

FOCUS

TAG Symposium: Reflections and Reactions

What Principals and Teachers Say

THE teenage ignorance about Bangladesh, which is a social problem, was exposed precisely by the Teenage Awareness Group (TAG) in a seminar highlighting "Knowing More About Bangladesh" which was organised by TAG and The Daily Star at the Jatiya Press Club on 26th of August. Principals, teachers, students of different English medium schools (EMS) were present at the seminar and voiced their opinions. Some parents were also present there. A number of new, creative ideas and solutions were presented by the participants of the seminar. In order to know the reaction of principals and teachers of different EMS about the seminar, we decided to speak to them personally.

Yasmin Murshed, the Chairperson of Scholastica said, "It was an excellent and a commendable effort. I want to encourage the effort in every way I can. The problem of not knowing enough about Bangladesh is not an individual problem, but a social problem. In order to make the younger generation more interested in their country, we have to take the problem out of the classroom. We have to create a series of activities which involves Bangladesh and attracts the teenagers. We have to use modern techniques to pass an old message. The message is that one has to know about his country in full."

Sitara Jabeen Ahmed, the English teacher of Scholastica said, "The problem of the ignorance of the teenagers regarding their poor knowledge of Bangladesh is a very significant topic. Though the problem is mainly concentrated on students, there has to be very good communication between teachers and parents in order to

combat the problem. There has to be an administrative board and materials on Bangladesh has to be published, so that the EMS can follow it. The efforts taken by TAG is absolutely worth praising and they should continue their good progress."

Zeenat Chowdhury, the Principal of South Breeze International School praised the efforts of TAG as well as Mahfuz Anam, the editor of The Daily Star for the symposium held at the Jatiya Press Club. Fauzia Enayet Chowdhury, the Bengali teacher of the same school, who attended the symposium had a lot to say. She said, "I liked the symposium as well as the significance behind it. We should have more seminars. There should also be a change in attitude of the parents. Some parents are not ashamed at all if their children forget Bangla. I also propose a few alterations in the teaching methods of Bengali in the schools. The language of our Motherland should be initiated from the junior classes. Courses on Bangladesh's history should be present in every class." When she was asked that what immediate measure did she undertake after attending the seminar, she answered confidently, "I am trying to enforce the fact that students of every class shouldn't be promoted if they don't pass in Bangla." She also said, "We have to change the influence of politics on our history so that the young generation can be fully aware of their true identity."

Shabnam Sobhan, the Vice-Principal of Scholastica said, "The symposium was interesting and there was a good turnout. It helped us to rethink what we are imparting to our students regarding

by Nusrat Sharmin Huq and Rabeth Khan

Bangladesh. More books of standard English on Bangladesh is required at all levels and film shows reflecting the cultural history of Bangladesh can be made. More seminars of this kind may be organised limiting the number of speakers from the audience and giving them a fixed time."

Mrs Ehsan, the Vice Principal of Sun Beams suggested, "The symposium was not very planned. It has to be more systematic. But in spite of those problems, the overall effort was good. We must try to develop our children and make them proud of what they are." Shahnaz Siddiquy, another teacher of the same school, said, "The symposium made us realise

that bilingual education produces students who are comfortable in themselves and in their own society while having the requisite tools to interact with the world outside."

The Principal of Radiant, Nazma Y Haque remarked, "I appreciate the effort of TAG for the symposium, and for the work they have undertaken. But I didn't like the way the symposium was carried out. It has to be more systematic in the future."

A unique comment was made by the Vice-Principal of Wills Little Flower, Salma Rahman: "I think religious studies play an important role in teaching students about their past. What I mean by religious studies is that it

should not be confined just to the teaching of Islam but should include other religions as well. In the past our country has been ruled by kings and leaders who were Muslims, Hindus and Buddhists. So by learning the country's religious past, the students will automatically be aware of their culture and heritage."

Mrs Zeba Ali, the Principal of Maple Leaf International School commented, "Holding the symposium was very useful. But the usefulness could have been elevated if the issues were discussed with a much more broader basis."

"This campaign should not be restricted to only teenagers of English medium schools but should be spread to cover the entire teenage community of our country,"

said Firoza Ahmed, the Principal of Green Gems International School.

S A Mollah, the Principal of Omni International School said, "An administrative forum can be formed with the help of all the English medium schools, and they may publish educational materials on our own history and culture, which can later be introduced as courses in the schools."

To our pleasure, we have received overwhelming amount of support and encouragement from almost all the principals and teachers we have interviewed. Many obliged us with their valuable advice towards the improvement of the symposium. We did not expect a full glorifying reflection of our symposium and we were not surprised.

Quite a few number of the principals and teachers interviewed expressed their doubt concerning the suggestion about getting the principals and teachers together to form a standard curriculum on Bangladesh history, culture and geography as expressed by Mahfuz Anam at the symposium. The Principal of Loretto said, "This may not work since one principal might not agree with another just because they cannot tolerate each other." But TAG will not be daunted as majority of the principals and teachers appeared supportive of the plan and seemed prepared to give their utmost cooperation.

"I would love to join and contribute in any way I can," said Shahara Ahmed, Principal of Step by Step. "This suggestion might work out if we all work unitedly," she added.



Teacher's attending the symposium

Not Enough Books: Parents' Perspective

A wide number of parents who enrolled their children in English Medium Schools (EMS) attended the seminar, held on 26th of August. Right after that, the Teenage Awareness Group (TAG) carried out an extensive survey among the parents who were present at the conference and also among those who were not.

When asked about the symposium, the guardians, who had appeared at the Jatiya Press Club, conveyed a positive opinion. For them, it had a friendly environment, and the purpose of the meeting to highlight the indifference that prevails among the English medium students regarding Bangladesh, was achieved. One parent even pointed out, "It will definitely

by Zaki Rahman and Romel S Mostafa

create an awareness among everyone who was present. Although, a few minor mistakes were observed by them, most parents were satisfied."

From the survey, it came out clearly that parents feel the lack of adequate books to be taught and read in the EMS. "There are hardly any books available in the markets regarding 'Bangladesh' in English. It is so unfortunate that the schools teach world history upto class eight or nine but our indigenous history, culture and geography does not receive enough attention. Parents feel more books should be published and kept in the libraries. Moreover, they insisted that lessons regarding Bangladesh history and cultural heritage

should be made compulsory at least in the junior classes and some of them even thing that they should be made mandatory in the senior classes, as well. Apart from these subjects, students could be taken to historical places for study tours in order to widen their views," suggested a pragmatic parent.

Some of them even pointed out that personal interest among the students should be encouraged, and the best way to do so is to encourage them to read books on Bengali literature and history in their spare time. Many of them also emphasized students' active participation in cultural pro-

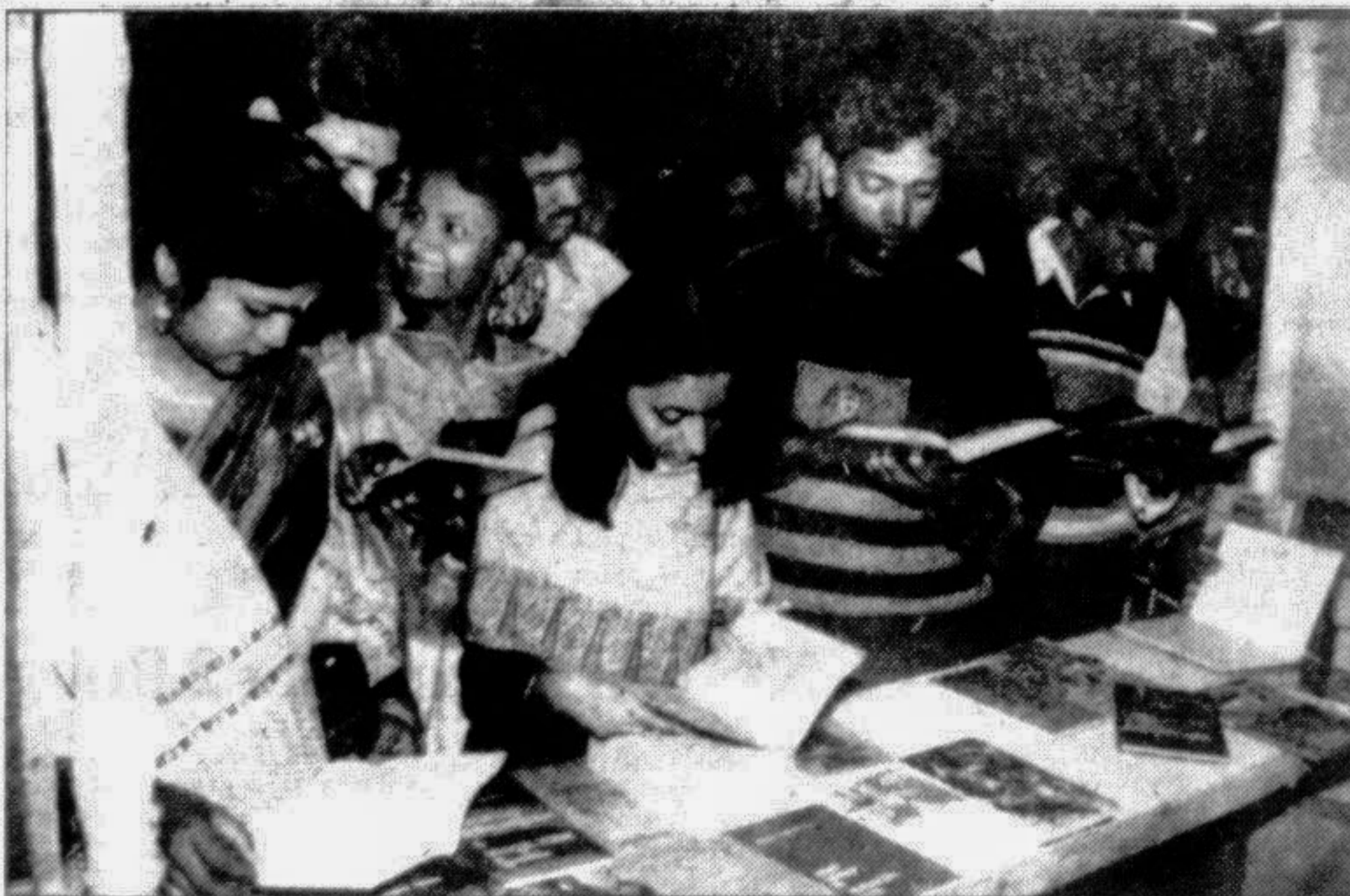
grammes. Moreover the parents reminded those present that the history of Bangladesh should not be confined to the 71 era and after the history of the pre-liberation period should also be included.

However, some parents stressed the point that this does not mean the students should focus too extensively on these matters, hence, over loading their studies. One parent suggested an integrated subject, with religion, cultural studies and history fused together, that can be introduced from class three and upto class seven.

For their part, many parents admitted that they themselves had not carried out their responsibilities effectively in shaping up their children with adequate knowledge of 'Bangladesh'.

In response to Mr Mahfuz Anam's proposal of holding a meeting among the principals of the English Medium Schools to form a standard curriculum in which the nation's history and culture will be well stressed, 90% of the parents expressed optimistic view-points.

As one parent echoed the famous quotation, "United we stand..." most guardians think that if such cooperation among the EMS can be achieved, then the establishment of the revised curriculum is not unrealistic. And if that can be realised and maintained in all the English medium schools, the demand for books in English, regarding culture, history and geography of Bangladesh, will eventually rise and henceforth, publishers will be forced to print such books, eliminating a formidable hindrance — lack of books.



Encouraging young people to read more Bangla books is a possible solution

AFTER the symposium we, along with other TAG members, went to different English Medium Schools to find out how the students felt about the symposium. As many of the students could not attend the symposium, we asked all of them to give us a written account of their opinions and suggestions towards the whole issue.

Some days later, when we received their replies, we were overwhelmed and to some extent bewildered by their appealing responses. According to the students the symposium was a brilliant idea and basically the foundation pillar for a much more organized way of solving the present state of ignorance among the teenage community. They also agreed that it brought to light that teenagers are very much enthusiastic to know more about their country.

"For the first time teachers, students and guardians sat face-to-face, discussing

Thoughts of the Students

by Mozammel Kabir and M Arifur Rahman

their problems. This is indeed a history by itself," said one student. In fact many wondered why such symposiums were not held before. For them, these meetings would bring unity among different schools, and students would have a greater opportunity to interact with each other. As to the subject of discussion, everyone felt that "knowing more about Bangladesh" was of immense importance and it had stirred the thoughts of many people. Everyone was excited to be a part of the venture.

However some expressed their concern about the way the symposium was organised. According to them, most of the valuable time had been wasted on speeches and little time was allocated for the open discussion session where the participants, especially the students, could

have discussed their ideas and thoughts much more widely. A few also expressed their dislike of the fact that some students wasted a lot of time in praising their schools instead of discussing how much there is to be done.

Besides this everyone thought the symposium was a great success and some are expecting a follow up symposium, in which how far things have progressed could be discussed.

Just talking about the matter will not get us anywhere; one has to implement it," commented one student. For a start, many of the interested souls wanted a curriculum which would be both educational as well as interesting so that they would all enjoy the process of learning. Some even wondered whether the London University could have a sep-

arate course involving our culture, geography and history. In that case many students could take the subject in their O'Level examinations, they suggested.

Another group of students wanted a mandatory curriculum but they suggested the course should be limited upto class seven or eight. Whatever may be the solution, all our young friends did agree that the principals and teachers would be the best people to deal with the matter. But they all had a very strong message: "Make it interesting and exciting for us."

As for TAG, we think, if one views history to be a mere collection of dates and facts, and culture to be a list of rituals and ceremonies, he is sure to find them boring and uninteresting. History has more to offer than that. First, it will make you aware of your true identity, and culture will help you preserve it. Special thanks to Sanjana and Carina.

Suggested Solutions

From various sources (principals, teachers, students and parents)

- * Field trips to significant areas of Bangladesh and projects about them.
- * Monthly discussion and lectures given by people who participated in the liberation war could be held at schools.
- * Teachers and principals should publish their own books on Bangladesh history and geography.
- * When learning about foreign countries we could have a much more comprehensive course dealing with our country especially in the secondary level.
- * Cultural programmes like dramas depicting Bangladeshi history and culture should be arranged.
- * Teachers should give projects which involve research on Bangladesh.
- * Students should attend Bangladeshi cultural functions that take place in the city on different occasions.
- * Knowledge on Bangladesh should be given through stories and class discussions.
- * BTV should take more care in producing educative and interesting programmes on Bangladesh.
- * Newspapers could start quiz programmes.
- * Inter-school debates on Bangladeshi aspects could be arranged.
- * Somebody should take the initiative, leaving the controversial issues behind, and write a book about the history of Bangladesh in English.
- * The Text Book Board can introduce English books on Bangladesh.
- * History, culture of Bangladesh and Bangla should be made compulsory in classes seven and eight.
- * An effort should be made to introduce the topic in GCE syllabus.
- * Parents have to play an equally important role to create an environment where Bengali culture should be observed.
- * Government writers and publishers should sit together and decide to either publish books or translate the existing ones into English.
- * Recast the GCE O'level Bengali standard.
- * One subject could be taught, i.e. an integrated one with religion, culture and history fused.



In search of their identity; TAG members — Courtesy: TAG.

TAG Members' Opinion About The Symposium

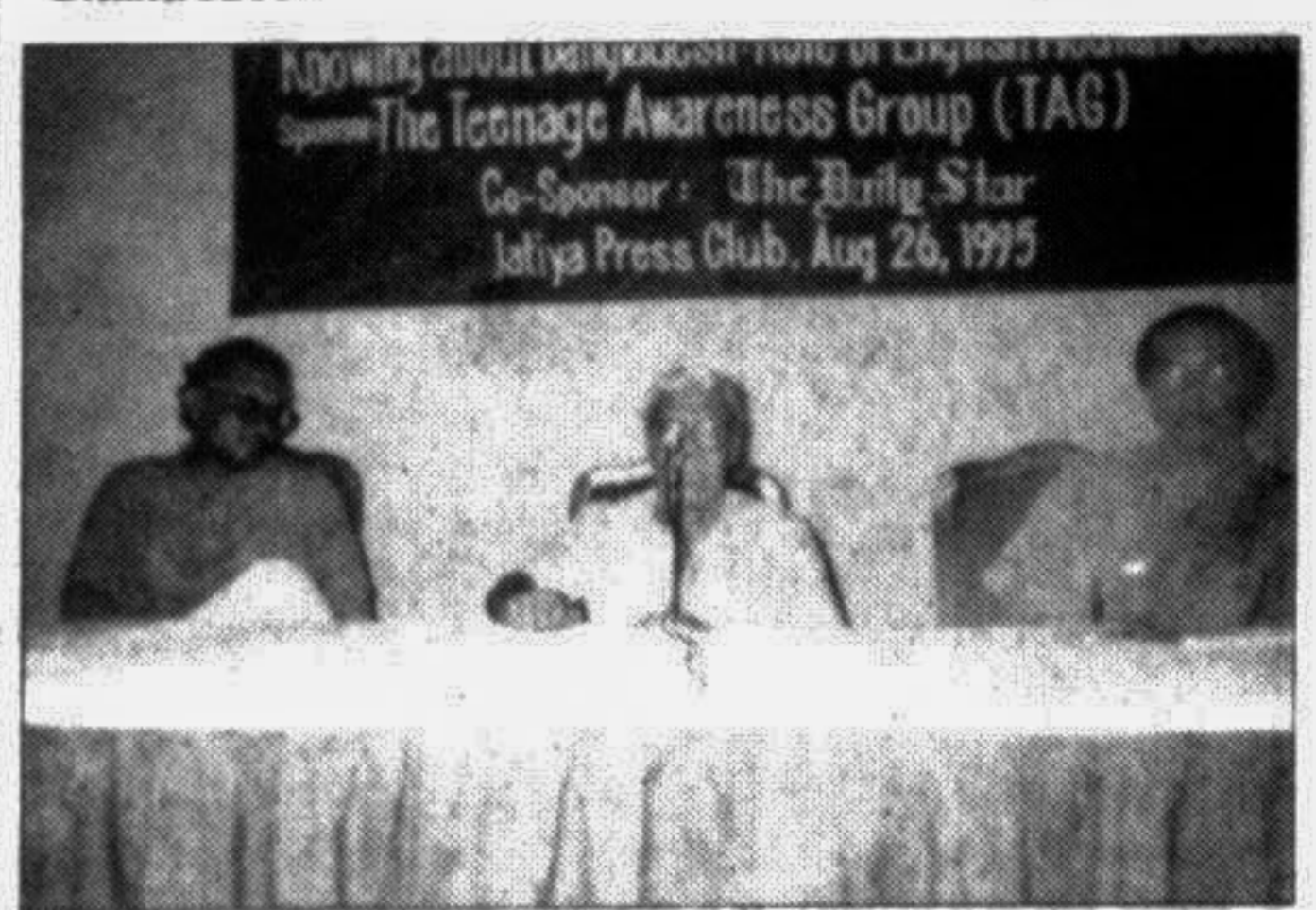
Though Bangladesh has an extraordinary history and amazingly rich and vibrant culture, many of us among the EMS (English Medium School) are not truly aware of it. This issue of complete apathy towards inadequate knowledge of our country was first brought to the forefront by TAG (Teenage Awareness Group), a group of students who were deeply concerned about this issue.

TAG then published several articles based on the ignorance of Bangladesh among EMS and found that to eradicate this problem it involves the support and cooperation of many people such as students, parents, teachers, and principals. As a result TAG organized a symposium, which was the first of a series, held at Jatiya Press Club on 26th August, co-sponsored by The Daily Star, where students, parents, teachers, principals, and eminent intellectuals discussed within themselves to find the extent of the problem and how we could bring a change to this problem.

We felt that the symposium went far better than expected and we were energised by its success. Thus, as soon as possible, we tried to reach all the participants of the symposium in order to know their views towards it. To our pleasure, we were received with overwhelming amount of enthusiasm and encouragement. Through the interviews we received valuable advice concerning how to improve the symposium. And, most importantly, we were able to obtain vast number of suggestions about how to eradicate apathy towards Bangladeshi history, culture and geography.

We hope that we continue to receive support and encouragement from all sectors of the society. We also hope that spread of the realisation of the ignorance about Bangladesh will instigate a positive and constructive trend of response from the community. We strongly believe that by working together we can and we will abrogate this problem progressively.

To contact TAG: Co The Daily Star House No 2, Rd-3 Dhaka-1205.



The symposium

—Courtesy TAG