There is also a workshop in drama conducted by Moidul Islam and it runs for six months. Meanwhile, Mujibur

Rehman Khan conducts a videography class, and this lasts for a year. The library which is opened from 9-12 am and 5-8 pm, everyday except on Saturday has six thousand French books, covering all aspects of culture and civilization. More interesting for the Bangladeshi readers are the thirty different magazines ranging from sports and fashion to history and architecture.

There is the video library with 700 titles and the video cafe with variety programmes and documentary that run for three and a half hours. Another major attraction are the film shows twice a week, on Friday and Monday, showing French films with English subtitles. There is also a record library.

In addition there are artistic exhibitions by local artists — painters, photographers and sculptors. Foreign artists, flown from France, also perform from time to time.

Aside from the balls, parties and games of the Lamical, the students' association, there is the social life built around the Jazz Club held very Thursday night, with jazz music. "I want people to come here and stay, spend some time" says the Director, M. Andre Raynaud. This club is typically Parisian and this becomes an occasion where people of various nationality can meet informally.

Another popular haunt of the studios and the young at heart is the German Cultural Centre, Goethe Institute, situated at Dhanmandi, Road No 2. One of the main attraction of this place is the library with its magazines and newspapers. This small but highly frequented library has magazine in Bangla, English and German, all related to German life. There are about ten different ones. In addition there are 1,500 books which comprise novels and books on philosophy and travel, science, politics, art and photography.

The language department holds classes at elementary, intermediary and advanced levels. There are two semesters of six months each every year which draw about 300 students. Classes are held in the morning, afternoon and evening. The teachers are all Bangladeshi nationals but have been trained in Poona and Germany. "It is amazing how

the Subcontinental teachers acquire a good accent," says Madame Lechner, the Director. It costs Tk 350 for beginners and Tk 200 advanced level students. A set of books are for Tk 200 for 240. The books and tuitions are heavily subsidised to encourage people. There are ten teachers. The students come here do so for leisure interest, and to get in touch with the intellectual crowds. International Relation students also choose German as a subject to offer at the University. Hopes and prospects of scholarships are limited.

Films with English subtitles are the other attractions of the Goethe Institute. The authorities allow film societies to use the theatre and also borrow the equipment. The centre also supports theatre production. German plays have been done in Bangla under the guidance of German art directors.

At times there are literature readings and often there is a combination of original Bangla poetry with German pieces in Bangla translation. Occasionally musical performances such as piano recitals are also held, but this is not frequent.

The only thing that is public at the Goethe Institute are the art exhibitions and these include the efforts of Bangladeshi artists, which are on display about six times in a year. Reproductions of German artists are also sometimes to be seen here.

## What Happens at USIS

"We are glad to have moved downtown where so many things are happening around," says Carlos Arana of the USIS American Centre. "We get more people now than we did when we were in Dhanmandi. We are more accessible to people all around. Even journalists from the Press Club come here for a chat," he added about the move of the USIS to Motijheel. One misses the good films and the book discussions which the Centre had before, but over the years, due to budget cuts, the other facilities have been shut down. These include the offices in Chittagong and the reading rooms elsewhere in Bangladesh.

The special attraction at the

USIS is perhaps the students counselling that goes on from 9 am to 12.30 am and programmes for students who want to go abroad to USA. There are regular lectures for big groups and college catalogues and information on TOEFL, GRE and all other tests to go to USA.

The library timings are from 10 am to 5 pm. There are about 6,000 volumes of books with about 15,000 reference works. There are books by American authors as well as books on America. The subjects range from Economics, History, Political Science to Literature and Painting. These are meant for students of University and colleges.

Video programmes are there at different times of the day and the timings are posted on the library bulletin board. The hall sits about 40 to 50 people. The videos are a mixture of different programmes. On Sunday there is music, on Monday history and social science. On Tuesday there is Political Science and Economics, on Wednesday there is Literature, while on Thursday and Monday there are shows on Science, Ecology, and anti-drug topics.

Periodically there are lecture programmes and cultural items as well as exhibits but these are less frequent than what the patrons would like them to be.

## At the Japanese Language School

Kazuko Bhuiyan, who has now been living in Bangladesh for 17 years now, is the main teacher at the Japanese Language School at 718 Satmasjid Road, Dhanmandi. She teaches a two and a half year course divided into elementary, intermediate and advanced special course. The elementary and intermediate courses are on two days a week and consist of three hours a week. The special course is for six months and is taught once a week for two hours. There are, at present, 100 students in the elementary stage, 25 in the intermediate stage, and 10 in the special stage.

According to Mrs Bhuiyan, ever after two and a half years it is difficult to be fluent in Japanese. The Japanese characters alone are over 2000, she informs. Explanations are

given in Bangla but now the school is trying to teach in Japanese only. There are four examinations each year and there is a certificate to be earned every year. People like doctors who are keen to get a scholarship in Japan come to learn the language. But there are others too, like bankers, students and lawyers. The cost of the lessons in Taka 50 a month. There is an admission fee of Taka 150.

There are film shows, speech contest and tests to go to Japan once a year. There is an annual cultural evening too. They often use scripts that are translation from Japanese to Bangla.

For over 15 years the Japanese Embassy has also organised Ikebana classes for those eager to learn Japanese flower arrangement methods. Students are also taught how to make artificial flowers from local paper and cloth. The junior and senior classes last for six months each. The total cost for the lessons are Tk 14,000. Mrs. Khanum and Mrs K Zohra are the two teachers for this course, which is popular with housewives and many young women, who learn this art to decorate their home.

## What the Soviet Culture Centre Has to Offer

The Soviet Cultural Centre is one of the first cultural centres opened in Dhaka in the early 1970s.

Located in Dhanmandi, the Centre houses a well-stocked library, a Russian language training centre, an auditorium where filmshows and cultural functions are held regularly and an exhibition hall which is frequently used by local artists to display their art works.

With a large collection of academic and general information books published in the Soviet Union, the well-stocked library also includes books translated into Bangla and English. A video library and a video salon is attached to the library. The library is open from 10 a. m. to 6 p. m. on Sunday through Thursday. Membership is open to all for a nominal annual fee.

The Russian language training courses conducted by the Centre is somewhat extensive. A short-term and a long-

term complete course lasting for two years is offered. Manner by experienced teachers, the courses are held twice a week with a choice of morning, afternoon or evening classes.

The Soviet Cultural Centre organises and promotes numerous cultural activities around the year. Film festivals depicting different aspects of Soviet cinematography is arranged on a yearly basis, in addition local and international films are also screened throughout the year. Cultural functions, art exhibitions and seminars are regularly held at the spacious auditorium and exhibition hall.

The Centre is active in promoting local artists and arranging functions and seminars on national events, in addition to acquainting Bangladeshis with various aspects of Soviet cultural life.

## The Indian High Commission's Presentation

The Indian High Commission's cultural section maintains an auditorium where filmshows and cultural functions are held, runs an international school and has an excellent reference library.

Located in Motijheel, the Indian Information Centre Library is frequented by local users to the tune of about 250 people visiting each day, according to Mr. Ratan Chakravarty, the amiable librarian.

With some 30,000 volumes, the library is divided into textbook, newspaper and journal, reference and issue and return sections.

The rich textbook section for the library is stocked with selected college and university level books, in both Bangla and English, published in India. Extensively used by the local university students, this section is also widely used by college and high school students seeking to expand their knowledge, commented Mr. Chakravarty.

Books from this section are for reference use only. As it is not possible to keep more than one copy of any particular book, users are not allowed to check-out textbooks.

The newspaper and journal section is enriched with about 20 daily newspapers and 50

weekly and monthly journals on various subjects. These publications are from all over India, but limited to those published in English, Bangla, Hindi and Urdu.

Information on India is the mainstay of the reference section. Reference books on history, literature, biography, directory manuals, pamphlets and brochures are included in the collection. Old editions of Bangla dictionaries are also available for reference use. The issue and return section is stocked with literary and general information books published in India. Books from this section can be borrowed by members of the library.

The library is open to the general public and a nominal annual fee is charged for membership. The library hours are from 9-30 a. m. to 6 p. m. and is open on Sunday through Thursday. Although the library is located at the centre of Motijheel Commercial Area, its fourth-floor premises is well-designed and has a quite atmosphere.

The auditorium, located in Dhanmandi, is used to host cultural functions and creative films by acclaimed Indian filmmakers are also screened frequently for local viewers. An English-medium school, the Indian International School is also located in Dhanmandi and has an open admission policy.

## The Most Active Centre

The British Council (BC) is perhaps the most active cultural centre in the local scene. Located within walking distance of the Dhaka University campus, the services provided by BC is widely used by students and the general public. Two other branches are located in Chittagong and Rajshahi.

The British Council promotes educational, cultural and technical cooperation between Britain and Bangladesh, according to Mr. Saidur Rahman, Cultural Assistant at BC. In addition to providing excellent library services, BC conducts training programmes, conducts examinations on behalf of the University of London, maintains English Language Teaching Resource Centres in all three locations, organises cultural programmes and filmshows and also promotes

local cultural activities.

The library in Dhaka is well-stocked with textbooks, newspapers, periodicals, reference books, films, videos, slides, audio cassettes and books on a wide range of subjects including the arts and fiction. Over the years, the BC library has turned into a valuable resource centre for students and is also used by people from different walks of life.

Most of the materials in the library can be borrowed by the members. Textbooks are made available to students for use only in the library premises. Membership is open to all for a nominal annual fee. New members are required to provide proof of identity and also need to be sponsored by a responsible person, while students are required to bring reference letters from their institutions.

Extensively involved in various training programmes, BC manages over 300 scholarship awards per year provided under the British Government Technical Cooperation Programme. In-country training courses and projects are also arranged. In addition, a wide range of training materials useful to local trainers is available through the BC libraries.

BC offers professional and material support to teachers of English language through the English Language Teaching Resource Centres. BC is currently managing a project which supports teacher training and materials development for secondary school English teaching in Bangladesh. English language and orientation courses are conducted in Dhaka for students preparing to go for training in UK. Specially designed courses are also arranged for the English language needs of specific groups or organisations. However, the course is not open to private individuals. On behalf of the University of London, the British Council conducts the General Certificate Examinations (GCE) in Dhaka. BC also administers the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) test on proficiency in English required for admission by many educational institutions abroad.

## Women's Education Leads to Divorces

S. M. Abu Zaker

HUJIRON, aged sixteen or seventeen a village woman in Chittagong in the south-east of the country, is divorced within one year of marriage. While she was completing eight years of schooling, her husband was still illiterate. An illiterate husband does not take kindly to and

educated spouse and suffers from inferiority complex. Eventually it led to break up of marriage. A dowry of five thousand taka (US\$ 1=Taka 35) was settled on Hujiron's marriage but it was not registered and so Hujiron could not claim legal recompense. Hujiron makes a living by rearing poultry and offering tuition.

In villages there are many young divorced women with moderate education like Hujiron whose marriages have been wrecked for similar reasons. In the country's existing social system the husband does not want to learn anything from his wife and considers

this, a compromise on male superiority. The other instances are Tahura, Anwara, Fatima. They have some education, and they cannot work as day labourers; and because they are divorcees, they have lost social esteem.

A divorcee woman finds her social situation very unpleasant and even employers are prejudiced against her. And if she takes up a job traditionally regarded as male's, she faces a virtual social boycott.

Among the poor villagers even moderate education by women often proves to be a serious liability. The experience of a Bangladesh NGO, BRAC also shows that it is the moderately educated village women who are more common victims of divorces, ending up as burdens on parental house holds.

In setting a marriage guardians should take into account education of the prospective grooms to avoid mismatch and tragedy.

—Dev feature



Women learning how to knit with machines.

## Illiteracy and some solutions in the USA

by S. Bari

"No," flashes the computer screen. "Conceive" is spelt c-o-n-c-e-i-v-e. 'I comes before 'e' except after 'c.' The student tries again. "RIGHT!" On to the next one, and another mistake. "I'm never gonna learn this," moans the discouraged student at the keyboard. Next to him, another student works on her math: "63 + 25." There is a muted hum of activity in the cramped room, as students work and chatter. Maps of the world line the walls. The teacher admonishes someone as the chatter increases, just like in any 6th-grade classroom. Except that the students here are almost all over 25.

They are some of the functional illiterates of America, unable to read or calculate enough to lead a normal life. These men and women hold jobs, sometimes at the management-level; some run their own successful businesses; a few even have high-school diplomas. Yet they cannot read highway signs or appliance in-

structions, nor can they figure out why 25 cents is a quarter of a dollar. 25 million adult Americans cannot read labels on products; 35 million are vocally handicapped due to inadequate reading skills.

Literacy experts are pointing to a variety of reasons for this epidemic: a lax school system, growing economic pains, inner-city trouble with drugs. Each factor is tied to the other, and authorities are often at a loss which to tackle first.

Encouragement of creativity leads to a far less strict discipline in American schools than in their European or Asian counterparts. Failing one's senior year in high school twice in a row led to automatic graduation. Teachers are paid appealingly low salaries (among the lowest of professional occupations such as medicine and law): an average of US \$26,000 per year. Incentive to entering the teaching profession has been low. Lately, not only low pay has been the issue: 57% of the teachers leaving their jobs cited work conditions as their reason, not salary. Violence, lack of discipline, drugs, excessive bureaucratic responsibilities, are all culprits. One out of five teachers need to supplement their income with a second job. Fewer of the best university graduates are opting for teaching careers.

The urban areas are those most at risk. Minorities such as blacks and Hispanics are sinking deeper into gang-controlled ghettos. Parental abuse and drugs take their toll on children at this crucial stage of their education. Michael, 24, left school at 16 in order to work for a living, a task his errant father was incapable of doing. Don, 21, is not allowed to work by his father, because the unemployment benefits Don receives from the Government support the entire family. The list of high-school dropouts and under-educated unemployed youth keeps growing. Family ties are loosening all over the country, and through a wide spectrum of social classes, despite TV sitcoms that show children and parents embracing in the final shot of every episode.

Literacy is lower in the South, which suffers from slower economic growth and higher concentrations of immigrants, and poverty is more widespread. In Texas alone,

over half a million people are functionally illiterate.

Bush has billed himself as the Education President, since panic is growing as tests and surveys rank American schoolchildren behind those of other developed countries.

Asian minorities are doing disproportionately well, a phenomenon that many find disturbing.

The teaching profession has been promoted, and various plans for improving school performance are being implemented. But the adults who missed such improvements are the ones that are suffering the most as a result. For this group, literacy programs (often called Adult Basic Education) are mushrooming. I visited one such class, offered by the state tuition-free.

The majority of the students read and calculate at or below a 6th-grade level. Some have nonetheless worked for years, and are now required by their employers to obtain a GED (General Education Diploma) in order to keep their jobs.

Others have recognized the handicap of limited reading skills, and attend class in the hope of training for better-paid professions.

Samson, in his thirties, has gone through life with no concept of money or of handling change. An abusive mother at home, and a severe learning disability, have hampered his progress. Juan, of Mexican heritage, was injured on the job, and suffered partial memory loss.

The overwhelming majority of these adults have Hispanic names, and a disturbing number are black. The class is a graphic example of how far racial unity has really progressed in the country of Martin Luther King.

In order to be promoted, a student must improve by one grade-level per semester. About 50% achieve this goal. Computers are available, but only by rote. Spelling and math take up most of the time, with basic science and social studies as additional subjects.

Teachers will tell the students about a particular country, the people, and a little of its geography. When told I was from Switzerland, they wanted to see it on the map.

There is room for improvement. Some literacy programs are money-making scams. But those that do offer free classes are also beset by financial troubles. Politics and cronyism run rife, according to insiders, and, as a result, efficiency is far below the potential.

Recently school districts were denied more federal funding, and education professionals are upset about the neglect.

"Poor education can only lead to more students turning up at adult education classes later in their life. The taxpayer had better pay now for the kids, than later for the adults," was one teacher's opinion.

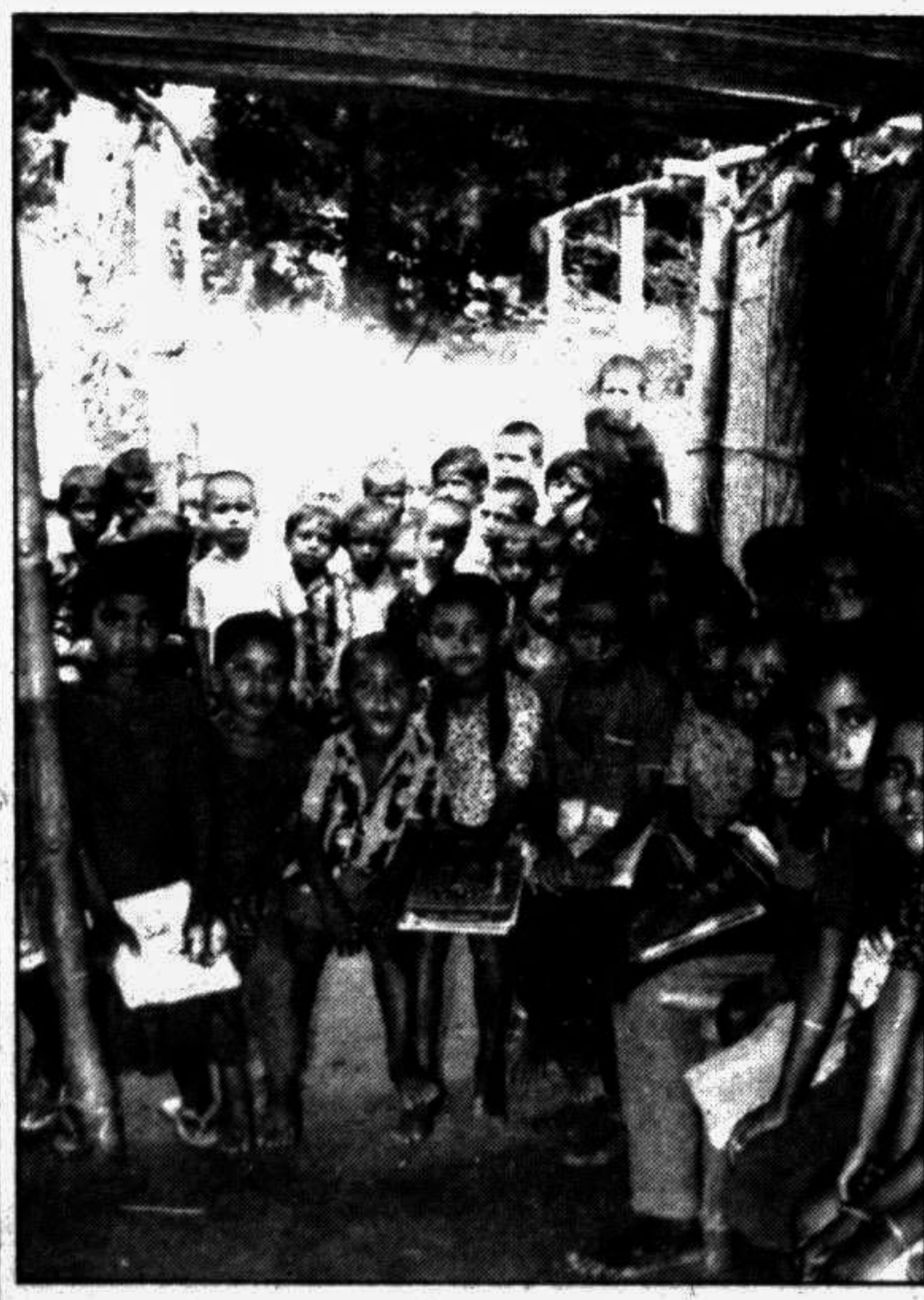
The victims of lack of funding and poor management are always the students themselves. When they decide to attend a literacy class, it is a decision involving job and family: how to get part-time work, where to leave the kids. One man was well-paid as a security guard, but slept through class because of the long night hours.

Leaving, on the other hand, is an easy decision. Through the inevitable frustrations and monetary difficulties, the students must try to stay on, and all that is possible must be done by the administration to see that this is what happens.

Because when they leave, like 26-year old Bruce, it is for the streets and the drugs that they head, abandoning all hope of a decent future.



Juan, injured on the job, needs to learn how to read before anyone will employ him now.



Rural children being educated in Bangladesh.