



John Cunningham reports on policies and techniques used by Bangladesh to raise standards of literacy throughout the country

## Campaigns to feed the minds

The women of Bangladesh and their children: only one woman in seven can read or write; pupils start dropping out of school at eight.



FOR HUNDREDS of thousands of families in Bangladesh, full-time schooling for their children from the age of five onwards is a luxury they cannot afford. Less than a quarter of the country's population is literate. Only one man in three, and one woman in seven can read and write. That echoes back to classrooms where, by the time they are eight, children have begun to drop out — after just three years of schooling which, in rural areas, might amount to three hours teaching a day.

As with so many sectors of life in Bangladesh, statistics hold the immensity of the problem. In a population estimated at 82 millions, 48 per cent are below the age of 15; and 31 per cent are below school age. About 13 million boys and girls are of primary school age. About 70 per cent of children attend school. The Government has ambitious plans to make it 100 per cent within five years.

The main thrust of the literacy drive is in the villages. However, there are millions who have left with-

out having acquired these basic skills and a National Mass Literacy Council has been set up to help them. The hundreds of literacy centres take advantage of local bureaucratic structures, and of voluntary agencies, to provide tuition. Several ministries are involved; in particular agriculture, rural development and social welfare.

The Government has identified education as one of its priority areas for spending. But so far the education budget accounts for only 1.5 per cent of GNP, compared with 2 per cent for India, and between 3 and 5 per cent for advanced countries. Education is an expensive service to provide in a country where mouths are even more pressingly hungry than minds. However, educationists are working on ways to spread the word effectively and cheaply, and the most encouraging system they have so far come up with involves feeder schools where very young children are taught reading and writing by staff who do not need to be highly trained. Then

they are fed into the primary school chain.

The Education Ministry assumed responsibility for primary schools only in 1973. It took over some 37,000 premises, where before the Government had provided only 3,000 primary schools. There are 68,000 villages in the country and a total of 40,000 primaries, but there are no major plans to increase the number of buildings at the moment. The emphasis is on encouraging feeder schools which can manage on few resources.

### Children do agricultural work

There is also the basic need to convince many peasant families of the value of literacy. Professor Abul Baten, Education Minister, says: "Education is still viewed in some rural areas as useful if it leads to something more responsible. We want to teach children to achieve better work in their natural setting. They can't all migrate to urban areas in search of jobs." There has been a recent emphasis in

timetables on agriculture, conservation, and rural studies.

In rural areas, children are needed for agricultural work: child labour is an important component of the family's economic survival. In the harvesting and sowing seasons, there are many empty desks in the classrooms. Increasingly in the countryside three crops of rice are produced each year: the main harvest in December; the others in May and July. This improvement in the fortunes of some families which continuous growing seasons bring, sometimes leads to tensions. There is a reluctance to spare the children at a time when there is greater pressure on them to attend school regularly.

But on the credit side this has produced flexibility in school timetables. It is quite common now to find schools operating a two shift system, with children having the choice — when their parents can spare them — of attending in the early morning or the early afternoon. The Open School Programme, as

it is known, has been operating with conspicuous success for the last two years. It means that some children who would skip classes completely now get at least three hours' teaching a day.

There can be difficulties with staff. In a village, the primary school teacher is quite likely to have some land of his own which means that he won't be working full-time in the classroom. It is probable that he will live and work in his home village — between 80 and 90 per cent of rural teachers do, which means the profession is largely immobile. No housing is provided, except in the case of head teachers of secondary schools, so it is hard for the authorities to provide any inducement for teachers to move to other areas when vacancies occur. A teacher can be transferred if there are complaints that he is neglecting the school in favour of his farm, but these are rare.

THE BEST NEWS on the literacy front is the success of the feeder schools experiment. This is being tried out

in a group of 24 villages known as the Meher Union in the Comilla administrative district, which is east of Dacca. The aim is to provide universal primary education for a total population of 20,000. This is spread between small villages of 60 people right up to communities of 2,000. There are eight primary schools serving the villages in the union, with a total of 1,344 children attending.

### The teachers are women

A project has been set up to provide 22 feeder schools, and of these already functioning, numbers vary between 70 to 184. The feeder classes should, in theory, take children of four and five. But the age spread is from three to ten. After a year they go on to the second class in a primary school.

By June this year 18 of the proposed schools had been set up. Each had two teachers, and an assistant, and was operating a double shift. The teachers are women, and their minimum

standard is a leaving certificate. Usually the Bangladesh Association for Community Education, which is running the project with Government funds, does not put up special buildings. Instead, farm buildings, out-houses, and mosques are utilised. The mosques are not grand buildings — in rural areas they are often made of bamboo and thatch — but getting the permission of the village council to use them for teaching is always a major breakthrough.

The message is that the schools succeed best when local people are involved in starting them. Often they become a focal point in a village which has no other community centre. The part of the project which has had the best success to date is a cooperative of seven villages, now served by four feeder schools. The parents in one hamlet were so enthusiastic that they built the schoolhouse themselves, thatching it with reeds with the eaves reaching almost to the ground. Other villagers have allowed their homes to be used as classrooms.

Running the show on a shoestring is a necessity. The importance of the Meher Union experiment is that it can be copied cheaply in thousands of other communities. The lesson so far is that the feeder schools can manage with part-time teachers being paid a monthly allowance of between 50 and 100 takas (a maximum of just over £3) depending on their qualifications. There is a 50 per cent addition if they work a double shift.

There are also some small inducements for the pupils to attend. In the first year they are provided with free books, slates and pencils, and a locally made jute bag to keep them in: for many it will be the first set of possessions they have owned.

The schools, in a country hallmarked by poverty, are finding that they quickly become involved in welfare work, so they offer six monthly medical checks, help with undernourished children and, in cases of extreme hardship, the local cooperative tries to find work for parents.