



Studying at an Intervida pathshala.

tive and encouraging environment, unlike some of the dreary cobweb-laced classrooms I have seen in regular primary schools.

These children have been selected from among families whose collective income is below Tk 5000 a month. Their schooling is completely free, including their books, uniforms, and even their tiffin. This system, which continues even when they enter mainstream education, raises familiar questions about dependency and sustainability, but it's not hard to imagine what might happen to the enthusiasm of parents for such education if they were asked to invest some of their hard-won earnings. Far easier to send their offspring out to work. Parental commitment remains an issue despite such free provision: the need for money in the present is far more tangible than the likely but still uncertain benefits of education for the future. These nagging issues though are not the only challenges faced by the organisation. There is a transience to these communities too, as labourers migrate in and out, which makes maintaining continuity a constant headache.

Nevertheless, wherever possible a dialogue between the organisation and the community is sustained. In an office in the school compound, a meeting is going on between some of the fathers of these children and a group of dynamic social development workers sent from Intervida's head office, who encourage discussion on a range of issues from education to hygiene and from crime to family planning. The talk is open and free-flowing, and seems a testament to a sense of involvement among the local parents.

The social workers are convinced that the nature of mobility in Bangladesh will allow these children at least a chance to haul themselves up out of the spiral of poverty, given an education. You can only hope this is true. What is beyond doubt however is that to deny an education to

these kids would absolutely guarantee a lifetime of destitution.

Some of the kids are already hedging their bets. Down the road from the main school is the "Second Chance" school, which caters exclusively to working children, whose youthful zest is combined with the brash self-confidence gained through a life on the streets. Here too, the teachers appear dedicated and the kids energised, encouraged by a positive environment. These children work in doctor's surgeries, as home helps, and gathering rubbish and plastic on the streets. It's interesting how the latter group is dismissively referred to by some of the kids themselves as "tokai" (scavengers). Already it seems, a sense of hierarchy has entered these young minds: a league table of disadvantage in which some clearly languish at the bottom.

A few steps away is the Cultural Development Centre, which looks after the extra-curricular needs of those children who are not at the school, which operates on a shift system. Here the desk-bound learning is forgotten, and the children engage in dramas, dances and songs, providing an outlet for play, imagination and creativity which has little place in their home lives, their parents too preoccupied with making ends meet. They are led by a self-confident young woman, herself wearing the standard blue and yellow, whose dedication is impressive.

The morning finishes with a visit to the neat Primary Health Care centre, which deals with vaccinations against contagious diseases, hygiene and basic health education, and to the Day Care Centre, a sort of crèche where the youngest pre-primary children are catered for, and taught games and activities which encourage the development of motor skills and foster curiosity and co-operation.

After a day like this among those who eke out a life in Korail, you are struck both by the contrast with the people in the smart neighbourhoods all around, and by how much we actually share. That evening, an image returned to my mind and refused to subside. Sitting in the day care centre, I'd looked through a gap in the wall, only to realise with a start that I was looking into someone's home. An almirah, with carefully folded shirts in a pile, a TV perched high above a few schoolbooks. And there, no more than a few feet away from me, a handsome teenager, looking intently into a heart-shaped mirror, brushing his hair, peering at his teeth, and, finally satisfied, making his way out into the morning. Despite the obvious difference in living standards between him and just about anyone reading this, what he and his neighbours also want from their lives is more of the things they find pleasant, and fewer of the hardships. He's looking for contentment, and just a small piece of dignity. In this, of course, he's no different from you and me.