

FOCUS

Special

The Why and How of T.A.G

by Mridul Chowdhury

THE concept and philosophies of TAG (Teenage Awareness Group) did not evolve in a day. Rather, they have developed gradually through series of discussions, surveys, interviews of students, parents, teachers and intellectuals. Today, TAG can be identified as a group of students, who are concerned about the ignorance of teenagers about Bangladeshi history and culture and want to help create an environment where such ignorance can be eradicated or at least be brought to a minimum.

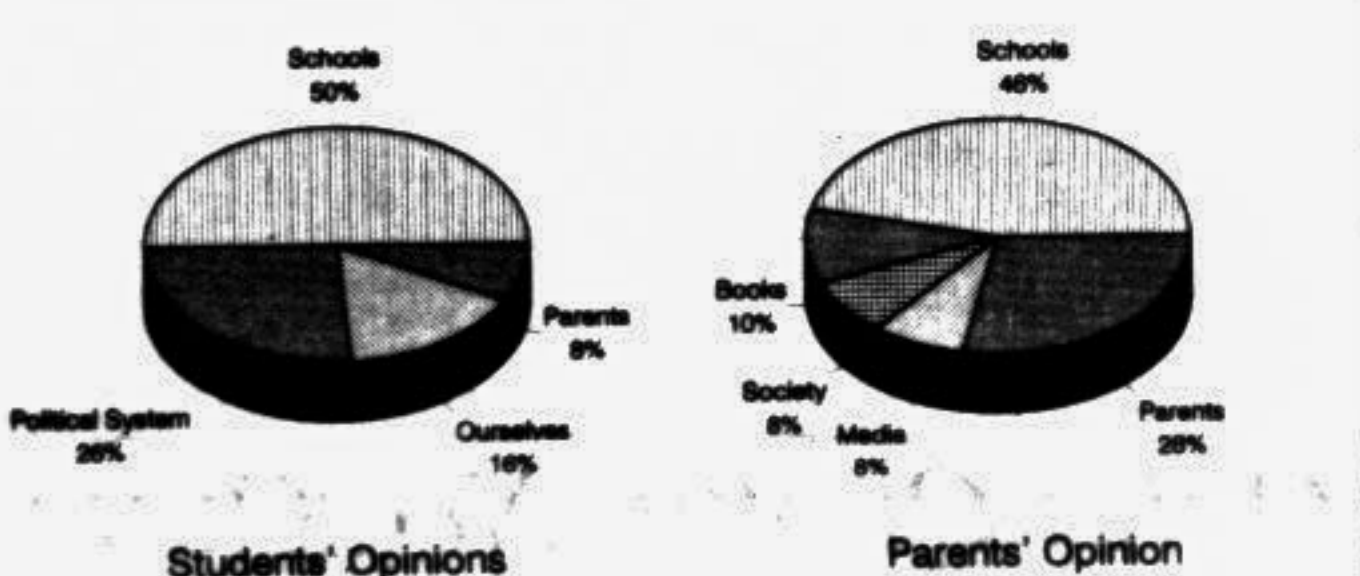
However, it all started when a few of us decided to form a student organisation, whose members would regularly meet and discuss issues concerning Bangladesh, mainly its history, and write articles for newspapers. But we were faced with grave difficulties in forming such an organisation. Ironically, it was those difficulties which necessitated the birth of TAG.

To persuade students to join that organisation, which did not have a name yet, we went to different schools and coaching centres. Most shunned the idea of spending time on researching on Bangladeshi history and culture and writing articles; some were willing only to participate in discussions; while some thought the idea too 'political'. But, still, in our

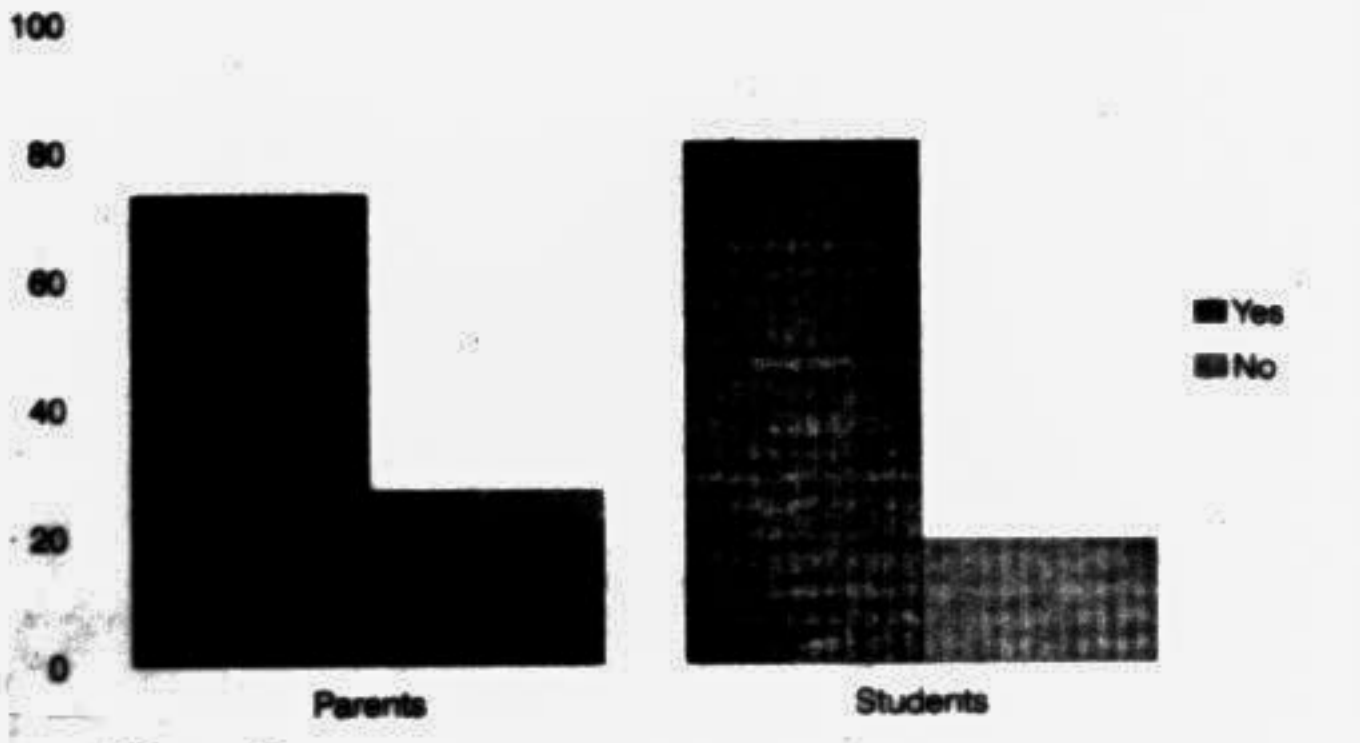
Revelations." By now, we had already deviated quite a lot from our original aim of regularly producing articles on Bangladesh. We concentrated on bringing this issue of "teenage ignorance about Bangladesh" to the forefront and attracting the attention of the concerned part of the society to it. We intentionally limited our scope to private schools for the time being so that the project does not become too ambitious too soon. In the next weeks, we interviewed numerous parents, teachers, Principals and intellectuals. Through the course of these interviews, our philosophies about the problem were gradually taking shape.

The interviews convinced us that the society as a whole is not making an honest, united effort to prepare our generation to take over responsibilities of the country's affairs in the future. Although most parents do identify this ignorance issue as a grave problem, few seem to be bold enough or consider it important enough to demand a change to the situation. Although some principals and teachers of English-medium schools do make a sincere effort to educate students about Bangladesh, most find an easy scapegoat — "In an international school, we like to avoid controversial national issues". The me-

Q. Who/What do you think should play the greatest role in educating the students about Bangladesh?



Q. Do you think students in English medium schools in general are ignorant about the history & culture of Bangladesh?



(Graphs composed by Monirul Islam Sharif)

first two meetings, almost 40 students from various schools turned up. It was time for us to decide on a name for the organisation. That was when we faced the first setback.

Several names were proposed. But none of them passed. Somebody proposed the name "Gangaridh", the ancient name of Bangladesh — it was shot down because it sounded "Indian". "Bangapradip" was outvoted because it was "Awami-League-ish". Soon it wasn't just the name that was in question, our basic objective, which was researching and writing articles on specific historical events of our country, was looked at with suspicion. A question was put forward by several "How do you propose to present history without hurting the interest of one political party or the other? Every party has its own version of history". In Bangladesh, everyone looks at everything through a common point of view — the political point of view — we were learning.

Meanwhile, to investigate why the idea of the organisation was not widely acclaimed, we conducted a city-wide survey. We interviewed more than 200 students from different private institutions to get an idea of the attitude of students towards and their knowledge about Bangladeshi history and culture. The results were stunning. 81% felt they know little about Bangladesh, while 63% did not know when our Shadhinata Dibosh is. We published our findings in an article "Stunning

Teenage Ignorance About Bangladesh

Immediately after independence we went through a phase of underplaying the need to learn English. Today the trend is almost reversed. English medium schools are springing up all around. But what sort of education are they providing? The general impression is that standard of education is generally good in all these schools.

However some questions have been raised about the quality and extent of teaching being provided about the history and culture of Bangladesh. A few enterprising young people got together — The Teenage Awareness Group (TAG) — and carried out a survey about on the issue. Today we publish its findings, along with the views of parents and teachers. Through the publication of this page we do not want to blame anybody, but create an awareness that English medium schools will, perhaps, need to do more about teaching their students about Bangladesh.

— Editor



What the Principals Say?

by Tareem Ahmed, Zaki Rahman

CONFRONTED with the problem of the apparent apathy of the students of English-medium schools towards 'knowing' their history, we decided to talk to the principals of a number of the city's leading schools.

According to the principal of South-Breeze Zeenat Chowdhury, the primary difference between English and — Bangali-medium schools lies not in the language of instruction, but in the fact that English-medium schools are of a much smaller size. The principals of such schools have greater control over their institutions and hence are much more answerable to the parents.

Scholastica's principal Yasmeen Murshed feels that the English-medium schools in general are better only in the sense that the University of London's O'Levels are of a higher standard than the Education Board's SSC examinations. The O'Levels test a student's power of expression, analytical ability and understanding of the basic concepts; the metric system has, however, continued to become more and more memory oriented in the recent times.

Presented with our survey results, Ms Chowdhury agreed that the students of English medium schools are somewhat ignorant about their heritage. One reason for this, she says, is that she (and the other principals) do not know what sort of history to teach. "We still don't know who to call the father of the nation!"

Ms Murshed, however, did not acknowledge the results as either completely or partially true, on the grounds that they were not carried out in accordance with scientific principles. She was also of the opinion that had such a survey been conducted of the Bangali-medium schools as well, the results would not have been much better. She feels that the ignorance issue is not only a problem of the English-

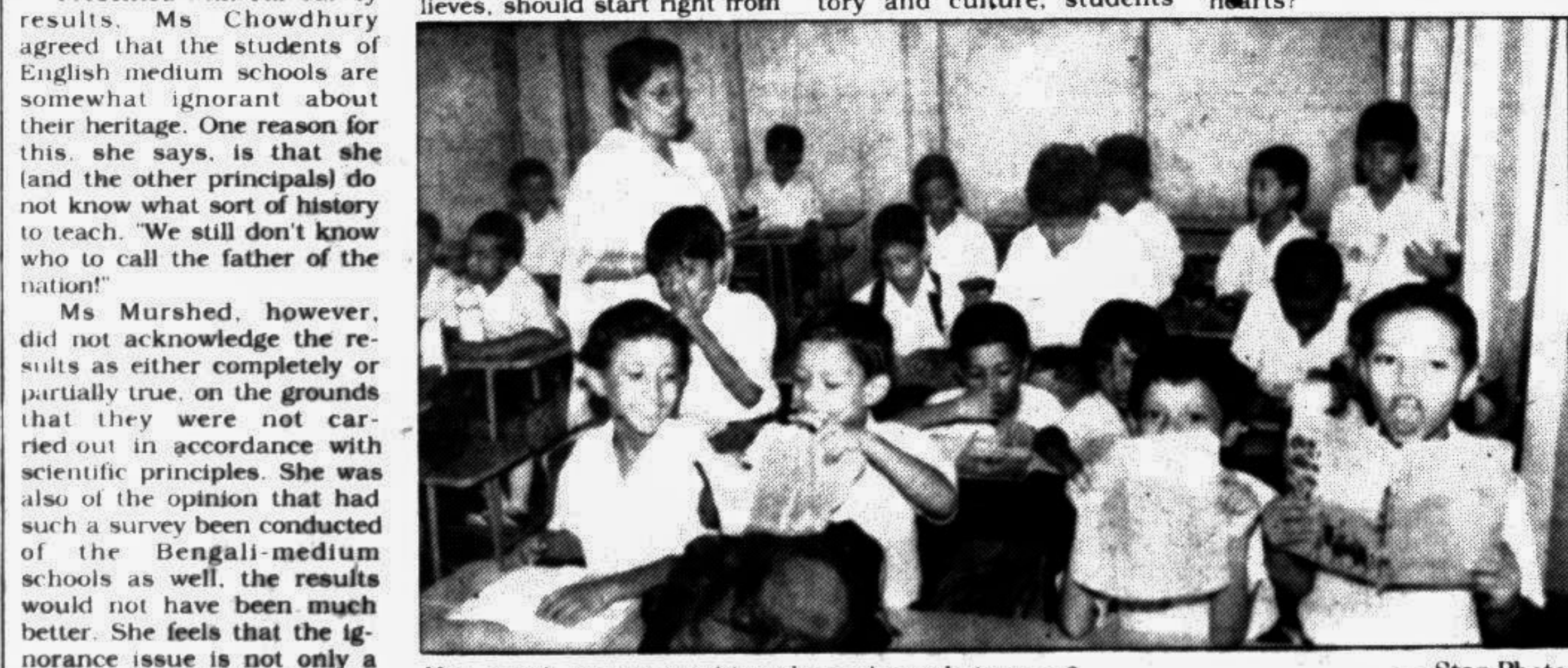
medium community in the country, but of the world in general. "Students nowadays are not only ignorant about their history, but are plain and simple ignorant. The issue you have picked up is only incidental.

The blame she feels, lies not with the schools, but with the previous generation (her age group). "We have failed to provide you with information and knowledge about our past in an interesting fashion. You spend just five hours in school. The rest of the time you just watch TV. You are affected by images, not words." So, she understands, if the situation has to change its means of getting through to the young, and the national television has to air something more than the stereotyped dramas on Independence and Victory Days.

Principal of Radiant International School Nazma Y Haque says that as these schools are on the soil of Bangladesh, they cannot dissociate themselves from the country or from society. The teaching of history, she believes, should start right from

kindergarten, and be carried out in a manner suited to the comprehending ability of the children. "If they can learn nursery rhymes at that age we can also simply history and teach them that in the form of stories", the rest of their lives, then why not simple historical facts? There are, however, no books on Bangladesh appropriate for tiny tots. "So we don't use any books. We compile the relevant information ourselves to teach to six/seven-year-olds." Anticipating the catastrophic results that the prevailing situation can have on our society in the future, Ms Haque lamented, "After we die, there won't be any eye-witnesses left. Then who will teach your about the Liberation War?"

Principal Mrs Matiur Rahman Nizam of Manarat, one of the largest schools in Dhaka, blames the University of London's education board for this ignorance. "The indigenous board fails to provide an international standard. And as the O' and A' Level syllabi don't include topics like Bangladeshi history and culture, students



How much are we teaching them about their roots? — Star Photo

Thoughts of the Thinking Ones

by Mozammel Kabir and Arifur Rahman

IN Bangladesh, intellectuals are usually the most outspoken group during a time of national crisis. Yet very few know and understand the gravity of the ignorance that prevails in the English medium schools at present in the last couple of weeks. TAG interviewed four intellectuals to get a glimpse of the problem from the perspective of these people.

The general attitude towards English-medium schools was that it was not the ideal system of education in Bangladesh. Dr Kabir Chowdhury, the well-known professor of the English department of Dhaka University, feels that primary education should always take place in one's own language. "Creativity cannot be obtained without one's mother tongue," he explained. Therefore, English should be emphasized as a language but not as a medium of instruction. Dr Anisuzaman, head of the Bangla department at DU, too, feels that it is unnecessary to teach a second language at the primary level. The reason for this is that "if a foreign language is taught in a scientific manner, efficiency can be attained in just five years."

The famous poet, Shamsur Rahman went slightly further to compare English-medium schools with madrasahs. According to him, both the systems were outside the mainstream, taught chiefly in a foreign language and made no efforts to inspire a sense of nationalism among the pupils. When we asked Dr Anisuzaman to comment on this analogy, he said "both madrasahs and English-medium schools fulfill a demand of the country. If the government fulfills this demand itself, then there would be no need for these other systems." Dr Seraj-ul-Islam, head of the English department at DU, had a similar opinion. "In a country, all the youth should follow the same system."

All four of the intellectuals agreed that since English-medium schools have become an integral part of our society, the system should be perfected rather than destroyed. The most important need in these schools, they concurred, is a "thorough education about Bangladesh and Bangla." Dr Seraj-ul-Islam said, "A foreign community will respect you only when you have a national identity." Therefore, knowledge about Bangladesh is important even for those students who

planned to go abroad for higher studies. Dr Anisuzaman feels that it is the obligation of the English-medium schools to teach its pupils about the history and culture of Bangladesh as they are "operating on the soil."

For Dr Chowdhury, Bangla education is vital in English medium schools for another reason. "A gap has begun to appear between the privileged class and the common people of Bangladesh. While one is being educated in English, the other is being taught in Bangla. If Bangla is taught properly in English-medium schools, it will help bridge this social gap."

What could be done to solve the problem? Dr Seraj-ul-Islam suggested that the principals of the English-medium schools jointly introduce a compulsory course on Bangla history and culture for their pupils. On successful completion of the course, the pupils could be awarded a certificate which will be recognized in all the schools. The obvious flaw in this system is that for students intending to go abroad, such a certificate would have no value and hence, they will not be motivated to study for it. Dr Anisuzaman pointed out

that it is wrong to make the schools bear the massive responsibility of national education alone. "Students learn not only from schools," he said, "but from homes too. So, if we want our youth to be educated about Bangladesh, we must have a social revolution."

Can the intellectuals play a part in solving this problem of ignorance? Till now they have paid little attention to this evergrowing community of English-medium school-going students. Very often during the interview, we had to explain what the O'Levels and A'Levels were, who set the syllabuses, where the exams were held, etc. It would be unthinkable if the intellectuals had no knowledge of the SSC and HSC exams. Then why should it be acceptable for them to be ignorant about the GCE exams?

We have to make the intellectuals aware of the grave situation that is prevailing among the youth community being educated in English. They have to understand the problem and take an active part in solving it. If we can involve the intellectuals in this issue, our task, as a society, will become much easier.

Special thanks to: Zaki Mridul, Tareem, Robin

20% said there should not be a mandatory mode of education involving history and culture of Bangladesh. This means there are quite a number of parents who do not give the study of Bangladesh enough importance. One parent remarked "English-medium schools make an honest

The Solutions

by Zaki Wahhaj

THE picture is not as bleak as it may look at first sight. Most of the English medium school principals understand the need of history and culture education and are taking the necessary steps to include such subjects in their curriculum. The principals we interviewed spoke of history classes, art competitions and cultural functions on important dates, etc.

The problem is that traditional approaches are, in most cases, futile. Since "history and culture activities" will have no effect on the students' grades, it will be specially difficult to make them participate in such activities. This is where English medium schools teaching the GCE subjects are essentially different from the Bangali medium schools.

While certain amount of local history is included in the SSC syllabus, nothing about the history and culture of Bangladesh exists in the GCE syllabuses set by the University of London. For this reason, the English-medium schools will always have to do something specially attractive and innovative to provide an effective history and culture education.

Ms Morshed, principal of Scholastica School, realized this fact when she introduced a compulsory course called "General Studies" to her A'Level class. Since the course would not effect the A'Level grades, very few of the students studied it seriously. The response was so poor that Ms Morshed finally had to remove the course from the curriculum.

In spite of this, simple techniques can sometimes prove to be effective. Zeenat Chowdhury, principal of South Breeze School, has kept the school library stocked with both English and Bangla books. Students are given English and Bangla reading lists for the holidays. To ensure that they do read these books, they are made to write book-reports when the holidays end.

The St Josephite Inter-school debate competition, which raises a storm in the schools each year, is a fine example of this phenomenon. Why can't we have similar activities which focus on the history and culture of Bangladesh?

Ms Nazma Yasmeen, Haque, principal of Radiant International School starts history education with the 6/7 year olds. Since she found no good books for this age group, she has compiled a set of simple historical facts (e.g. the name of the first prime minister of Bangladesh, the year in which Bangladesh was liberated, etc) which is taught each year to the class.

The possibilities for such "joint ventures" are endless. Schools could jointly organize essay competitions, produce dramas and so on. A very interesting approach to history and culture education would be to hold a mock parliament session. Students from the different schools would each represent a member of the national parliament and then discuss some of the issues that are pertinent to the atmosphere in Bangladesh at present. After the session concludes, the best debaters could be awarded prizes.

Parents' Eye-View

by NS Huq (Muna)

AFTER we interviewed the students, we realized that the survey would not be complete without the interviews of parents. We believe that parents can play an important role in eradicating teenagers' ignorance about Bangladeshi history and culture.

effort to turn out a complete citizen of the future, for the country."

According to some, schools avoid teaching Bangladeshi history because of the narrow outlook of many parents. One parent explained "If the students are given an assignment on the achievements of Sk. Mujibur Rahman or Zairur Rahman, the parents would 'retaliate' Q. What has been your most important source of information about the history and culture of Bangladesh

The parents' survey, in which 91 parents (all of whom enrolled their children in English-medium schools) were interviewed, was quite revealing of their attitudes. It has been our understanding that while most parents are aware of this problem (73% agree that English-medium school students are ignorant about Bangladeshi history and culture), they are evasive about the major role they themselves can play towards a solution. When they were asked who/they thought should have the greatest role in educating teenagers about Bangladesh, only 28% took the responsibility upon themselves.

20% said there should not be a mandatory mode of education involving history and culture of Bangladesh. This means there are quite a number of parents who do not give the study of Bangladesh enough importance. One parent remarked "English-medium schools make an honest

The interviews convinced us that the society as a whole is not making an honest, united effort to prepare our generation to take over responsibilities of the country's affairs in the future. Although most parents do identify this ignorance issue as a grave problem, few seem to be bold enough or consider it important enough to demand a change to the situation.

with charges against the teachers for trying to politicize their children's minds".

Some parents have mentioned that they themselves do not know the true facts about the concerned topic. There are so many versions that it became difficult to judge what is true and what is not. But this does not mean that nothing can be done about it. This type of nonchalant attitude encourage and influence the spread of apathy towards our country's past.

The current attitude of parents towards education and school has to be changed. Parents need to be more involved in their children's education — not only to check their progress in the results, but also to check whether they are well informed in every aspect of education at their level.

Special Thanks To: Asif, Carina, Eram, Keya, Onick, Robin, Romel, Shahed, Shanta, Sumon, Tareem, Zaki Rahman.

