

# Dhaka Day by Day

## An Unconventional Approach to Literacy

by Aasha Mehreen Amin

It does not take much imagination to know that the process of learning, whether it is for a child or an adult, can only be of any consequence if it is made simple and practical. This is especially true in rural areas where abstract subjects taught in the conventional education system have little or no value. Zena Sorabji, a consultant in the Women's Development Programme of the Bahai Institute in India, on a recent visit to Dhaka, talks of an approach to learning that is both unconventional and pragmatic.

Concentrating mainly on rural areas, the projects under this programme include schools and centres for women and children where, along with basic reading, writing and mathematics, students are taught about agriculture, the environment and practical skills such as sewing, weaving etc. "We also teach them the spirit of serving others," says Indian born Sorabji, "and of winning not through competition but through cooperation."

The training institute for women in Indor, Madhya Pradesh, has been most successful. The programme involves bringing women from the villages to the centre where they undergo a three-month training period. During this time the women are taught how to read and write and also skills such as spinning, weaving stitching, making arts and crafts etc. They are also taught how to count, how to use the tape measure and so on. In addition, the women are encouraged to talk about issues that directly affect them, such as the dowry system, child marriage, wife battering, child care and health. "The idea," says Sorabji, "is to give them the opportunity to exchange ideas on how to better their lives so that they go back to their villages more as change agents of society."

The project started about six or seven years ago with a facility for 30 women boarders. Initially there were only about four to five women. Taking womenfolk from their villages for three whole months, was after all, no small task. There were objections from husbands, in-laws and families who were skeptical about the merits of this programme. "The coordinator of the programme realized the need for the support of the men folk," says Sorabji, "so she went and spoke to them personally." Some of the husbands were even brought to the centre where they stayed for a few days observing the programme until they were satisfied of its usefulness and legitimacy.

The results have been quite visible. The students of the centre have gone back to their villages with a new sense of self esteem. They have managed to bring about social changes such as stopping alcoholism that was so rampant in these villages. They are now being consulted for decision making something that was unheard of before. "Because of their experience they now know more about issues, about disease and they often come up with useful ideas,

which sometimes, even their menfolk don't have," adds Sorabji. Moreover, their new earning capability has given these women an elevated status in the eyes of their husbands and families. All this has increased the number of students to 40 per cent with a hundred applications for each term.

But what is unique about the training centre is its literacy programme which not only provides functional literacy but is based on social issues. On the first day, for example, the women do not learn the alphabet but a single word 'naam' (name), after which they are taught how to write their own names. A discussion is also initiated by the teacher on the issue of names that represent religion. This is to teach women to remove their prejudice against names, and so religions other than their own.

With an interchange of letters the word 'naam' is transformed into 'mana' which means that which is forbidden. Under this title the women are asked to discuss practices that are

harmful to society and so should be made taboo, such as alcoholism, drug addiction, violence against women and so on.

Another word from this is 'maan' which means respect or worth. Here, the students learn about showing respect to God, parents, elders etc. "All this is aimed to start a thinking process among the women, that will ultimately benefit not just themselves but the entire community," comments Sorabji.

Another project the Institute's consultant talks about is in Uttar Pradesh, a region with a shocking 16 per cent literacy among women. "Even those children going to school," says Sorabji, "lapse into illiteracy because there

are no books available." For this, what is known as a 'mobile library' has been introduced. Essentially, this is a 'library' of books and a battery operated television set, that moves all over the village, not on a truck or van but on bullocks. The mobile library makes its rounds to 10 villages in 10 days, allowing the village folk to borrow books and showing educational videos. Subjects discussed in these videos include women's literacy, gender equality, how to keep wells clean, sanitation, how to cure certain diseases etc.

The success of these rural literacy programmes lies in their informal, unconventional approach that reaches ordinary people especially women in a direct and personal way. They are taught things that are relevant to their way of life, subjects that they can relate to. The village is a place where morality and religion hold higher positions than logic could ever hope for. Creating an awareness about social issues along with the basic tools of education is much more effective than teaching abstract concepts that have no relevance in a village context. Sorabji, recently visiting Dhaka, believes that this technique can be applied to the villages of Bangladesh where the women's literacy and status are the same as in India.



Zena Soli Sorabji



Prokrichi BCS Central Action Council secretary general M A Hena presenting a paper at a seminar on the bureaucracy at the Institute of Engineers in the city yesterday. — Star photo

## 'Project true history of nation thru' drama'

City Mayor Mohammad Hanif yesterday called for projecting true history of the nation through drama, reports BSS.

Speaking as chief guest at a seminar on "inadequate stage facilities and solution," he said the people involved in performing drama could play an important role in projecting positive sides of the society.

Organised by a cultural organisation 'Samay', the seminar

at the Guide House auditorium in the city was presided over by Aminul Islam Montu. Playwright Syed Shamsul Muq, president of Sammilito Sangskritik Jote Faiz Ahmed and architect Robiul Hussain participated in the discussion. Mayor Hanif reiterated his commitment to establish and open air stage in the capital and said he would also do his best to rename Baily Road as 'Natak Sarani.'

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Friday

- Morning session**
- 8:00 Opening announcement
  - Al-Quran
  - Programme summary
  - 8:10 News in Bangla
  - 8:15 Alor Disheri
  - 8:40 Film Show: Border Town
  - 9:00 Education Programme
  - 9:25 Major Dad
  - 10:00 News in Bangla
  - 10:15 Moner Mukurey: Mohar Ali
  - 11:05 Film show: Tarzan
  - 11:30 Programme on health: Prescription
  - 11:45 Images
  - 12:30 Closing of morning session
- Afternoon session**
- 3:00 Opening announcement
  - Al-Quran Programme summary
  - 3:15 Cartoon show: Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles
  - 3:40 Movie of the week: The Ship of Angelica
  - 5:10 News in Bangla
  - 5:40 Sports programme
  - 6:20 Open University
  - 6:55 Modern songs programme: Malancha
  - 7:20 Special Discussion on Pension
  - 8:00 News in Bangla
  - 8:30 Comedy series: Perfect Strangers
  - 9:00 Magazine: Antarranga
  - 10:00 News in English
  - 10:30 Programme on Hajj Khabar/The News
  - 11:40 Tomorrow's programme
  - 11:45 Closing of afternoon session.

## What's on today . . .

**Solo Painting Exhibition:** By Mohammad Iqbal. Professor Mohammad Kibria will inaugurate. Venue: Gallery of Alliance Francaise, 26 Mirpur Road, Dhanmondi. Time: 5:30 pm. The exhibition will remain open from 3:30 pm to 8:00 pm everyday except Saturday till May 19.

**Raga on Piano:** A concert of subcontinental music to be performed on the piano by renowned composer and artist Azad Rahman. Venue: American School Auditorium, United Nations Road, Baridhara. Time: 7:30 pm.

**BUP seminar:** ON 'Bhola: Planned Development at Local Level' organised by Bangladesh Unnayan Parishad. Main speaker: Journalist Nazim Uddin Mostan. Chief guest: State Minister for Planning Dr A Moyeen Khan.

**Baishakhi Mela:** Organised by Bangladesh Federation of University Women. Venue: Eskaton Ladies Club, Eskaton. Time: From 10 am to 5 pm.

**Anirban Shilpi Gosthi:** 16th founding anniversary will be observed through day-long cultural programmes. Venue: Haji Gani Community Centre, 5 Azimpur Road. Time: 9 am.

## Weather

### Rain likely

By Staff Correspondent

Weather forecast for the next 24 hours commencing 6 am today says rain or thundershowers accompanied by temporary gusty or squally wind is likely to occur at one or two places over Dhaka, Chittagong and Barisal divisions and over the regions of Pabna, Bogra, Jessore and Kushtia.

Weather is likely to remain mainly dry elsewhere over the country.

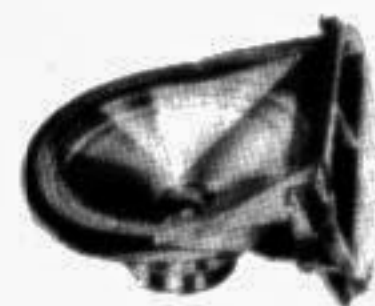
The Met office said day temperature is likely to remain nearly unchanged. Country's maximum temperature of 42.5 degree Celsius was recorded in both Rajshahi and Ishwardi and the minimum of 22.6 degree in both Sylhet and Srimangal.

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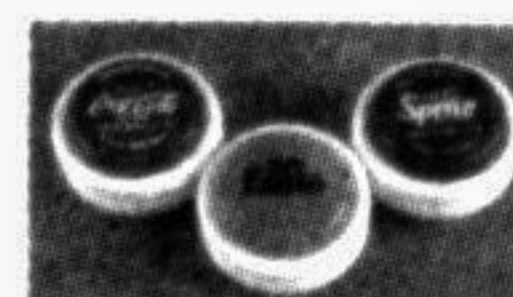
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