

FOCUS

World Literacy Day was observed yesterday in Bangladesh and around the globe. As a nation in desperate need of a solution to mass illiteracy, one hopes that the efforts of various groups to mark the occasion will prove fruitful. The Daily Star offers some facts and figures to contemplate, focusing on women and literacy as the Fourth World Conference on Women proceeds in Beijing.

Literacy and Education

Education is a Basic Human Right

EDUCATION is a basic human right which is essential for achieving the goals of equality, development, and peace. Educated women tend to raise healthier families, have fewer children, and be more productive in both the home and the work-place. Children of educated mothers are more likely to become educated too.

Global literacy
According to UNESCO, literacy has risen in all regions of the world, but 885 million women and men, almost a quarter of the world's adult population, are still estimated to be illiterate. Sixty-four per cent of the illiterate are women.

Literacy gaps
Women in rural areas often have high illiteracy rates, in some countries two to three times that of women in urban areas. In Honduras, in 1988, of women aged 15-24, 9% in urban

areas and 30% in rural areas were illiterate. Generations of educational neglect have left high illiteracy rates, especially for older women in developing countries. Illiteracy rates among women 25 and above are typically two or more times those of women aged 15 and 24. Among women over 45 years of age, illiteracy rates in developing countries were usually at least 50% in the late 1980s, and often exceeded 70% in Africa and Asia.

Primary school
Girls' primary-school enrollment has reached parity with boys' except in Africa and Asia. In 1990, the average ratios of girls to each 100 boys in primary school was: Africa (79); Asia and the Pacific (84); Latin America and the Caribbean (95); Western Europe and other (95); Eastern Europe (96).

College and university
Women are increasingly entering colleges and universities. In 1990, the average ratios of women to each 100 men in tertiary education was: in Africa (32); Asia and the Pacific (84); Western Europe and other (94); Eastern Europe (104); and Latin America and the Caribbean (106).

Increases have been dramatic in some countries: China's number of female postgraduates increased by 157% from 1985-1992. An increasing number of girls are entering fields once dominated by men. The average ratio of females to each 100 males in science and technology were, in 1990: Latin America and the Caribbean (80); Eastern Europe (74); Asia and the Pacific (70); Western Europe and other (67); and Africa (24).

Non-formal education
As many children fall through the education net, non-formal education programmes become essential, especially for girls. The Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC) has created 4,500 experimental schools since its start in 1985. Out of the 100,000 children served by BRAC, 70% are girls from rural landless families.

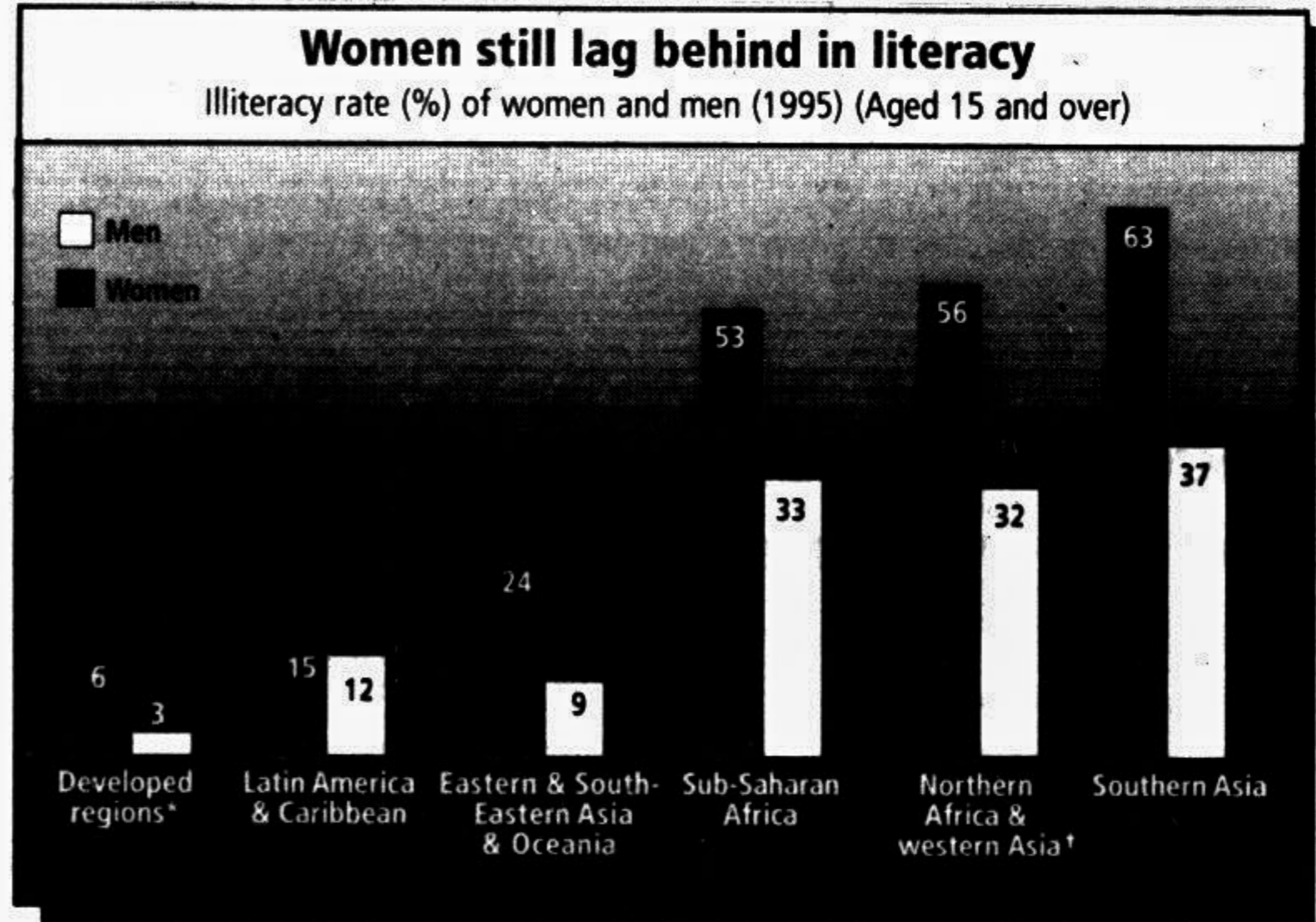
Economic crisis hits education
The progressive trends in

education adopted by many countries were reversed in the 1980s, particularly among those experiencing problems of war, economic adjustment and declining international assistance in Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean, Eastern Europe and a few other cases. An increase in per capita gross domestic product tends to improve female schooling and literacy.

However, remarkable success can be found even in areas with low GDPs, suggesting policy can be more influential than the economy. In 1991, the per capita GDP in the Indian state of Kerala was below the country's average per capita GDP (Kerala: US \$ 200, India: US \$ 250), but the percentage of literate women in 1991 was 87% in Kerala

compared to 34% for India countrywide.

Population growth
In many countries with rapid population growth, the planning of new educational facilities has not met the actual need. In Nigeria, the number of primary schools increased by 85% between 1975-76 and 1982-83, while the number of students increased by 140%.



* Approximations † Also includes Djibouti, Mauritania and Somalia Source: United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, "Statistics on adult illiteracy, Preliminary results of the 1994 estimates and projections" (STE-16). Courtesy UNICEF

The Draft Platform for Action proposes to:

- Eradicate illiteracy among women worldwide.
- Ensure the completion of primary education by at least 80% of children, with special emphasis on girls, by the year 2000.
- Create an educational system that ensures equal education and training opportunities.
- Develop curricula, textbooks and teaching aids free from sex stereotypes for all levels of education.

AMONG 133 countries Bangladesh ranks 107th in literacy with a literacy rate of only 28 per cent. In a country where 60 per cent of the total population lives in absolute poverty, almost the entire population of the illiterate mass depends upon the government allocation for their access to education. Bearing the educational expenses of more than 8.5 crore people is not a task our government is capable of doing. Though foreign donors can be a possible way out, depending upon others in the very first step towards self-reliance will not be a smart choice.

So the situation is we cannot spread education for our under developed economy and we cannot strengthen our economy for our under developed human resources. A possible way out of this situation, however, may have been always present. Perhaps it is so simple that we did not take enough notice.

We have to realize one thing, that what the majority of our illiterate mass needs is not traditional schooling but some sort of non formal education.

The first step towards starting a non formal education programme (NFEP) will be to develop a new curricu-

Our Greatest Cause

by Iftikhar Uddin

lum. The present curriculum of our primary schools is grossly irrelevant. What benefit can a farmer or a rural house wife get from learning English, Arabic or Civics? We need to deliver them an educational package that will enable a poor farmer to read the figures properly before applying his finger print and taking money from a loan shark, or a mother to read a brochure which will enable her to take better care of her children. In this regard, the ability to read and write Bangla, some arithmetic and some basic knowledge about nutrition, hygiene and environment is what should make up the curriculum.

A streamlined curriculum will catch the interest of the learners. This factor is vital for the success of the program. Moreover a new curriculum free of irrelevancies will cut government expenses. As there will be no need to publish and distribute such unnecessary texts like English and religious study (in lakhs of copies), this fund can be diverted for further utilization. Finally a modified curriculum

will facilitate the program, with fewer specialized instructors. Unlike traditional schools where a teacher is assigned for a particular subject, NFEP can cover the whole curriculum with a single teacher.

In the second step we will have to mobilize an army of semi professional teachers. In this respect we must ensure the participation of the community. In the first phase of NFEP about 200,000 instructors will be needed to run some 70 thousand (roughly) one in every village) non formal education centers (NFEC). These centers in two years time will turn over not less than 20 lakh graduates who will subsequently be absorbed in the program as second level instructors (SLI). The SLIs can work within their innermost circle (i.e their families). A vital benefit of this process will be that, the learning process will not disturb the daily routine of either the learner or the instructor. Thus if the process of incorporating the newly educated into the army

of instructors continues, the system in three phases (a total of six years) may produce 5 crore literate persons. At this point with a literacy rate of more than 60% the task will become a lot easier. The

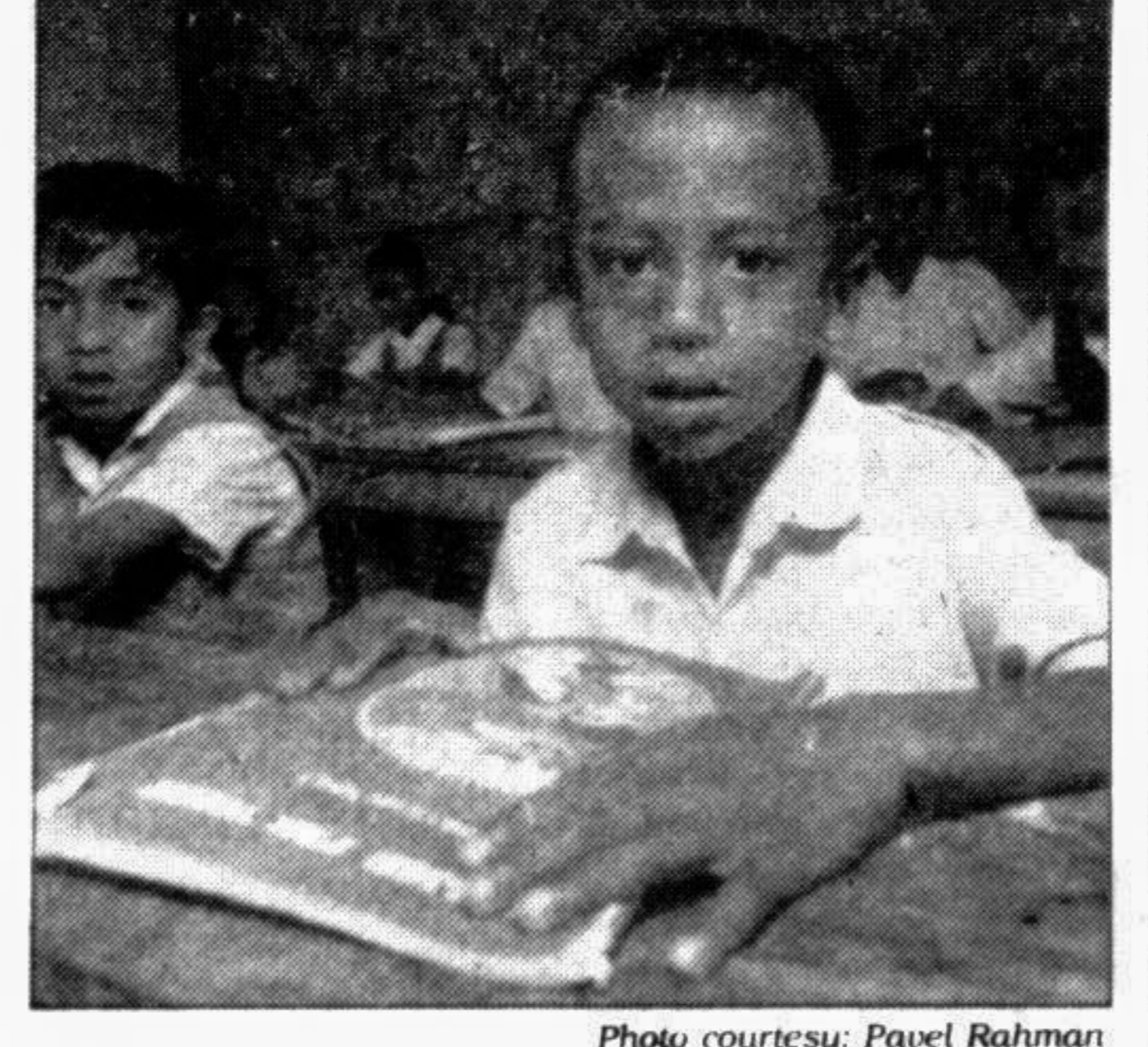


Photo courtesy: Pavel Rahman

situation may appear grossly simplified, but it is possible. The key to its success is the participation of the community. We have to realize that liberating the nation from the clutch of illiteracy is a national task and that a handful of professionals is not enough

to do it. Just as up our liberation war when the freedom fighters were supported by the general people, the education movement needs the active participation of the community. Although the program will need an initial investment of 200,000 teachers, the figure should not be discouraging. The number is merely 0.6% of the total literate mass. Mobilizing only one in every 168 literate persons will be enough to set the ball rolling.

Those who have passed the SSC level can be enlisted into the process. University students, who apart from their 70 days yearly vacation enjoy another two to three months vacation after each year finals, should be mobilized for this purpose. Finally there is the spirit of serving the nation. The masses, particularly students, have in the past proved their readiness to serve for a greater cause. During the liberation war of 1971, the devastating floods of 1988, the mass upsurge of 1990 or most recently the devastating cyclone of 1991, the nation witnessed the self mobilization of lakhs of people. Now the time has come to do it again, for possibly the greatest cause of the present time.

"The Call of the West, the Lure of the Promised Land" The Psychology of Middle Class Bangladeshi Migration

FOR many middle class Bangladeshi families, migrating to the West (largely the US, Canada and Australia) has become an imperative, the no longer obscure object of everyone's desire. It sometimes seems as if all the hopes, aspirations and yearnings of middle class urban Bangladesh centers around the process of migration. Myths abound about how to get the coveted green card, the landed immigration permit, the passage to the 'promised land'

While it is easy to understand why the poor would want to migrate, I am somewhat more intrigued by the phenomenon of middle class individuals with fairly stable jobs giving it all up to live in a foreign land. What propels them? Why this urgency to give up roots, family and friends?

On a recent trip back from Boston, while waiting in Amsterdam airport, I struck up a conversation with someone who had just taken the momentous decision to migrate to Canada. He had a relatively stable job as an engineer in Bangladesh, and yet he was going to give it all up to try his hand at something new in a country about which he had only the vaguest notions. He had no firm commitment of a job, and furthermore had no relatives or friends in the area. He had heard that there

might be work for someone with his qualifications. On this tenuous thread of expectation, he was journeying thousands of miles to try his luck. I was struck by this expression of daring. Why was he going, this seemingly conventional middle class man?

Superficially he said, he was going in search of improved economic opportunities, a better material life. When I pointed out to him that Canada was barely recovering from one of its worst recessions, and that jobs were hard to find and more importantly hard to keep, he said he didn't care about himself, he would make do somehow, doing odd jobs or whatever, but his children would have a future. In his view, in Bangladesh there was no physical or mental security, crime was rising and the educational system was paralyzed. He was tired of politics, tired of the inflammatory rhetoric, the failed promises. He wanted stability, predictability, a future for his children.

Children seem to figure in all middle class immigrant conversations. They exist not so much as individuals, but as icons, they provide the rationale for migration, the consolation for the wrenching emotional trauma associated with uprooting oneself from one's native land and family. They are what makes the sacrifice, the inevitable

sense of personal alienation worthwhile. In the mythology of migration, the children will have a better material future, and yet somehow not acquire any of the cultural baggage of their adopted land. There will be no conflict of identities, no soul searching. In an endless cycle of renewal, the children will marry other Bangladeshis and continue confident in their own cultural heritage. As one parent put it, it is as



REFLECTIONS

by Dr Omar Rahman

if we are still in Bangladesh, except that there are many more economic opportunities, a better life for our children.

This is the stuff of innumerable conversations among middle class professional Bangladeshi immigrants scattered all over the west, living in hermetically sealed, self created worlds, where your only interaction with the world of your adopted country comes out of necessity, at work. In the weekends, you can retreat into a more surreal world, a home away from home, where just for a little

time you can pretend that you really haven't left. You can eat maach, bhata, bharta, complement the hostess on her culinary capabilities, tell her 'that it is just like home'. She replies somewhat coyly that one can't get good ruy here, and that the chicken is too tough, and the vegetables are like plastic. Everybody smiles in agreement. Just for a moment, all of those present are transported back to an earlier time, in another

world, where the fish was fresh, the chicken tender, and the vegetables tasted like they should, just picked from the ground. This reverie is rudely interrupted by the cacophony of heavy metal rock music — if one can call it that. The host shouts out to his teenage son salem, turn that stereo down. He apologizes to those around him, (the 40 something crowd with teenage children of their own). I can't understand their taste in music, it sounds like random noise to me. Everyone commiserates, the age old conflict of gener-

ations, teenage rebellion, exacerbated here by a clash of cultures separated both by time and geography. The conversation turns to politics, not of their adopted country but the one they have left behind. Everyone has an opinion, a point of view expressed vociferously. The passion here is almost tangible. It is as if for those who are thousands of miles away, no longer bearing the burden of life in Bangladesh, these passionate arguments about politics reaffirms some deep seated yearning to belong. Snippets of conversation float in the air — the country is going to the dogs, there is no security anymore, my brother in law's cousin, (you know the one who lives in the south Bronx) just returned from Dhaka and said that it wasn't safe to go out at night. Dhaka is primitive, you can't get fresh orange juice and my neema just won't drink anything else.

Now it is time for the obligatory post-dinner jaisha. The harmonium is brought out, there is a special treat tonight, the noted rabindra shangeet singer, the one who lives in ann arbor, michigan is going to sing, all the old favorites. There is a hum of anticipation. The living room is cleared, the furniture is removed, the guests seat themselves on the carpet. Oh! where are the chil-

The New Forest Conservationists

by Sarah Russell

Even though ordinary citizens donated generously towards saving the world's forests, and in instances the timber industry became more eco-sensitive, the situation in the last decade has continued to deteriorate. The need is for closer interaction between conservationists and industry.

GLAND, Switzerland — For the past 30 years, environmentalists have been guilty of seriously misleading the public," confesses Jean-Paul Jeanrenaud, Forests Officer at WWF-World Wide Fund for Nature. "Right up to the mid-1980s, northern conservation organizations got away with saying: 'There are serious problems facing the world's forests and people, but if you give us your money, we'll save them.'"

The response was gratifying. Cash was relatively plentiful in those pre-recession years, and Americans and Europeans dipped willingly into their pockets and purses. Everyone felt good. Environmentalists because funds were flowing into conservation projects, the public because consciences were eased and they could sleep at night, secure in the knowledge that they had done their bit to save the world.

Ten years on, however, conservationists — and the public — are beginning to realize that the world is very far from being saved. Simply pouring money into efforts to stop people cutting down the Amazonian rainforest is not enough. To save the forests, we must change the way we manage our forests and trade the products they provide.

In the old days, green-tinted members of the public looked on the timber industry as a pariah, responsible for the virtual extinction of trees such as the Brazilian mahogany. Eagerly, they latched on to calls to boycott tropical hardwoods and shun companies with logging interests.

Now, the eco-minded must face up to the fact that if they really want to save forest, the best solution could be to make sure that they and their friends and colleagues buy timber from reputable sources.

Many timber companies have woken up to the fact that more and more consumers are asking for "green" products. Customers want to know that the greetings cards and bookshelves they are buying come from "sustainably" managed forests. In response, traders in wood products have rushed to put labels on their wares announcing that they are eco-friendly.

Unfortunately, many of those labels are unreliable, and the consumer has no guarantee that the claims they make are valid. To provide that guarantee, those claims must be verified by an unbiased, independent body.

But what should that body consist of? Conservationists? Timber traders? People living in and around forests? Timber certification companies? In 1993, a group of people from all these disparate fields tried to come up with a solution. The result was the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC).

The FSC has now drawn up and agreed on a set of principles and criteria for good forest management. Companies trading products from forest managed according to these principles and criteria will receive the FSC

stamp of approval. Customers buying products carrying an FSC-approved certificate can therefore rest assured that they were produced using "responsible" forestry techniques.

The council is currently in the process of accrediting certifiers which have themselves certified more than 4 million hectares of forests in Costa Rica, Honduras, Indonesia, the UK and the US. A number of retailers in the UK and US are already selling wood and wood products from these forests.

Among these are companies belonging to WWF-UK's 1995 Group: 54 British companies that trade in forest products. More than 25 million customers shop in the group's stores each week, which between them trade well over \$1.5 billion worth of wood products per year — almost 15 per cent of the UK's total wood consumption. Eight members of the group — Boots The Chemist, B&Q, Do It All, Great Mills, Homebase, MFI, Texas Homecare and Wickes Building Supplies have formally agreed not to buy products from unknown sources or poorly managed forests after the end of 1995.

But not everyone working in the timber industry is as enlightened as this group. In many developed countries, there is a growing industry backlash against conservation. In Australia, for example, loggers have clashed violently with environmentalists over attempts to stop logging in remaining old-growth forests.

Some industrialists complain that conservationists focus too much of their attention on forest related industries.

"Many industrialists object saying that we environmentalists fail to give credit where it is due and that we keep moving the goal posts," observes Jeanrenaud. "They have a point. The trouble is that we have to keep moving the goal posts, because new, and increasingly worrying, problems keep emerging."

Over the past ten years, the global forest situation has actually got worse. In the tropics, the forest area is declining, in numerous temperate and boreal regions, though, the area covered by trees is expanding. Much of this tree cover, however, is provided not by natural forests but by unnatural, single-species plantations.

"The best way to solve these problems is for both industry and environmental groups to change the way they work," concludes Jeanrenaud. "Conservationists must stop simply criticizing loggers for cutting forests the wrong way. Industrialists must stop leaping to defend the way they operate. Instead, the two groups need to forge partnership which promote solutions — such as independent certification of forest products — that offer positive benefits for both business and the environment."

Sarah Russell is a Press Officer with WWF International.

Technology

SESAM Keeps Out Unwelcome Guests

"ENTRY denied!" should be the answer to any unauthorised persons attempting to get into security areas. And this is absolutely guaranteed by an innovative and comprehensive screening system developed by the Fraunhofer-Institut für Integrierte Schaltungen IIS (Fraunhofer Institute for Integrated Circuits) in Erlangen. The system has been given the appealing name SESAM, a German acronym standing for "synergetic visual, acoustic and motorial recognition," and is based on the principle of synergetic computing systems. The synergetic principle allows a computer to recognise, learn and record complex amounts of information independently. SESAM processes the characteristic features of individuals, filtering out those characteristics common to all people. Only truly distinguishing features serve the purpose of identification, and SESAM is able to ignore such changeables as hairstyles, beards or spectacles. In order to guarantee 100% recognition, the system uses three sources of information — the visual (facial appearance), the acoustic (voice) and the motorial (lip movements). Additional components can be integrated easily.

The rapid, reliable and contact-free identification of people according to a combination of their features makes SESAM superior to conventional screening methods and circumvents their common problems. The system uses no keys, ID tags or chip cards, so none of these items can be lost, decoded or forged.

SESAM can handle security controls for large numbers of authorised persons. It requires only a short time to learn and recognise the relevant human features, and utilises only a small amount of memory. Its visual and acoustic activation is straightforward and user-friendly, and it is ideally suited for installation in research, laboratories, banks and manufacturing facilities.