

# Girls' Education: An Investment in Gold

IT is now 4 o'clock in the afternoon in a small village called Khamar Bhopala in Goreya Union, 10 km east of Thakurgaon District Town in northwest Bangladesh. The August sun is subdued and the sweltering heat is cooking as the wind sighs through the mango trees. The azure sky is fading to a dull copper and the air carries the sweet smell of sunbaked soil and straw. Crows strike a shrill discordant note, breaking the silence of the emerald rice fields.

At the southern end of a courtyard, amidst a few bamboo huts, 19 young girls are attending a literacy class under a make-shift thatched roof supported by bamboo poles. The open classroom has a chalkboard and a flip chart. The teacher, aged about 22, sits on the mud floor with the girls and helps them read the primer.

These adolescent girls are taking part in a pilot training project organised by the Rangpur Dinajpur Rural Service (RDRS), a large Nongovernmental Organisation (NGO) working in northern Bangladesh. In addition to literacy, the girls received education in issues of marriage, marriage registration, laws relating to dowry, divorce and rights of women; health and nutrition; mother and child care; and income generation and self-reliance. Out of the 19 girls, 10 never went to school at all; 9 have dropped out of the school system. In Thakurgaon Upazila (subdistrict, one of the 28 where RDRS is working), 165 girls have received this kind of training in eight groups. Thirtytwo have been subsequently married. Twentyfive of the marriages were duly recorded with the Marriage Registrar — an important deterrent to husbands against abandoning

or divorcing their wives. Amongst the millions of poor people in Bangladesh, women are the most deprived of all. Their social status and wage rates are lower than men's. Their key role in production is unrecognised and often unpaid. Household income is controlled by men. Female child mortality is high,

and live in constant fear of violence, harassment and abandonment.

To help promote women's independence and confidence, RDRS emphasises activities which benefit women: education and skills training for adolescent girls, women's group formation and functional education, solidarity-building, sav-

ties based on organised groups of women for many years. Half of RDRS grass roots level staff are female, and new initiatives such as the Female Trainee Scheme and Women's Workshops have been started, to increase the number of women in management in RDRS.

The introduction of training

development opportunities RDRS offers to women. RDRS sees adolescent girls' training as an important stepping stone to overall women's development.

All 19 girls in the Khamar Bhopala class will soon complete their literacy training. They will be able to read, write and calculate. They have already received basic training in sewing and tailoring, poultry, home gardening, health, nutrition and legal rights. All of them grow vegetables and raise chickens at home and some of them have substantial savings. They are now more conscious and aware and much better prepared to face the challenges that lie ahead of them.

All the girls were born and brought up in Khamar Bhopala village. Some of their parents had migrated to the area from Hossainpur/Gafargaon in Greater Mymensingh District twentyfive years ago, after the Brahmaputra river eroded their cropland and homesteads.

Abdul Bari Bepari, now in his late fifties, still remembers the circumstances which compelled them to leave their homes in the green, riverine eastern district and settle in the arid, highland district in the far north of the country, nearly 500 km away. The Brahmaputra continually eroded its banks, devouring crop fields and gradually advancing towards the village. The situation worsened with each flood and every year the poor families became steadily poorer as their land disappeared. Finally they had to leave.

Bepari and his next of kin sold their homestead land and one night boarded the North Bengal Mail which brought

them to Dinajpur. Then they took another train to Thakurgaon. From there they came to Goreya and bought a piece of land in Khamar Bhopala village. It was slightly larger than they had sold as the sandy highland in Thakurgaon is cheaper than fertile land in Mymensingh. After building their new huts, they had some land to cultivate. As Bepari narrates the story of their life in exile, he looks much older than his age, battered by life but unbowed.

The girls also seem resilient. They attend their lessons with enthusiasm and in about two more months they will finish the course. They want to live a life different from that of their struggling parents — a life of dignity and satisfaction.

### A Case Study: Ayesha Siddiqua Shyamola

Ayesha Siddiqua, known as Shyamola by her friends, was born on a moonlit night 15 years ago in Chandipur village in Goreya. Dark, tall and sad-looking, her temperament is as soft as the moonlight.

Shyamola is the eldest of three sisters and three brothers. Her father, Rahimuddin, can hardly support his wife Anwara and the six children with the meagre income from his small grocery shop. Rahimuddin and Anwara were very happy when Shyamola was born but the days became harder as the family grew bigger. As a result, Shyamola could not continue her studies after passing fifth grade in the local primary school. She stayed at home helping her mother with the household chores.

When Shyamola was 13, her father wanted to marry her off and began looking for a husband. Shyamola told her father that she was not yet ready for marriage and that she would like to resume her studies. Two years later, motivated by an RDRS worker, Shyamola joined the adolescent girls' training. Here she learnt about her rights and responsibilities and began to discover herself and the potential that God had created within her. New opportunities began to open up before her.

As her father could not af-



Shyamola

ford to bear her educational expenses, RDRS provided her with grade-6 text books which she studied at home. Simultaneously, she used her knowledge from the training to supplement the family income. With about Tk 500 (USD 14) from her father she bought some chickens and a goat for rearing and started intensive home gardening. By selling eggs and chickens and vegetables she soon earned a profit of Tk 800 (USD 22). Out of this she spent Tk 300 (USD 8) on books and stationery and a school dress. In January 1991, she was admitted into grade 7 in the local Salandar High School.

Shyamola continued her investment and income earning and also did well in her stud-

ies. Her father Rahimuddin again arranged a marriage for her, but once again Shyamola refused to be married so early.

With the sewing and tailoring training from RDRS, she now makes simple clothes for her sisters. She also bears the educational expenses of a young brother and sister and teaches them at home. She helps her father with money from time to time.

Six days a week Shyamola walks 9 km to and from school. After school, she often comes to the RDRS-organised adolescent girls' training class in Khamar Bhopala village and helps the girls and the teacher voluntarily. Shyamola wants to build a dignified life for herself and also ensure the same for her fellow women folk.

— RDRS FEATURE

*The education of girls is probably the world's best investment. Nothings else has such power to improve family health, slow population growth, and improve the lives of women themselves.*

enrollment in primary and secondary education is low and the incidence of early marriage, dowry and divorce often ruin their lives. Women have less access to food, clothing, medical care and legal rights

ings, and traditional and non-traditional income-earning activities such as home gardening, tree nursery farming, poultry rearing and tailoring.

RDRS has been offering women's development activi-

ties for adolescent girls, using an open curriculum designed to give them a better chance of achieving a happy, dignified, and less impoverished married life. It is another new initiative designed to increase the de-



An investment in gold

RICE science has gained much from the work of five women, according to the International Rice Research Institute (IRRI).

Name outstanding Young Women in Rice Science by the IRRI were Fadhila Hamed Ali of Tanzania, Su-Jein Chang of Taiwan, Ma Yue-fang of China, Teresita Harina-Borromeo of the Philippines and Shailaja Hittalmani of India.

The IRRI presented them with citation plaques during the 1990 International Rice Research Conference held recently in Seoul, South Korea.

Ms Ali is in charge of rice improvement in a Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) project on development of smallholder-oriented irrigated rice production in Zanzibar. When she needed to analyse two years of rice research data, she learned to use a micro-computer and developed procedures for designing rice trials and analysing the resulting data, according to the IRRI.

Ms Ali is now collecting and purifying the seeds of native rice varieties of Zanzibar, and studying their agronomic characteristics. IRRI said she has improved the storage system for the conserved seeds.

A holder of a master of science degree from the University of Manitoba, Canada, Ms Ali also trains extension agents and farmers. Her work

## Women Achievers in Rice Science

by Bernabe Paguio

is credited for much of the nearly two tons per hectare increase in average rice yields of Zanzibar farmers.

Ma Yue-fang, who holds a master of science degree from Hangzhou University, is assistant plant physiologist of the Zhejiang Academy of Agricultural Science in Hangzhou.

Her generation of new knowledge on physiological traits reportedly helped increase the yield potential of hybrid rice. Her work led to the development of new tools that promote late senescence (dying) of leaves and improve the response of hybrid rice to fertiliser.

The holder of a master of science degree from the National Taiwan University, Ms Chang heads the rice breeding section, agronomy department, of the Taichung District Agricultural Improvement Station in Changhua, Taiwan.

She led the development of two new farm varieties —

Taichung Glutinous 70 and Taichung 190 — released in 1986. These varieties are now widely grown in Taiwan, according to the IRRI.

Ms Borromeo is affiliate instructor of agronomy at the University of the Philippines, Los Baos (UPLB). She breeds rice for irrigated lowland and drought-prone rainfed environments for both UPLB and the Philippine Rice Research Institute.

IRRI said Ms Borromeo's work in germplasm collection has added 91 traditional varieties to 1,870 rice in the Philippine collection and helped the Philippine Seedboard improve data analysis and interpretation.

Ms Borromeo holds a master of science degree from the UPLB.

Ms Hittalmani is assistant professor of plant breeding and genetics at the University of Agricultural Sciences (UAS) in Bangalore. She is credited for having led the development

of seven promising improved rice cultivars with aromatic grain, disease resistance, or tolerance for medium-deep water.

Mr Hittalmani, a doctor of philosophy, recently identified a new high-protein breeding line and is now working to transfer its genes into a high-yielding plant type, according to the IRRI.

The Institute said it is recognising these young scientists to highlight and encourage women's involvement in rice research and to promote their professional development. The award is supported by the government of Denmark.

For this award, young female rice scientists all over the world were nominated by heads of their home research units and each recommended by three referees. Among the criteria for nomination are: age below 35 years old; working as a researcher in a national institution, government or private agency; conducting applied or basic research in rice.

The five winners received a travel grant to visit the IRRI headquarters and to participate in the 1990 International Rice Research Conference in South Korea.

— (Depthnews Women's)

## University Rumpus Grows Over Acquitted Student

by Norman Sowerby

GULF crisis interest in Swaziland might be expected to be slight. The country is tucked away in the south of the continent between South Africa and Mozambique, with a population of just 800,000 and has almost no Muslim presence.

Yet interest here in the Gulf has been intense. The explanation has its roots in a controversial incident set off in November 1990 when students started a lecture boycott at the university.

They had three grievances: poor food, a shortage of lecturers, and the most emotive issue of all, refusal by university authorities to reinstate a student called Sabelo Dlamini.

Swaziland is a no-party state, in which all political activity is treasonable in law. Sabelo Dlamini had been acquitted in the High Court of high treason and of being a member of an illegal political party.

Nevertheless, he has been held in detention without trial

since November with four others acquitted with him on the same charges.

Three days after the boycott began the authorities closed the University and asked for help from the armed forces to eject the students from campus.

Police and members of the defence force complied with a vigour that shocked the entire nation, even people of an age not normally sympathetic to

*A crisis at the university in Swaziland has escalated following a lecture boycott by students. The boycott was provoked partly by refusal to free a student acquitted of treason and of being a member of a political party in a no-party state. Gemini*

student demonstrators.

Persistent reports that up to four students had died after brutal beatings were denied and later disproved by university authorities and the police — but the allegations left an ugly smear.

Many students, some from other African countries, were able to show journalists scars and severe cuts inflicted by batons and sjamboks, four-foot whips made of hippo hide more commonly associated with punitive action by South African police.

One girl had to be sent to Johannesburg for treatment for head injuries and may lose the sight of one eye.

When the university reopened students reported ra-

invasion of Kuwait, and from his sentiments we assume that Swaziland is against Iraq.

"Since Swaziland is a member of the United Nations, perhaps it would be wise to send part of the Swaziland army, for instance the new regiment who have shown great concern about peace maintenance, as evidenced by their great exuberance at the university on Black Wednesday.

"Why not give them a chance to use their freshly acquired skills in the troubled Gulf area?"

Another reader who signed himself "Concerned" said: "... the enthusiasm with which the soldiers operated during the mission at the university showed a great concern on their side to serve the nation... especially those who participated in raiding those university children who were led like a blameless lamb to be sacrificed.

"When they are trained they are transformed, their muscles ready and alert for any action. It is a pity that the girls who sustained severe injuries were far more than the boys..."

"Concerned" urged the Defence Ministry to send the "university squad" to the Gulf. That would get the war over quickly, he said.

One or two correspondents took the suggestions seriously and said plaintively that it was 22-year-old King Mswati, absolute monarch of Swaziland, who should be deciding where the army was to be sent.

A soldier responded angrily, agreeing that members of the forces should be sent to the Gulf, and adding for good measure that their critics should be sent as well "to polish the soldiers' boots and wash their clothes while they are fighting."

The correspondence has now petered out, but the sharp edge of the criticism remains.

Public opinion is firm that there was brutality at the university on Black Wednesday. And resentment is growing that there appears to be no commission of inquiry as promised.

Norman Sowerby was formerly editor of The Times of Swaziland.

## Deciphering Elephant Talk

GERALDINE the elephant is out with the family in Kenya's Amboseli National Park, and some of her group lag about a quarter of a mile behind well out of shouting distance. So she "rumbles" at a frequency low enough to travel the distance, even through tress and brush. About 30 yards from Geraldine, Solia Sayialel, a 27-year-old Maasai woman who has been eavesdropping on elephants for 4 years, says she "feels" the response as a faint vibration "It doesn't really go into my ears, says Sayialel. "I feel it here, in my chest." The response is a common elephant "contact answer." Rough translation, "We're OK."

For centuries people have marveled at the intelligence of elephants. Herds have been known to bury their dead under branches, and to coordinate their movements even when separated by more than a mile. Some years ago, when rangers at Hwange National Park in Zimbabwe began gunning down an elephant herd to herd dozens of miles away left their long-time watering holes for an area more remote from the killing ground. Perhaps they heard the hunters helicopters. But another possible

explanation came up in 1984, when zoologist Katherine Payne noticed an odd throb in the air at a zoo in Portland, Oregon. Payne later recorded Asian elephants at the zoo and found that much of



Messages are not always prerogatives of man

their "talk takes place at infrasound frequencies - too low for human hearing but capable of traveling several miles.

Payne has since joined other researchers snooping through Africa for bits of elephant dialogue. Joyce Poole head of the

elephant program for Kenya's National Wildlife Service, says that about 30 elephant calls have been deciphered, from warnings to mating calls. The sounds range from a variety of low frequency rumbles to audi-

Most known calls express a basic need or emotion. Females in estrus rumble to attract males; sexually aroused males rumble to warn off other than the population another males; a hungry baby makes a snuckle protest. But some of the conversation is slightly more sophisticated. Let's go can be coupled with directions on which way to go, say researchers. And some calls seem to be directed at individuals within the herd. There are times when elephants get into what appears to be a conversation, says Poole.

Scientists are now trying to learn in on these pachydermal discussions. Poole says that by using recorded elephant calls she has been able, in effect, to ask elephants questions about their social world. What elephants have to say about humans is not very flattering. Kadzo Kangwana, a 23 year old Kenyan doctoral candidate, has played tapes of cattle bells used by Maasatherdsmen to elephants as a way to ask them how they feel about people. "The bulls generally ignore it. The females, how ever, stand up, listen and run as fast as they can in the opposite direction. -J.B.

## Swaziland

