

A Positive Turn in Literacy

For the first time in the country's history the International Literacy Day is going to be observed with a difference today. The difference lies, as reports say, in the contents or substance of the day's programmes — not in the high-flowing rhetoric. As many as 20 villages are going to be declared as illiteracy-free to mark the day. At the initiative of Swanirvar Bangladesh (Self-reliant Bangladesh), a programme conducted for five months purely on the basis of voluntary service made the miracle possible. All the men and women of those 20 villages can now read and do simple enumeration, deduction and fraction.

We do not know if it was a crush programme aimed to root out illiteracy from the villages in question. However, we know that the villages were chosen all across the country. This makes the impressive record even more illustrating. If five months' effort can help achieve such a marvellous result, we can surely think that not everything is lost for the nation. Now this good work itself runs the risk of coming to nought if further follow-up on this is not fully ensured. In that case the happy news may as well turn into a publicity gimmick. We hope it does not.

The message therefore is clear: we ought to expand the range and scope of the programmes initiated only for five months to achieve a definite target. To do that the effort can neither be completely voluntary nor fully government-supported. A balance in between has to be struck to get the best possible results. Involvement of the leading NGOs in the effort in a more complementary way is going to make a difference. However, the best guarantee of making the programme a success is to motivate the people for whom it is meant.

Learning the skills of simple reading and enumeration may not provide one with the proficiency needed in a competitive job market or with the empowerment to rise in the social hierarchy of villages. But even then it is no mean achievement in that it ensures one is not going to be cheated so easily. For a farmer or a labourer or a small trader this means a lot. Even more beneficial will be the appreciation of education by such people from a different angle for their wards. If literacy as such makes any sense, this is how the whole nation can benefit from it. Primarily 'literacy for all' as a target is not a bad idea to be realised. However, the next objective ought to be turning it into functional literacy in the true sense of the term. This calls for further investment in the education sector. The fact is that our people are no less resourceful than others, including those in the advanced countries. The problem is that they have little means at their disposal to put their talents in effective use.

All this can change provided that they become familiar with modern concepts and technical know-how for their routine and systematic use. It is not however enough to import sophisticated implements and gadgets from abroad and use them as a way of life. Such artificially raised standard of life hardly touches the lives of the neglected multitudes. Knowledge must come to these people particularly as a means of power. The challenge for Bangladesh is really great. But through the success of the 20 villages, we all receive a positive signal. There is every reason to be optimistic about eradicating the bane of illiteracy from the country.

What is needed is a serious and coordinated effort. The five-month programme has shown the way. But we still believe that there are scopes for improvement on it. Let the different bodies and agencies — both government and private — put their heads together to find out a common ground to dedicate to a common cause. When this has been done, the rest of the job may really prove much easier to be done.

Good-bye to Bouncing Cheques

The Jatiya Sangsad has just passed a bill making it punishable to draw cheques that bounce. The bill provides some relaxation for offenders ensuring that bouncing doesn't immediately land them into jail for a year. The relaxation is, however, to run out 'in due course'.

Bouncing cheques have been vitiating the financial sector for long. The new enactment only underlines the fact that the menace has crossed limits of resilience that a lively economy must have. The Finance Minister has explained the 'relaxation' provisions offering scopes to offenders to make good their lapse as allowed to avoid too much harshness at the initial stage of the new law. Well, habitual offenders in this line may be grateful to Mr Saifur Rahman for they would indeed take some time to adapt to unpractised ways. The relaxation, however, was needed more to avoid an anarchic situation in a market where bouncing cheques were a part of a system, not quite a violation of it. In a buyer's market situation with sellers fighting it out with brief-cases fattened by pads of pre-kickoff money, payments may be made to wait through unavailability of the payer or bouncing cheques. You must not press the brakes to the floor in a hurtling car. Even after applying soft-brake, it remains to be seen how the vehicle and its riders take the jolt.

While fully endorsing the new law we want to point out, if half in jest, that there is a goodly part of bouncing cheques which have been, or will be, drawn in favour of 'self'. Ordinarily these cheques are not useful as instruments of fraud. The inconvenience caused to the banks by such can be more than made up by enhanced banking charges for these — banks should rather be pleased with the extra business coming with each of these.

The over-due action is expected to heal some of the distrust left in the trail of the busting of two banks — one very international and very big, the other very national to the point of being provincial. All that are involved in the nation's finances, including those who are only remotely so, know that our banks haven't been doing well generally these past few years, mostly owing to practices not congenial to good banking. Adding to this the fact that our people have decades of good banking to go before becoming bank-minded, which means that only a very skimpy skin surface of our people's earning is bank-transacted, the importance of any action augmenting trust in the banks can be well imagined. This new law has been an enactment of paramount importance although this hardly addresses the main afflictions of our national finances. We welcome the law, with relaxation now and without it as soon as possible.

Ailing Countryside: Stop Migration to Urban Centres

by Md Asadullah Khan

ECONOMIC situation in the country is perhaps heading for a chaotic turn, with no apparent signs of a redeeming future for the people at large. There are tens of millions, of them who have started wondering if elections or a people's government could bring about any substantial change in their lot. Happily, food shortage could be avoided during the last few years. But most of the countryside, where some 70 per cent of the population lives, remains as poor as ever. The lower middle class, rickshaw-pullers, daylabourers, fishermen, weavers etc. all belonging to this soil, just could not share the country's economic growth. Sadly enough, a difficult time seem to be winding down well for all of us. As political impasse lingers, reform measures stall, economic woes mount, more and more people in the countryside with education or no education get wary, and are virtually trying to flee the countryside. Rural horizon is highly charged with rising and unfulfilled expectations of vast members of unemployed youths. No wonder, it is because of the maldistribution of economic activities and total lac of expansion of basic industries which could offer employment facilities to a large chunk of unemployed groups, that people are crying for creation of divisional headquarters in almost all the 19 erstwhile district towns. This is just to draw the attention of the government to all these places neglected since long.

The countryside, broadly the rural areas have vast possibilities. The populace is implicitly committed and imbued with a sense of integrity and sincerity of purpose. But these potentialities till now remain to be exploited. More importantly, nowhere in the world, the land is more fertile and, at the same time, more where the populace is more miserable. Nevertheless, because of lack of entrepreneurship and proper motivation, much of these vast countryside has turned into a ripe ground of contenting dooms: poverty, illiteracy, corruption, social breakdown, vanishing resources, drought, even war and homelessness of war's refugees and environmental catastrophe.

Until very recently, this country of ours was termed an international basket case. Drought, flood, cyclone, of unprecedented nature made things worse here. Happily, the country is slowly recovering from the ravages of these scourges through access to modern and scientific techniques. In the face of political bickering, vandalism, extortion, terrorism, disintegrating transport system, power crisis and other disincentives, investors from Europe, America and Japan are withdrawing from Bangladesh and looking for elsewhere. Bangladesh too are pulling out their money. Why risk expropriation or failure in a country virtually governed by lawlessness, terrorism and extortion-spree where drainage by corruption, kickbacks, unsound tax system

and import irregularities often equal or exceed the legitimate intake? Cravings for Better Life

But, despite all the gloomy picture threatening the spurt of activities and growth of the economy, there is lot of enthusiasm and cravings for a better life among the people. What we need is that all the political leaders and industrial entrepreneurs must consider self-sacrifice rather than self-service as the most essential agenda now. In rejecting other political parties in the last election, the country's largely illiterate and overwhelmingly poor electorate confirmed its right to make free political choices. Voters also signaled their disillusionment with the previous regime's failure to deliver on its tall promises to spur equitable economic growth, industrial and agricultural rejuvenation. Economic activities as expected by and large from all sections of the people did not come up.

The ruling party has to stem the eroding public confidence in the Government what is needed is probity on the part of our leaders accompanied by tough and consistent enforcement of laws. Containment of corruption in public life would reassure investors from within and without who have been fulminating in the hope that a system of kickback flourishing in the previous regime would end. Senseless bureaucratic regulation and political interference

have almost stifled the growth of industries in the country. If we have to stop migration of people from the countryside to the cities, then a lot of agro-based industries, may be small-scale, have to be set up to keep people provided there. Rural exodus will continue unabated unless a production base is created there. Unless we have been able to foster economic growth and forge income generation activities in the rural base, this grim scenario will continue. Most disturbing and disquieting it may sound but the stark reality is that, in general, people's purchasing power has gone below any conceivable limit. Reports appearing in a section of the press said, in some areas of Bogra disgruntled sellers blocked road traffic by heaping bananas because of low price and poor turnout of purchasers. Even four bananas could not be sold at Taka 3. This sort of glut also occurs with other commodities like tomato, mango, potato, guava, papaya, lichees, pineapple, chilies and lemons etc in the peak season of harvesting. Surely, things would not come to such a sorry pass had we have a lot of agro-based industries in the countryside that could have utilized these mangoes and tomatoes for production of jellies and sauces and juices which could have been marketed in cans and bottles to far flung areas.

Moreover menacing communication network and hazard in the transportation of perishable goods have accentuated the frustration of the growers and small scale traders. Many of them have been totally off from production and business by incurring losses one after another.

Even Distribution of Benefits

To be more precise, the benefits of economic growth must be distributed evenly; such growth which was spurred by the democratic government's stray economic liberalization has only tended to benefit the already affluent upper middle class. The poor, who constitute more than 50 per cent of the country's 120 million people must be provided greater access to educational and employment opportunities. It must be brought home to all of us entrusted with the gigantic task of planning and drawing future strategy of the country that nearly 40 per cent of the country's population is under 25 years old. This cohort, if disgruntled, can be explosive elements blocking the little bit of reform and structural reorganizations that are taking place here and there.

The other key issues that need to be addressed are the area of population control and empowering women in the rural areas. The population growth rate that has come down to almost 2 per cent as revealed in a recent report on "State of world population" is an encouraging sign. This effort of population control needs to be energetically re-

activated all the time if the demographic numbers are not to overwhelm the limited resources for economic development. Already the rural areas and from there, the streets of big cities are teeming with boys and girls whose battle for a decent life was lost the day they were born. We only hope that this year the state of world population report which has addressed the issue of empowerment of women, as the key to solving population problem should also be given a priority cognizance here. The salient part of the report suggesting free and equal access for both men and women to health care, family planning and education is not only desirable in itself but is a practical contribution to environmental protection and economic development. In fact, when women are in a position to control their own affairs, to fix up priorities in the family, it opens up a new vista of opportunities and potentialities for the family as well as for the society at large. Our effort to remove gender-disparity can meet with success when the people in general in the society are more educated, culturally advanced and forward looking.

In bringing about all these changes for better, what it calls for is a vision for the nation — a vision of unity in diversity and a non-violent way to progress. What we envision is that our people are willing to make more painful sacrifices still now to regain the prosperity they had lost in the preceding years.

efforts to raise the issue of several thousand ethnic Albanian Chams murdered by Greek forces during the civil war in 1944. He said 30,000 people were driven out of Greece during the conflict. Yet, says Mete, Greece has made wild claims as to the size of its ethnic minority in Albania, has interfered in Albanian Orthodox church affairs, continues to charge that Greeks are being treated unfairly in Albania, and lays territorial claim to a strip of Albania the Greeks call North Epirus.

In 1914 Britain, France and Russia allowed Greece to occupy southern Albania. But after World War I, Albania's national borders were reconstituted, largely at US behest.

By 1921 it was an independent state and the Greeks were forced to relinquish control of the North Epirus strip. Ever since then nationalist Greeks have claimed that ethnic Greeks living in North Epirus have suffered discrimination.

Albania: Cast Adrift in the Balkans

ALBANIA, orphaned by the Ottoman Empire, exploited by the Italians and brutalised by Stalinism, is attempting to find its feet amid turbulence and uncertainty in a very tough neighbourhood: the Balkans.

For neighbours, they have the Serbs, the Slav state that is now called Macedonia and the Greeks. In times past and still today in places, all three dealt harshly with ethnic Albanians in Serbian Kosovo, western Macedonia and northern Greece.

Much blood has been spilled and memories remain undimmed by time. And with nearly half the ethnic Albanian people living inside the borders of these neighbouring nations, the appeal of a 'Greater Albania' is a strong one to the aggressively nationalist.

But senior Albanian foreign ministry official Egerem Mete says Albania's historic aspiration to reunite with the other half of its people must be met by realism, a sense of what is possible.

Albania has recognised the self-declaration of independence made by the Albanian majority living in the Serbian province of Kosovo, but it is a gesture of moral support just

as its offer of Albanian citizenship.

Mete says that Albania is for dialogue between the Kosovars and the Serbs, without preconditions, in the presence of a third party. Tirana, he says, cannot presume to speak for Kosovo.

He says Miodrag Lekic, foreign minister of Montenegro, the former Yugoslav republic still federated with Serbia, recently raised the question of talks. Tirana urged him to try to help, but Mete says the problem is that the Serbs refuse to deal with Ibrahim Rugova, Kosovo's self-declared Albanian president.

Genc Pollo, adviser to Albanian President Salif Berisha, says the question of Kosovo is central to relations between Belgrade and Tirana.

He claimed that without a real settlement accepted by both sides, Balkan stability will be endangered even if the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina ends.

Pollo regards the restoration of rights under the Yugoslav constitution of 1974 only as a starting point. The constitution granted Kosovo extensive autonomy within the

Albania: Cast Adrift in the Balkans

Albania's destiny is getting mixed up in the boiling cauldron of the Balkans. Wes Jonasson of Inter Press Service reports from Tirana.

The key question is: who is the majority ethnic group in the new Macedonia? Mete said the unsuccessful census of 1991 placed the Albanian population at around 440,000 or 23 per cent of the total. He thought it was higher and that he estimated 250,000 ethnic Albanians not registered as citizens are being left out.

An European Union (EU) census, due to finish this week, may pose as many questions as it answers, though Albanian protesters that helped shackle the 1991 census are in danger of doing the same in 1994. Bulgarian and Greek communities claim the Albanians fear an accurate census will expose their figures as grossly overstated.

Pollo denies Tirana is encouraging ethnic Albanians in Macedonia to do anything else but cooperate with the ruling coalition government, not least

because it was difficult to see how a viable Macedonian government can be formed without their participation.

But he argues that to avoid territorial war, Macedonia and its borders should be recognised by all the world community.

Greece has withheld recognition and has placed unilateral sanctions on the new country: the EU recognised it as 'Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia' (FYROM) to circumvent the row.

Bulgaria recognises the state but flatly rejects the concept of a 'Macedonian' people, feeding speculation that it too sees it as a mere extension of Bulgaria.

But it is the tension with Greece that most concerns Albania, Athens, says a suddenly angry Mete, 'insists in having everything their way, and we are tired of it'.

He says Greece had ignored

To the Editor...

Letters for publication in these columns should be addressed to the Editor and legibly written or typed with double space. For reasons of space, short letters are preferred, and all are subject to editing and cuts. Pseudonyms are accepted. However, all communications must bear the writer's real name, signature and address.

Human or system weakness?

Sir, The dissipative public debates on the caretaker government (during the general elections) issue is not concentrating on one basic topic: whether the movement by the opposition is based on human or system weakness.

The administrative structural weaknesses are much easier to remove or strengthen than improving the human qualities of the people using the system. On the former point, the government has come forward with certain proposals, awaiting discussion in the House.

Moral rearmament programmes are long-term remedial measures, which simply cannot be discussed away in debates and public meetings. There is no instant and magical solution. Changing the mores of the society takes time, and has to be approached methodically, and not through street agitations.

What is the fuss about?
M M Ahmad
Dhaka

What's in a life?

Sir, Unquestionably, a band cannot bring a dead back to life (without a miracle), but a band playing at a wedding of a Chinese corpse-bride, who took her own life over their love affair, did enliven the solemnization.

Variety of ceremonies are sanctified also in Bangladesh nowadays, like elsewhere since the Dark Days, with bands playing favourite tunes to demand or occasion, eg wedding, academic commencement, marching, protest demonstration, election campaign, victory celebration, birth anniversary, etc.

No wonder this practice is gradually turning into a tradition in this nation's life lately, and apparently that day is not far off when a band playing at

the funeral also will be a commonplace overhere.

The civility has grown humanity alongside the wrath of cruelty ultramodern weapons plus lust for eternal pleasure have been inflicting into human life all along.

Consequently, thousands of casualties of men's ill motives coupled with Mother Nature's onslaughts dumped in mass graves by the bulldozers or human hands over the centuries in many places on earth remain immortal in the history of mankind.

What is a life worth after all? This inquisitiveness validates the same old pondering over its value, qualitative or quantitative, that must vary mainly due to varied perceptions of various people.

Hence, how many people care about life's worth will also be worth an accurate computation, and the ones who do will probably find it hard to come up with a precise evaluation of a life — dead or alive.

M Rahman
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Status of women

Sir, I have read with interest the letter of H Lechner of German Cultural Centre, Dhaka, published under the caption 'Status of women' in your esteemed daily of August 28, 1994.

I would like to request the distinguished correspondent to kindly tell us as to why all the contraceptive pills made in London, Paris, Bonn and New York are exclusively meant for women only? Why the developed and advanced countries of Europe which rightly advocate the status of women have not made any contraceptive pill for use of men to check the population explosion as yet?

O H Kabir
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Raunchy photo

Sir, The Daily Star of August 17, 1994 carried on page 5 col 5-7 a picture of a couple — the girl on the body of the man in a compromising position — "in a sexually explicit song sequence from a... movie". The photo was printed to cover the news on raunchy films. In my opinion it rather has served to cater to depraved relish. The said news item could have been covered without such 'raunchy' photograph.

I am among other regular readers of The Daily Star who are hurt by such display of compromising postures.

Muhammad Anisuzzaman
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Nationality card

Sir, Time has come to gradually give nationality cards (NC) to all the citizens of our country in a systematic process. This will help solve a number of problems starting from voters' right to estimating the population of our country. Any birth or death can well be taken into account. If a system is developed in course of time.

The process can be started from thana level. Perhaps the use of computer is a must to ensure correctness and one computer in one thana is supposed to be enough to insert the particulars of the total population of the thana. A door to door field work needs to be done to note down the particulars of the total population of a particular area. UP Chairman along with his members and local teachers of schools and madrasas can also be involved in the field work. A short training course can also be arranged at the UP Chairman's office to give a clear understanding of the task, and a provision to pay some incentive remuneration to all the field workers shall also be made. It should be ensured that no body is left out of the list, in order to make the whole effort really purposeful.

A laminated NC can thereafter be issued from the thana computer centre with the holder's name, father's name, address, finger print and code

number clearly printed, and a stamp size photograph firmly fixed.

The NC will then have a very wide range of use and will obviously help solve a number of problems. It is, therefore, expected that the government will pay due importance to this proposal.

Motius Samad Chowdhury
Phulitola T.E, Sylhet

Marriage: Retarded persons

Sir, In China's Gansu Province, as many as 1.2% people are mentally retarded, and the provincial legislature passed a law debarbing those severely mentally retarded/physically handicapped to marry and encouraged them to undergo stabilization with state assistance for rest of their life.

A similar law is needed here in Bangladesh and it could be implemented with our existing family planning policies. Those having IQ of 49 or less with other handicaps, which make one incapable to care for himself/herself or the children, must be debarred from child producing by state laws and given state help for active living. At the same time, as the problem originates from inbreeding, iodine deficiency and malnutrition, these must be taken care of politically and socially in order to improve the overall standard of our people.

Col Mirza Shajji (retd)
Banani, Dhaka

Am I a fool?

Sir, Mr Haque of DOHS, Dhaka, says: "I'm foolish enough to wait till the light changes to green..." (DS Letter 3-9-94) under the caption Am I a fool? The writer ends by saying: "If this is any reflection of the traffic policemen in general, what can be expected of the poor driver, rickshawpullers, or even law-abiding fools like myself?"

However, it is my advice to all concerned: "When in Rome, do as the Romans do."

Natasha Kamal
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OPINION

Family Planning: Micro-level Experiments Needed

Shahabuddin Mahtab

Family Planning in Bangladesh owes its inception to a group of enthusiastic social workers who initiated the programme in the form of a social movement in the year 1953. The first Family Planning Association, a voluntary agency was set up in this year and became a member of the IPPF (International Planned Parenthood Federation). The activities of this voluntary association was limited to a few urban areas of the country, in the distribution of contraceptives and publicity materials free of cost. And it continued to grow in size with the passage of time.

The Government, considering this initiative and the ever-growing size of the population launched a clinic-based Family Planning Programme in 1960 which could be marked as the 2nd phase of the programme. This ended in June 1965, however, with little headway to its credit.

On 1st July, 1965, considering the dimension of the population problem which was aggravating on a continual basis, as well as economic, industrial, and socio-cultural situation in the country, the Government launched a National Family Planning Programme (field-oriented) marking the beginning of the 3rd phase of the programme. It was a unipurpose programme with all emphasis on the reduction of birth rate from 50 per 1000 to 40 per 1000 by the end of the plan period (1965-70). Under this programme a large number of village women (lady village organizer called dai) were involved as part-time workers in the implementation of the action programme.

The methodology of the programme was 'motivation by bringing supplies and services to the doorsteps of the people'. The programme during the year 1971 remained in a state of suspension (owing to the war of liberation) with concomitant confusion. The year 1972, ushered in an era of Integrated Health and Family Planning Programme which continued to function as a unipurpose programme under the Ministry of Health and Family Planning.

Accumulated experiences both within Bangladesh and in other developing countries show that the overwhelming increase in population cannot be tackled through conventional Family Planning Programme alone, in the absence of supporting social policies and legal measures purporting to produce drastic reduction in fertility. The ever growing concern for still more efficient and comprehensive policy measures, and programme strategies call for a variety of micro-level experiments and studies, and this need be conducted without interrupting the Family Planning action-programme. The findings and implications from these studies, nevertheless, should strengthen the action programme with fresh dynamism and direction.