

# The Magic Touch of Education

by Bernard Gomes

ONE hot summer day, as usually smiling young farmer named Abdul Mannan returned from the field for his noon meal, his wife met him with some very bad news:

"Your elder brother has deceived you! He has grabbed all your property by virtue of a false document." Disturbed and bewildered, Abdul rushed to his brother, who calmly showed Abdul a stamped document with Abdul's thumb imprint on it. Baten told Abdul that the paper said his thumbprint was like a signature, and that the document was a deed of sale transferring all Abdul's property to Baten. This was especially disturbing news because the property included a valuable thatched-roof house, and a good piece of land for cultivation.

### Illiteracy's cost

Abdul had put his thumb impression on the paper weeks earlier, while borrowing some money from his brother. Illiterate as he was, Abdul never suspected the terrible significance of the document. After losing his land house, Abdul and his family migrated to the capital of Bangladesh, Dhaka, which is about 97 km from Abdul's village in the Comilla district. In Dhaka, Abdul quickly became a rickshaw-puller, a simple but quickly debilitating way to make some sort of living.

Looking back eight years later, Abdul says, "Through the incident with my brother I realized for the first time how literacy was so important for a person's life." With a deep sigh he says, "If I had known how to read before, I would not have been cheated so easily."

Abdul said this at World Vision of Bangladesh's Agargaon Family Development Project in Dhaka, where he had just completed a six-month literacy course. There, together with seven other rickshaw-pullers, Abdul has learned how to read, write and do simple arithmetic in Bengali language.

But this knowledge did not come easily. Attending the evening literacy course had required great discipline from Abdul and the other rickshaw-pullers, since they have to spend long days pedalling the three-wheeled rickshaws, loaded with passengers. But the thrill and potential of learning helpful knowledge each evening kept them motivated to attend the classes regularly.

### Signs of hope

"Earlier I could not read the street signboards, nor the numbers on the rickshaws and cars," says Shahabuddin who, like Abdul is now a 40-year-old rickshaw-puller. "I used to have to ask people the names of streets. But now I can easily read them on the signboards." His eyes show enthusiasm and pride as he tells how his illiterate neighbours now treat him with greater respect because of his newly acquired knowledge.

Like Abdul and Shahabuddin, many other Bangladeshi men and women are experiencing the benefits of attending literacy courses offered by World Vision, an international NGO, in its several projects in Bangladesh.

These courses teach not only reading and writing, but also information on health, family planning, cooperative savings, economic development, and social and moral responsibilities. Obviously, in a country where 74 per cent of the total population cannot read or write, programmes integrating literacy with these diverse other subjects are clearly important for development.

In Bangladesh, the demon illiteracy dwells in a large house right alongside poverty, ill-health, hunger, malnutrition, and high infant mortality. With a 2.3 per cent annual population growth rate, this small agrarian country has enough problems afflicting its over-sized population. Add to this that most of the people live in abject poverty in either villages or urban slums, and have little or no easy access to education, professional health-care, or even moderately modern manufacturing techniques.

Although one may debate whether illiteracy is a cause or a consequence of poverty, there is no denying that in almost two-thirds of the Third World countries, including Bangladesh, these two walk hand-in-hand, constantly reinforcing each other. But still the question arises: Which should be attacked first — illiteracy or poverty?

For World Vision, Bangladesh, involved in the development of Bangladesh since 1972, adult literacy programmes are an integral part of the total development package it offers to communities.

The literacy programmes are always linked up with other development activities including income generation, health, family planning, and leadership development.

Of course, World Vision, Bangladesh also provides support for formal primary education for children. Through its sponsorship programme the NGO currently oversees support for more than 57,000 Bangladeshi children so that they may receive education in the public schools. Books, tuition fees, health-care, and school uniforms are provided by the organisation.

### New Social Awareness

Adult literacy creates social awareness which is a prerequisite for communicating development ideas to the poor. This was observed by Hubert Dores, Manager of World Vision's Rayerbazar Family Development Project, a major component of which is a literacy programme for slum women. Dores believes that literacy creates new avenues in the human mind for exploring and acceptance of new ideas for development.

In the Rayerbazar project in Dhaka, the literacy classes are

held out in the open, often in a courtyard surrounded by several houses. The current adult learners, all of whom are women, bring their own stools to sit on, and World Vision provides the books. At three o'clock every day, five afternoons a week — having completed their cooking, washing

brick chippers. Sometimes they come to class with their children who are too small to be left at home. On completion of the six-month course, which was designed by a local non-governmental organisation called BRAC, the women are organized into cooperative groups that save money to-

group has 16 members, most of whom are brick chippers earning about Tk 800 a month. Learning to read and write in the literacy classes has helped Momtaz become president of the savings group, which provides loans to its members for economic development. With little outside as-



Some of the members of the literary group at Agargaon.

Photo: Bernard Gomes

and grinding of spices — the women begin their lessons on the courtyard. In addition to their household responsibilities, many of the women also work outside their homes as

getting for difficult times. Momtaz Begum, a 40-year-old mother of four, is a member of such a group that has saved about Tk 100,000 (US\$2,857) since 1987. Her

assistance, these women are able to conduct their weekly meetings, maintain accounts, and support each other in the face of opposing forces.

In a recent example, one woman of a cooperative group was severely beaten by a man in the community. Her fellow group members demanded justice for her insisting that the man at least should pay for the treatment of her injuries, not, to mention, for the emotional loss caused by the miscarriage of her child. Thus literacy had a unifying effect on the women, helping them to secure whatever justice they could get.

### Opened our eyes

"The literacy knowledge has opened our eyes," says Momtaz. "We are not only able to read and write, but are also able to solve many other problems in a united way." Momtaz has thus far taken four loans from the savings group, investing the money in a small business she runs with her husband. She says she values her contribution to the family's economic well-being.

The stories of Abdul Mannan, Shahabuddin and Momtaz Begum all show the ripple effects of providing education to adults. Literate parents tend to have fewer, but healthier children. They also encourage their children to go to school. And as is visible in the case of Momtaz, literacy empowers women for making contributions to families as well as societies.



Abdul Mannan with his wife. Both of them took an adult literacy course. Photo: Bernard Gomes

# UNESCO Seeks to Strengthen One-Teacher Schools

UNESCO is preparing an international guide on methods of running one-teacher schools and multi-grade classes in rural, isolated and sparsely populated areas. Based on studies carried out in nine countries and expected to be ready by the end of the year, the guide will highlight the crucial role of such schools, particularly in developing countries, and give guidelines on how they can be strengthened to produce better results.

The studies, carried out in Australia, Bolivia, France, Greece, Korea, Mali, Portugal, the former Soviet Union and Zaire, show that one-teacher schools exist in all countries, irrespective of their level of economic and cultural development.

A report on the studies says although such schools are on the decline, they will continue to exist for a long time, adding that "the specific character of such schools is not sufficiently recognized either in legislation concerning them or in the training and remuneration of the teachers employed in them."

Andre Lokisso, a programme specialist in UNESCO's Primary Education Section, said there is a possibility for developed countries

to merge one-teacher schools into one normal school and consequently provide transport to the children.

"But in these times of economic crises in developing countries, the situation is different and these schools will continue to exist for quite some time. The ideal would be

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to close them altogether but the situation in many developing countries does not augur well for such action.

"We are, therefore, preparing a guide that will help equip those who run the schools with the necessary skills while, on the other hand, expanding their services to provide education to all children of school going age," he said. It

is also expected that national authorities will accord the necessary attention to such schools.

The guide will be prepared along the same lines as another published by UNESCO in December last year to strengthen the managerial and leadership skills in French-speaking African countries. Workshops will be organized where personnel from one-teacher schools and schools with multi-grade classes will prepare, test and evaluate the draft guide. Meetings of education administrators will also be held to finalise the guide.

According to the report on the studies in the nine countries, 6,418 of the 14,533 primary schools in Bolivia in 1987 and multi-grade classes while 21.5 per cent of the primary schools in France were one-teacher schools.

One-teacher schools in Greece represented 31.5 per cent of the total number of primary schools, accounting for 5.1 per cent of total enrollment between 1987 and 1988. During the same period, 2,769 of Portugal's 9,818 primary schools were one-teacher schools. In Mali, schools with two-grade classes represented 35.15 per cent of all the country's elementary schools. — UNESCO Press

# Illiteracy Stalks 418M Asian Women

by Wirasak Salayakanond

When Poupoung Duongchan died a few months ago, a nation wept.

She was the undisputed queen of Thailand's folk music. As the news of her death spread, so did the brawls over what she left behind.

Family members, husband, mother and father — all sought to have direct control over her wealth the extent of which remains unknown. Insiders estimate it to be hundreds of millions of baht.

Ms Poupoung died without ever learning her worth. When she passed away, there was barely enough cash to pay her medical bills. Resigned to her fate and accepting all the conditions others piled on her, she summed up her lot in a message recorded from her hospital bed.

"I only worked and worked. When I was home, I cooked for my husband," she signed. Her life on stage did not seem to eliminate the notorious double responsibility most women are facing, at home and at work.

As her final days approached, the "Queen of folk music" realised she had no control over her own earnings which, in her words, "came by the sweat of hard work." In one day, she gave a record 13 performances in a row. "I don't have education. No money to hire a lawyer. I don't have evidence or papers about what I own. It's all in my husband's hand, because I can't read."

Around Asia, millions more are suffering just like Ms Poupoung but their stories are untold. Their underlying condition is the same — they are female, overworked, exploited and illiterate.

According to the UN Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), 418 million women in Asia and the Pacific are illiterate. Their number is steadily rising. If their lives are similar to Ms Poupoung's, then their countries are letting down the drain tremendous these women could offer. In financial terms, the loss amounts to millions of dollars.

Women's work input and other contribution to the economic wealth of their countries have ceased to be a novelty. But the struggle goes on to enhance women's capacity to be proud and contributing citizens.

It all has to start with work," says Hedayat Ahmed, UNESCO Regional Director. "Work is what brings about the recognition of one's worth. And self-worth is something that women can build a dignified life on."

Women everywhere work longer hours than men. The sad saying "A woman's work is never done" captures accurately the crooked pattern of work distribution between women and men. Many jobs assigned to women support the existence of families and communities and can fairly be considered part of the product generated by villages, provinces and even countries.

Take Nang Tongdee of Laos, who labours for hours making trips to the stream to fetch water for her entire family's use. In South Asia, only women and girls fetch water, which is a tedious and time-consuming task.

A woman from Bhutan went down with serious back injuries after carrying manure for her family field for an entire season. Suman Pradhan says people believe that carry-

ing manure brings men bad luck. So the job has been tacitly to women's duties.

In Phubjika village at the foot of the Himalayas, women secretly confess their work is so hard they do not like any of it. Nearly all of them wish they could be born a man in their next life — highly unlikely event, according to them. The Bhutanese believe a woman has to be born nine times before she can be reincarnated in a man's body.

Xu Fanning is a typical villager in Lanzhou, in China's Kobi desert. He works in his bicycle repair shop. But his wife, Yi Ling, does all the other jobs — getting up at four to make a fire to warm the crops.

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watering the plants, feeding the pigs, cooking breakfast, preparing children for school and then working in the field.

The list of her tasks seems endless. Now, at 45 years old, with her weather-beaten and wrinkled face Yi Ling is often mistaken for her husband's mother.

Every poor and illiterate woman has her own story of being overworked, underpaid and unrecognised. Their problems are manifold and vary according to the unique conditions of their cultural settings. Educating these women means special care must be given to these specific needs. That is why learning programmes spawned by UNESCO cover a wide range of women's con-

cerns.

Mr Ahmed outlines some 50 learning programmes and 29 booklets produced as part of UNESCO's education for empowerment project.

In her programme, Marilyn Kajot writes of Basanu of the Western Highland province of Papua New Guinea who adopted the idea of raising pigs for sale. Pigs are commonly used for barter trade — and even acquiring brides. But to raise them for sale adds a new dimension to Basanu's work. She now has to learn improved techniques of pig-raising, how to keep simple accounts and make plans and to spend her earnings wisely.

Eduardo E de la Fuente of the Philippines wrote about Babo Pao, a Maguindanaon woman in Muslim Mindanao who is left with her children during her husband's long absence. Faced with hungry children, Babo Pao turned her cooking skill, previously taken for granted, into money.

Although the programmes are essentially about work, they encompass other desirable outputs: better health, managerial and entrepreneurial skills, increased self-reliance, independence and self-respect.

The feeling of self-worth and empowerment are keys to success in reaching the millions of illiterates of semi-literate in the region.



The rate of female literacy is still frightfully low. Photo: UNICEF

# In-school Illiteracy Hits Pacific Islands

by Ian Steele

THE quality of teaching and its relevance to job prospects, are key to the success of education in many developing countries. Experience has shown all too often that time spent in school alone is no guarantee that students will emerge literate or more desirable as employees.

Pacific Island countries are one example. Schools with reasonable attendance statistics in the region report troubling levels of in-school illiteracy and sub-standard reading abilities, both of which suggest that the primary education system as currently managed is a rather weak springboard to opportunities.

Peter Higginson, former chief of the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural

Organisation's (UNESCO) Office for the Pacific States, said recently that a survey in one island country found that 25 per cent of the sixth grade pupils were unable to read or

ous cause for concern," he said. "Recent research into literacy levels in primary schools when coupled with emerging data on the numbers qualifying to enter secondary education

which as expected lead the list with rates of 99.2 per cent each.

Figures, however, vary from a low adult literacy rate of 53 per cent for Papua New Guinea

**Despite concerted efforts over time, the quality of primary education in the South Pacific remains a serious cause for concern**

write in their mother tongue after six years of primary education.

"Despite the concerted efforts over time by national departments of education, and various initiatives supported by aid donors, the quality of primary education remains a serious

and subsequent dropout rates, are collectively indicative of the magnitude of the problem."

According to UNESCO figures, the adult literacy rate in Fiji is 87.1 per cent among people aged 15 and older. This does not compare well with Australia and New Zealand

which has the highest number of adult illiterates (aged 15 and higher) among Pacific countries. Fiji has 58,000 adult illiterates, Australia 92,000 and New Zealand 20,000.

Enrollment rates at the primary level in 1988 were 129 per cent for Fiji, higher than the 106 per cent for Australia and 75 per cent for Papua New Guinea. At the secondary level, enrollment rates for Fiji is 56 per cent, in between a high of 98 per cent for Australia and a low of 12 per cent for Papua New Guinea. Enrollment in higher education per 100,000 population were 420 for Fiji, compared with 3,197 for New Zealand and 177 for Papua New Guinea.

UNESCO has responded to the problem with a four-year project to bolster the school systems of 10 Pacific Island countries including Fiji, the Cook Islands, Kiribati, Niue, Solomon Islands, Tokelau, Tonga, Tuvalu, Vanuatu and Western Samoa. The project, which has the support of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), is focused on the relevance of school curriculums to the lifestyles of is-

