

1984: education for all

THE TARGET — like so many being set in Bangladesh these days by President Ziaur Rahman—is extremely ambitious: free and compulsory universal primary education by 1984.

President Zia has called it "the second phase of the revolution" and has warned the people that unless major peaceful and democratic changes were made successfully, the country would inevitably face "bloody revolution."

The educational revolution is scheduled to begin in a few days. The Government doesn't much care which buildings are used for schools. They can be mosques, rooms in houses, sheds, or community centres: the fact is that if they are to achieve their target, the authorities will have to open an additional 23,000 schools in the next five years, thus providing one in every village.

Primary education in Bangladesh has been bedevilled by the sheer grinding poverty of the country. Children start dropping out of school at the age of six. The urge for education is stifled by the need for food, and the parents

soon send their hungry children out into the fields to earn money.

The primary education statistics for 1978 show this trend clearly. First grade children numbered 3.3 million, while in the second grade, this had almost halved to 1.8 million. By the fifth grade, there were a mere 800,000 students.

Few of the campaigns being mounted by the Government can be seen in isolation. How can you force some impoverished peasant family to keep their small children in school, when the pitiful amounts of money they could be earning instead would help to stave off hunger? Clearly, life must simultaneously be made easier for the parents — and this is where President Zia's plan for a democratic increase in food production comes in.

If Zia's agricultural initiative fails, the compulsory primary education scheme is going to have a hard time.

Yet the Bangladeshi Government feels it cannot afford to lose the education battle, not so that children will be able to conjugate the Latin verb "to starve," but so that they can learn something about agriculture, and fertilisers, to know about irrigation, to understand the economic necessity of limiting families, and to be able — at least — to write their own names.

Attempts are also being made to improve the quality of the schools by getting rid of a lot of male teachers who proved to be less than satisfactory and single-minded.

Prime Minister Shah Azizur Rahman, who also holds the education portfolio, said: "Previously, we only had about 10 per cent of female teachers, but now we have 50 per cent. We found

said. "The President is going to villages, walking miles, to talk to the people. We have asked students, teachers, and workers in all Government departments to take part in the mass literacy campaign and the family planning campaign when they go home on holiday."

The Government is forcing a start among its own employees. Since the day of the Raj, illiterate workers have been allowed to "sign" for their pay, or complete documents simply by applying their thumb prints.

This system is about to be abolished in Bangladesh. By February 21 next year, every employee in Government service or in the autonomous bodies must learn how to sign his or her name. Anyone who doesn't simply won't get paid.

"We are not going to give any pay to anybody, or register any document, unless the person concerned is able to put a signature as a first step," the Prime Minister said. "The time has come to put behind us the old colonial habits."

Peter Niesewand



PRIMARY EDUCATION 1978

70 per cent enrolment of those in the primary school age group, 5-9 years. Total primary school age population: 11,600,000.

Total enrolment ... 8,200,000

Males ... 5,100,000 (62 pc)

Females ... 3,100,000 (38 pc)

Enrolment in class one 3.3m

Class two 1.8m

Class three 1.3m

Class four 1.0m

Class five 800,000

that in villages, the male teachers, after taking one or two classes, would go out into the fields and factories to do extra work, neglecting their duties to the schools.

"Female teachers work better, with more concentration and greater precision. They also take better care of the children as mothers, or would-be mothers."

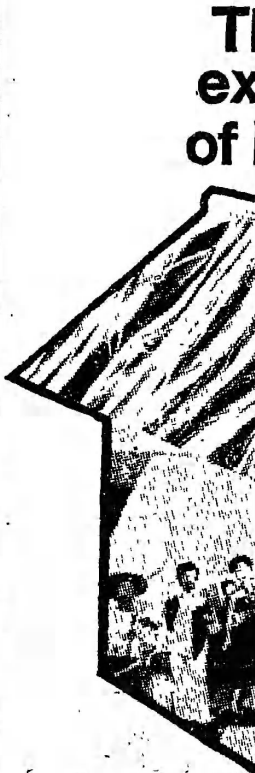
Staffing the new schools would not present a problem, the Prime Minister said, because of the high rate of unemployment.

The Government is also dropping the nominal school fees of less than 10 new pence a month, and is considering supplying free books and school uniforms.

While the children are in primary school, special inspectors will be monitoring their performances and attitudes, and, Shah, Azizur said, the Government intends being selective about who will be able to go forward for higher education.

The other main aspect of Bangladesh's new educational campaign is the fight for adult literacy. Less than a quarter of the population can read and write, and the ratio is far worse for women than for men. (One in three men, and only one in seven women are literate). The Government is deeply concerned about this, because apart from the question of dignity there is an official belief that real progress in agriculture and family planning is not possible without some education.

"A mass literacy campaign is on," the Prime Minister



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