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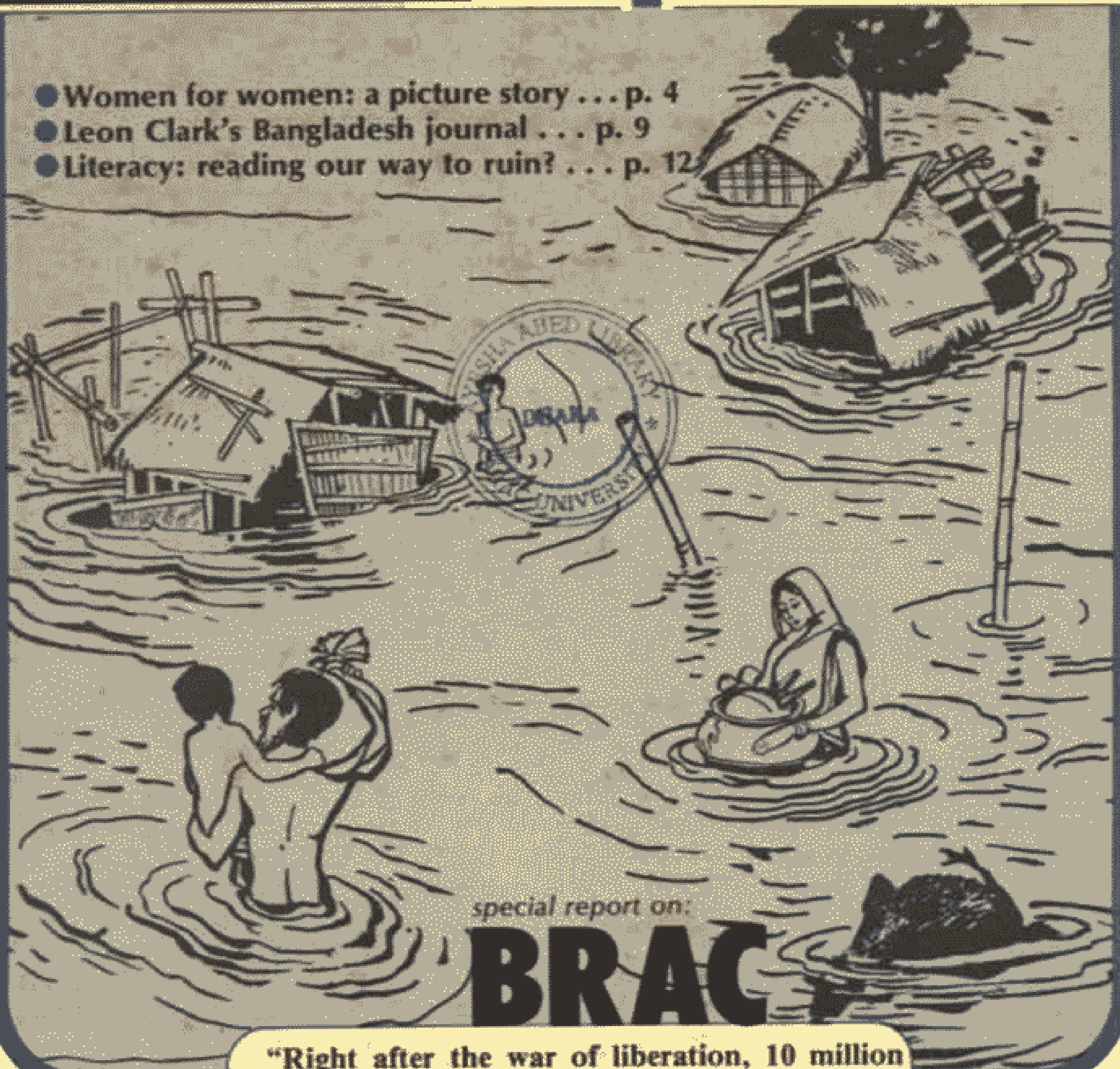
world education reports

● Women for women: a picture story . . . p. 4
● Leon Clark's Bangladesh journal . . . p. 9
● Literacy: reading our way to ruin? . . . p. 12

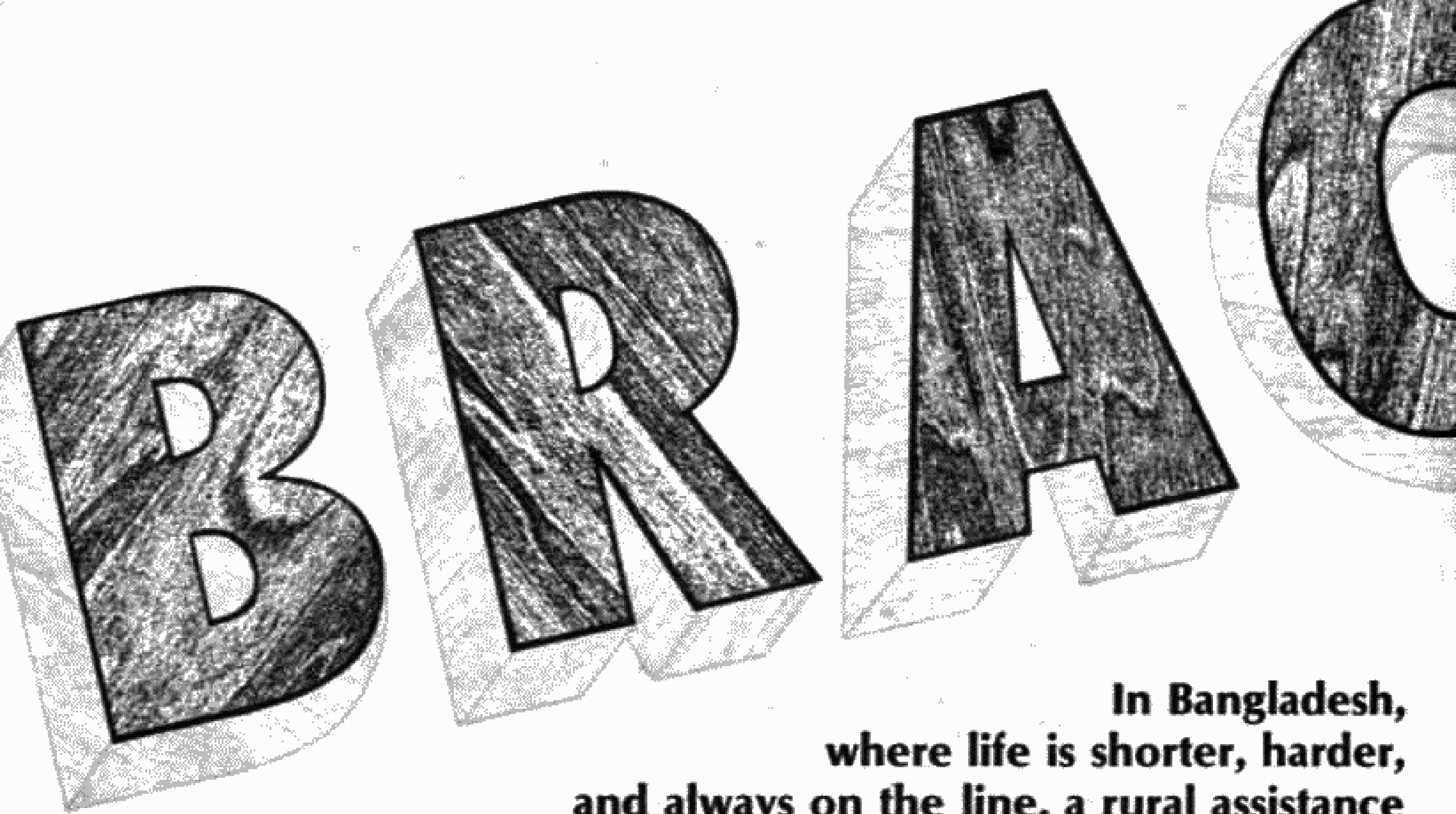


special report on:

BRAC

"Right after the war of liberation, 10 million refugees started trekking back home to Bangladesh from India. We followed a large party of them from Meghalaya in India to the Sulla region of Bangla-

continued on page 2



In Bangladesh, where life is shorter, harder, and always on the line, a rural assistance program called BRAC is making its point felt.

continued from cover

desh and found village after village completely destroyed. Houses—with utensils, tools, and implements left behind in terror—had been burnt to the ground, the livestock killed and eaten. We felt that the great suffering of the people of this region, because of its remoteness, would not attract very much relief assistance. This is why we chose to work in the Sulla area."

This is how its director and co-founder, Fazle Hasan Abed, remembers the origin of BRAC. Then its initials meant the "Bangladesh Rehabilitation Assistance Committee." Today, five years later, BRAC has grown into a thriving integrated rural development agency serving hundreds of villages throughout Bangladesh.

Its initials now stand for the "Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee." The change from "rehabilitation assistance" to "rural advancement" indicates an evolution of philosophy and procedures that make BRAC notably different from relief programs in general. But why is BRAC different?

Most of BRAC's funding now is provided by Oxfam and the Canadian International Development Agency; its staff members are Bengali. When BRAC goes to work with a village, it tries to enlist its staff from the community at hand; many have been born and raised within walking distance of their project sites.

One of BRAC's main concerns is to establish a resilient infrastructure in each village so that when it comes time to move on to another area, the people and ideas that are left behind will continue working. This means, of course, that the people BRAC needs most on its side are the villagers themselves.

Starting Off. The district of Sulla is about 100 miles northeast of Dacca. Today, the project site covers an area of about 160 square miles. Within this area there are 220 villages.

When BRAC began in 1972, the war had left hundreds of thousands of families broken, people wounded, and thousands of homes and community buildings demolished. Floods followed, food was scarce, and famine threatened.

Ensnared in the grip of such misfortune, the people of the Sulla district were not easily convinced that the help they needed could be found in the form of an educational program. Education was something done in the present to prepare for the future. They could not afford to think that far ahead.

For BRAC, the road from rehabilitation to advancement is steady and deliberate. And education is crucial at every step. The first phase of BRAC's work necessarily was devoted to relief. The staff floated large quantities of bamboo down one of the rivers flowing into the Sulla district from India. They went to work with the villagers building shelters and repairing damaged homes.

Taking Root. Eventually BRAC entered upon its second phase. The area had been repaired, now it was time to advance.

For generations, the people of the Sulla district sustained themselves on their flat wet land, accommodating their lives to floods, pestilent diseases, and chronic malnutrition. They manage to endure in the treacherous balance of nature, accustomed to being hungry and sick, and often stuck for months on lonely patches of land lost on the vast flooded plains.

When the BRAC staff arrived among them with promises of change and

development, they were incredulous, and on occasion, hostile. The women were suspicious of new health procedures that flew in the face of hundreds of years of village life. How could BRAC make its case?

The procedure finally chosen was to show the new ideas in action and hope that the people would want to use them or even expand upon them. So the BRAC field workers living in base camps near the villages planted their own gardens, using new strains of wheat and rice, and cultivating them with modern agricultural techniques.

Thirty-one paramedics were trained to diagnose and treat the twelve most common diseases in the area. They started making regular visits to the 220 villages. In a very short time it became clear that BRAC had something to offer. The gardens at the base camps flourished and the sick villagers who were treated by the paramedics got better. Gradually the people of Sulla came to trust the advice and example of the BRAC staff. They paid more attention to the suggestions about preventing disease and growing crops. They began to take measures to ensure that the water they drank was not contaminated. They accepted vaccination. BRAC was on first base.

Over the course of the next few years BRAC stayed with the villagers, building community centers and forming cooperatives, starting fisheries, setting up medical centers, and dispensing family planning information and devices. A mass nutrition program ensured that the children had adequate diets. Each child wore a growth record so that cases needing special attention could be quickly spotted.

Village laborers constructed mud embankments to stem the recurrent flooding. Their wages were paid in rice and grain as part of a Food-for-Work program sponsored by the United Nations.

What money BRAC could muster from outside sources was used to help farmers and fishermen get back on their feet.

Literacy Program. After a while, a literacy program was launched but there was trouble getting the right learning material. A chronic problem with motivation let to a higher than expected dropout rate.

In June 1974, BRAC and World Education worked in cooperation to set up a 21-month pilot project that would establish a new nonformal educational program. The need, as BRAC saw it, was to upgrade the quality of village life in rural Bangladesh. Oxfam agreed to fund the project.

Staff members from BRAC, with assistance from World Education, visited villages in the Sulla District. They engaged the people in interviews that sometimes last over an hour. A profile of the mental and emotional landscape of these remote villages was drawn and on this ground BRAC began to build its educational program and develop learning materials. (See *A Consultant's Journal* on page 9).

Although the villagers learned to read and write as part of the classes, literacy was only one part of the curriculum. Health and nutrition, agricultural practices, family planning, and sanitation were approached, considered, and discussed in the light of the field workers' technical expertise and the villagers' practical knowledge of what kinds of reforms or innovations were needed and feasible.

Moving On. At the heart of BRAC's philosophy is the expectation that the villagers will achieve a level of competence and be able to carry the program forward even after the original BRAC staff is no longer part of the local program. This is what is happening in the Sulla villages—BRAC is taking root. The initial staff that broke the ground for the project in 1972 will now move on to other areas in Bangladesh.

In the Autumn of 1975 BRAC scouted around for an area that would be most typical of the rest of the country in terms of topography, population, and agricultural crop patterns. Manikganj thana, an area in the Dacca district, about 40 miles west of the capital, was chosen. They decided to launch a Food-for-Work program; villagers would be rewarded for their participation with payments of wheat.

The number of staff members helping with the program was kept at a minimum. The idea was that BRAC would organize young villagers and train them as facilitators for functional education classes.

BRAC hopes that a by-product of the classes will be the formation of youth organizations, women's organizations, and cooperatives. These institutions serve as media through which the development programs can be delivered. Like the prototype project in Sulla, BRAC's project in Manikganj will meet the needs of the villagers on a variety of levels—providing health care, family planning services, agricultural assistance, and literacy training—while at the same time hoping to excite the social and critical consciousness of the people involved.

Until the middle of this century, Bangladesh produced an agricultural surplus. Its fertile soil earned it the name Shonar Bangla, or Golden Bengal. Now, population has outpaced agricultural production and famine is a fact of life in Golden Bengal.

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ANANDAPUR VILLAGE:

These pictures tell the story of Anandapur village, its women, its needs, and a young field worker named Khushi Kabir who brought BRAC to Anandapur.

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KHUSHI KABIR (#2) is the leader of the Anandapur camp. She came to her post in a rather unexpected but definitely nonformal fashion. Two years ago she was the secretary in BRAC's Dacca office. She spent her days answering the telephone, typing correspondence, and adding an occasional opinion to the constant planning and production going on around her. Although there was nothing lacking in her secretarial skills, it soon became clear that her opinions and organizational skills were needed even more. She was asked to join a materials development team that was producing the lesson units for the BRAC literacy programs. (See *A Consultant's Journal*, page 9.)

This assignment finished, Khushi moved on to become program supervisor to fifteen funtional education teachers in Jamalpur town in the northern region of Bangladesh. BRAC had hired new teachers to implement a program for 840 destitute women, and they had to be introduced to BRAC's methods quickly and thoroughly.

After half a year in that position, Khushi's strength as a facilitator in the tradition of Paulo Freire developed to such a point that she was given a choice of remaining with the Jamalpur program or starting up the Anandapur Women's Camp. She knew the Jamalpur team could continue its work without her. The challenge is in Anandapur.

THE FIRST TASK in Anandapur is to overcome the villagers' suspicion of strangers. (#3) The field workers go from door to door patiently explaining what they intend to do and urging women to join them. They assure the villagers the meeting will be interesting as well as relevant. They win the support of the village *mashima* ("auntie")—an old widow, (#4) who is socially mobile and accepted throughout the village. She helps to spread the word about the meeting.

Who selects the women who attend? The women select themselves. They listen to the *mashima* or the field workers. Those eager—or just curious—show up. But not everyone. At one point, a young bride (#5) shows interest in the meeting but her mother-in-law angrily rejects the idea. (#6) A girl should not attend any public meetings—her place is at home. The young woman is disappointed but she obeys.

A site for the meeting is found in an open area between some houses. Women begin to gather around the *mashima*. These women encourage others to join the group. All ages come. (#7) It turns out to be a good meeting and it is not long before nearly the whole village is crowded into the open space. The village leaders seem pleased.

RURAL WOMEN bear heavy responsibilities. It is not surprising that they doubt that these strangers can understand their needs. They doubt their own ability to change the course of their lives. Life in the village has changed little in their lifetimes.

BRAC field workers believe the women can bring about change. But first the women must became "conscious" of what they already do. They possess many skills. They must see how valuable these skills are. Then the women will decide for themselves what they can do to make life better.

The field workers distribute photographs to the crowd. They show women engaged in a variety of activities (some familiar, some not). (#8) It is important for the villagers to draw their own conclusions about the relevance of the pictures to their own lives. One group studies a picture of women tending potato plants. Questions are heard: *Who are these women? What are they doing? What tools are they using?* The BRAC workers also probe: *Are all these women in the pictures from Bangladesh? Yes. Can you do all the things they are doing? Some, not all. Would you like to learn some of these things? Yes.*

THE PHOTO DISCUSSION is a good way to help villagers gain self-confidence. Everyone's comments are important here and everyone has something to contribute. Suddenly the villagers are no longer just watching—they are involved.

BRAC COMES TO TOWN

story by Margaret Brehmer
Marty Chen
Eikbal Hussein

photos by Rehman

Two hours by bus, five by steamer, and the last ten miles on foot—or, if it's the rainy season, in a country boat—gets one from the district capital of Sylhet to Anandapur village. It lies in the heart of the *haor*, the area of lowland in Bangladesh which remains heavily flooded for six month of each year.

Until BRAC arrived four years ago, Anandapur and the surrounding villages had no family planning or health care services, no adult education, and very few primary schools. Much of the burden of this deficiency fell upon the village women. **(1)** Recognizing that female staff would be ideal for designing and extending new services to rural women, BRAC decided that one camp in the project area would be staffed entirely by women. BRAC began hiring village women to work part time as functional education facilitators and family planning workers. Now there are seven women working as full-time staff members in Anandapur. Khushi Kabir is their leader.

Together, these women design and implement rural development programs for women. Anandapur Women's Camp serves as an experimental laboratory in which various ideas for women's development activities can be tested and evaluated. It is also a staff training center.

Because so few action programs for women have been tested and evaluated, the Anandapur staff have to feel their way as they go. Their programs must be acceptable to rural women and they must tackle both the needs specific to the women in the Sulla district and at the same time confront the universal problems that face women everywhere.

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Now a BRAC field worker suggests a game. *How about Kana-machee, Blind Man's Bluff?* Someone volunteers to be blindfolded and the game begins. The villagers enjoy the play, but more than a game is involved here. Games increase group participation and a sense of sharing.

Perhaps, suggests Khushi, *this game tells us something about the way we feel in real life. What do we feel when we are blindfolded? Andhakar, darkness! Okay, in real life, do we ever feel blinded, helpless, dependent? Yes, when we were first married, when we gave birth to our first child.* They find that they share many of the same doubts and worries. A sense of interdependence emerges.

Then someone thinks it would be fun to turn the game around. *What about blindfolding Khushi?* **(#10)** *Everyone enjoys* the joke. Now it's *andhakar* for her too. The *mashima* and a field worker join in the laughter. **(#11)**

To end the meeting, everyone joins hands in a circle and promises to meet regularly and work together. A new program for rural women begins.

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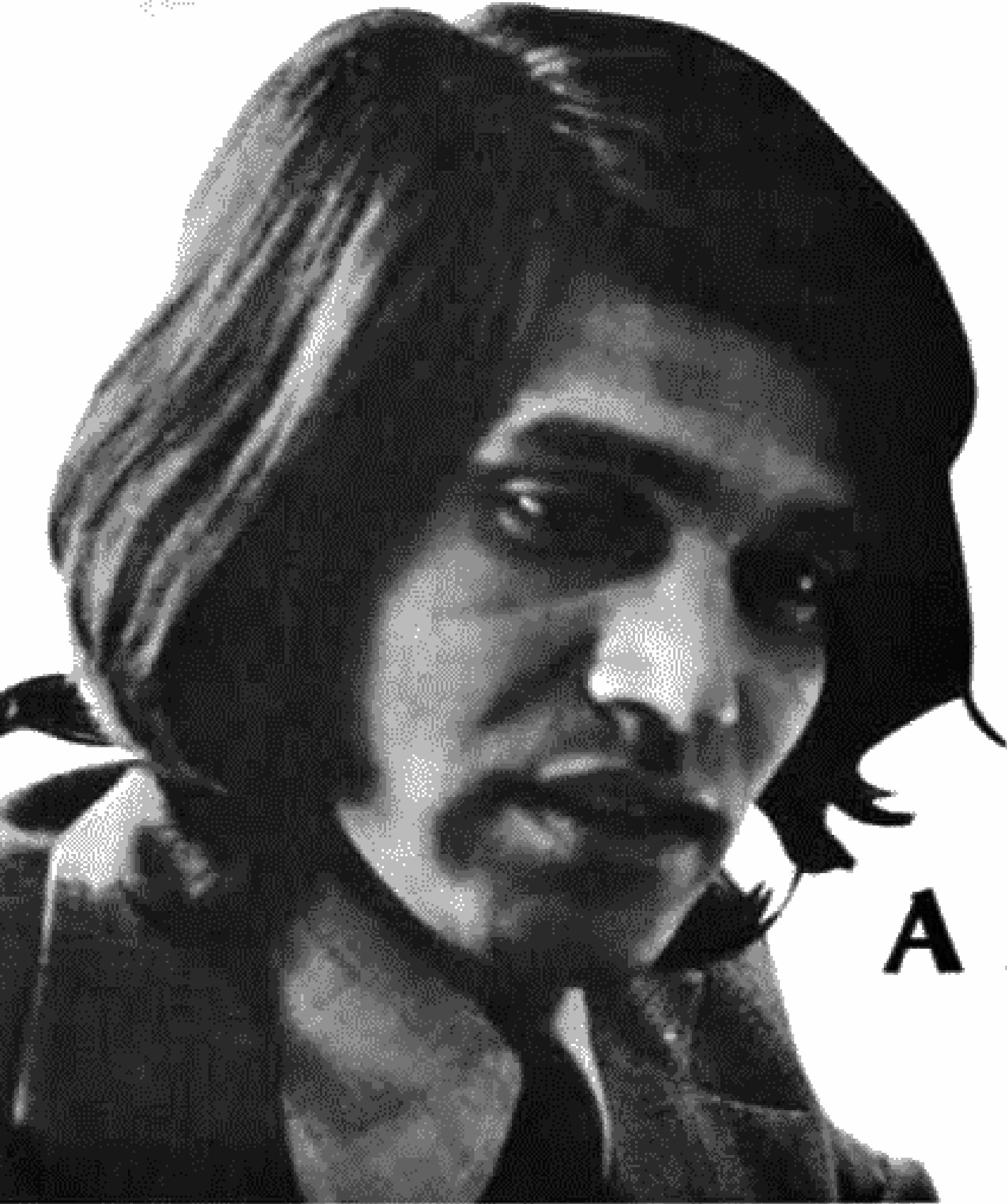
Note: A new slide/tape presentation, produced by Communications Development Service (120 color slides, 19 minutes) about BRAC, its methods and philosophy, can be obtained by writing to BRAC Slide Show, REPORTS Magazine, World Education, 1414 Sixth Avenue, New York, New York 10019, U.S.A. (Purchase price: $60. Rental: $10 plus postage.)



Rahat Uddin Ahmed talks about BRAC, Bangladesh, and the future of an idea.

A Man from BRAC

The following interview took place in June of this year in New York City between Rahat Uddin Ahmed, a former training coordinator with BRAC, and Martha Keehn and Gus Hedberg of the publications department of World Education. Mr. Ahmed is presently a training coordinator in Dacca for Canadian University Services Overseas.

GH: *If you had to name the major problems facing Bangladesh today, what would you come up with?*

R: I would say that the first major problem is the land-tenure system. In Bangladesh, 85 percent of the population is rural, and about half of this 85 percent do not own any land. They farm land owned by landlords—absentee landlords, who live in the city and lease their land to the landless people or the mini-farmers on a share-crop basis.

MK: *What do you mean by "mini-farmer?"*

R: Less than two acres. Most of these landlords don't live in the villages where their land is. So the redistribution of land is very important, and education can be an impetus to that end—a means to that end. This is one of our main problems.

GH: *What's another?*

R: I would say the next one is political. It's mainly the educated people and the wealthy people who dominate political activities and decision making for the whole country.

GH: *As they do in this country.*

R: Another thing I would say, is about the cultural power. The middle class has the maximum education. Our educational system is alien to the culture of the country because the educational system we have inherited is the British system. So we really condition ourselves to an alien culture, which is British culture. And it is this alien culture that divides the elite from the rest of the masses.

GH: *In England the middle class is very large, but, in Bangladesh, its economic counterpart is a very small percentage of the population, so the middle class there is also the elite?*

R: Yes, and what happens is that these people are the bureaucrats, and administrators, the land owners, the ministers, the prime minister—everything. So that the government ministries are mostly manned and staffed by this middle class with its peculiar alien culture. They cannot really understand the problems in the rural areas, and of course, they use their cultural power to exploit. So, you see, they have the political power, the economic power, and the cultural power. At the moment, I would say they don't really see the implication of holding all the power. I would say the

development would come about through sharing these three powers among the masses. Then I think that the land tenure system will change, and people will participate more in the decision-making process. They will make decisions on their own.

Possibly, it's easier to change the rural population than to change a person who has been highly conditioned by an alien culture. It's very difficult to change them through training or education because of their peculiar attitude. If the whole project was staffed by only the educated people, this would be another weakness.

MK: *Retraining is harder than training then?*

R: Yes, this is why in the BRAC program the emphasis is on consciousness-raising. The emphasis on things like literacy is very light. It is combined with the rest of the program.

MK: *Let's go back to the beginning. In the first place, did the villagers know that they wanted to learn to read?*

R: I think that there was a kind of expectation that this was a sort of literacy project. So they were very cautious, and when our first lesson didn't have any literacy in it at all, they were very surprised. This first lesson was designed to give self-confidence and so forth. So they got involved right from the beginning and they got excited about it.

MK: *When they come expecting to learn to read and write, is it ever a problem that they go away disappointed not to be able to write their names?*

R: It could become a problem in a community where the members of the community attach great value to literacy. But this was not the case in the BRAC villages. In the communities that we are working with in the Sulla area, the people are adults. They say: "We are old, what's the use of learning about reading?" In a lifetime, a farmer will use the skill of literacy maybe two or three times. There is little use for literacy in the rural areas at the moment. When the baseline survey conductors go to a village, if the people know that we are the people from BRAC, who are going to launch an education program, they will answer certain things that will satisfy our expectations. We ask them, "What do you think about education?" and they will answer, "Oh, we want to read and write," because they know that this is the answer that will satisfy us. So we didn't place too much importance on the skill of literacy.

GH: *So you interpreted their reply. You asked them what they wanted, they said "We want to learn to read," and you came back and said no, that really isn't what they wanted.*

R: Yes, we had to, because we lived in that area beforehand. We had a history of having adult education centers which put maximum emphasis on reading and writing and on literacy, and they failed. So we analyzed why it failed. From that we concluded that the reason it failed is that people are not interested only in literacy — in reading and writing. Their priority of interest is something else.

GH: *But tell me this. It seems to me that in 70 classes that you had, the people did learn literacy skills. At what point did they genuinely become interested in reading?*

R: We designed our first three lessons with no literacy. We were concerned with involving the learners in a new kind of learning experience, and revealing to them how important they are in making history, and how they could be an element of change and production in their own economy. This was the first two lessons. In the third lesson we introduced literacy. We introduced syllables, two phonemes, and at the end of the class, from these two syllables, they could make words by themselves. Using these syllables they made new words. This is a kind of creation.

MK: *Do you guide the discussion?*

R: We do, but in a different way, keep-

"In a lifetime, a farmer will use the skill of literacy maybe two or three times."

"So we really condition ourselves to an alien culture, which is British culture."

LEON CLARK

ing a very, very low profile in the discussion. The teachers go along with the students as far as they want to go. They do not ask the students to go any further than the student wants to. If the student is willing to go two steps, the teacher will go two steps. If the student wants to go three steps—fine.

MK: *And if a student wants to go off in another direction all together?*

R: Okay, for the time being, could be. There is no reason that the teacher should get disturbed about it. The lesson that we design may not be a really good lesson. This is very interesting to see what kind of stimulus a lesson gives the student, and what direction is taken during the discussion.

MK: *What do you do in a situation where you find the students giving each other misinformation?*

R: About?

MK: *Health practices, let's say.*

R: It is possible that they will give misinformation because they see any problem according to their own life experience. The scientific explanation may be different. But I would say that there is another step in between that—between how they feel and what the problem really is. In order to cross this bridge, we have to provide them a new kind of material so that they will cross it properly. So that, for instance, they will connect the health problem with the real causes.

MK: *Say, a dirty water supply.*

R: Okay.

MK: *But in the meantime, the baby is sick and they say it's because of the evil eye.*

R: Let's say a baby is sick of diarrhea. We ask the mother and the father, "Why do you think your baby's sick?" They might cite a hundred and one things which are not really there. We ask them, "Suppose that the stool of this baby is eaten by another baby. What will happen?" And the village people, they all know the baby's going to have diarrhea. So we ask them then, "Do you think that the baby's stool might have something to do with diarrhea?"

MK: *So you do intervene?*

R: Intervene? Yes, we have to intervene with some kind of questions connected with the real cause of diarrhea, if the diarrhea is the topic of discussion, and that's how you build up connection.

GH: *How do the materials fit in? Do they serve the same function as the questions? Or do you see them as providing the answers?*

R: Well, there are certain problems where you can use some kind of pictures, or flip-charts, and there are certain problems where you really cannot. The problem will really determine what kind of materials you are going to use.

Initially, if you want to take them deep into the problem, you can use a kind of survey, which will be conducted by the villagers. One of the women can bring her own child who is suffering from malnutrition, and the teacher can demonstrate how to conduct a survey. They will pair off into small groups, and these small groups will go around the next day for two or three hours to visit families and come back with the findings—reporting that there are so many number of malnurished children. They interview the mothers and the fathers of these families and find out that the well children eat some things and the malnourished children eat other things. They establish eating patterns. So using this information as a stimulus, the teacher can now question the class "What can we do?"

GH: *Are you ever surprised by the learners coming back from a survey with results that you didn't anticipate at all?*

R: I was surprised in one village class, where my expectation was that they would come up with some evidence to relate the nutrition problem to poverty. But they came up with not poverty, but social practices. In the family it is always the man who eats first. They eat all the best food, so that the mother is malnourished and consequently the babies are malnourished.

GH: *But surely that was no surprise to the villagers themselves. They must have understood quite clearly why the women were malnourished—even if they didn't want to talk about it.*

R: All of us, we live in reality, but we take many things for granted. "Oh, that's just the way it is!" we say. But when you analyze reality, in terms of a problem, you look at the reality from a new angle, a new point of view. And you say, "Oh, that tradition, that's the reason my son is sick. That's the cause my wife is sick." That's in terms of the male. And the females say, "Oh, that's how we have lived through many years, and it's the tradition that is causing ill-health to my children." It's a new understanding about the whole of reality. ◻

If the student is willing to go two steps, the teacher will go two steps. If the student wants to go three steps—fine.

ownership, housing, price of commodities, and food. With these needs in mind, we began selecting topics for the individual lessons.

Several fascinating exchanges about whether a topic should be categorized for women only, men only, or both—veritable consciousness-raising sessions about sex roles. "Only women take care of vegetable gardens." "Yes, but their husbands might help them." "Besides, if the husbands don't understand the value of vegetables, they won't support their wives; they'll think they should be doing something else." "O.K., let's put vegetable gardening under 'Both'." The discussion and debate lasted about three hours.

August 3, Saturday

Met with usual group: Uncle, Shahid, Anwar, Jyoti, and Nurul Huq with Khushi in the background at her typewriter. I handed out a list of options entitled: "What Work Plan Should We Follow for Today?" and the group decided to make some quick changes in the male and

female categories and then move right into the breaking down of the topics into subtopics. This took all of Friday and Saturday, until way after office hours. There is no way to convey adequately the excitement, intensity, and sweeping cultural analyses that these discussions created. Khushi ran upstairs at one point on Friday afternoon to call the director's wife to join us. She was enormously helpful, especially with family planning, nutrition, and cookery. With Khushi and Bahar working together, they were in a much stronger position to have their ideas accepted. Both are bright, responsive, flexible, and always positive in their thinking.

Brainstorming, discussing, listing of subtopics continued. We finished by late Saturday. The entire group was exhilarated. They had a sense of completion and accomplishment. They worked very, very hard. We should have taken more breaks, but everybody felt that we should push on to finish by the end of the day.

Should we have spent so much time evaluating evidence from the project area and setting goals and priorities for the functional literacy curriculum? I think so. The group wanted to do this and probably would not have felt secure if they hadn't, and there is justification for establishing a knowledge base before writing lessons.

Also, by spending the first few days on topics that I was not expert in, and where the group was clearly well informed, I was able to establish my role as "facilitator" rather than "leader." Even so, I find everybody, even Uncle, looking to me for final answers. By now they know that I am not the judge, that they ulimately have to decide for themselves what to do and what not to do, but old habits die hard.

August 5, Monday

We got into what the lesson should look like. To avoid prejudicing them, I did not hand out any examples of materials but rather simply asked them to discuss what ideas they already had.

Then we examined some Thai, Turkish, and Ethiopian materials. The task was to decide what they thought were the strengths and weaknesses of each example. This process took almost three hours. In the end most decided that they liked the Thai use of a picture with key words. Some, Shahid in particular, held out for some use of problem dramas. There was also interest in the way the Ethiopian material took a word and formed other words from it.

Then we talked about the sequence of the class. They agreed on the following: (1) Stimulus—preferably a picture, (2) Discussion, (3) Literacy Lesson.

At this point I conducted an exercise, totally unplanned, that proved to be very successful. I placed four pictures from Africa on the blackboard. I asked the group to rank-order the pictures according to the way they would choose them as a stimulus. I then asked them to write what was good or not so good about each picture.

Everyone had a different idea of what made a good picture, or a stimulus. Some thought contrast was important; some liked pictures because they depicted nature. The picture showing the latrine baffled everybody. We concluded: not everybody sees the same thing in pictures, hence there is a need to have pictures that are unequivocal; it is important to have criteria well established before choosing pictures or otherwise we will have continual disagreement.

In the afternoon a few fears emerged. The first was that the teachers could not handle our new lessons very well. They are also concerned about how to change the set-up of the traditional classroom. One decision: *shikok*, the Bengali word for teacher, should be changed to *shebika*, which means "helper." It was another long day of work.

August 7, Wednesday

Started the morning by brainstorming about games and amusements that villagers already engage in and that might be used in the classes. We came up with a number of ideas, eliminated many of them, and then focused on the most likely.

August 8, Thursday

Khushi has been freed of her secretarial duties and is now working full time with the materials development group! Not only has she been freed, but she has been given a raise, a pure bonus for her because she never expected it. Abed, the director, has hired another woman to take Khushi's place, so it seems that the transfer is permanent.

"We did a little role-playing and concluded that we had as much to learn as the villagers."

This is a real boon to the group because Khushi is bright, sensitive, gets along well with others, and is a real doer. As a woman she may not become the leader of the group, but she will exert an enormous positive influence and certainly will be relied upon because of her abilities, which everyone recognizes. [*Note: For more about Khushi Kabir, see* Anandapur Village: BRAC Comes to Town *on page 4*].

August 9, Friday

How to begin the course—what topics, what activities? The group seemed undecided. I then taught a Freire "cultural circle" exercise, the way a facilitator would present it to nonreaders. The group loved it, said this was the whole point of our program—human beings as free, creative, transforming beings, not merely reactors to the world. They decided this same exercise should begin the course.

August 12, Monday

We talked about Freire's generative word approach to literacy. This will be the final technique to be considered; the rest of our time has got to be spent in producing actual materials.

August 13, Tuesday

The day seemed singularly productive; I thought everything was going very, very well, until Khushi mentioned to me late in the afternoon that the group had reservations about the approach they had chosen to use with the literacy lessons. This came as a complete surprise to me—I had thought they were extremely enthusiastic. Moreover, I thought I had bent over backwards in allowing them to make up their own minds. I should have known better, I guess; people don't change ideas about learning that quickly.

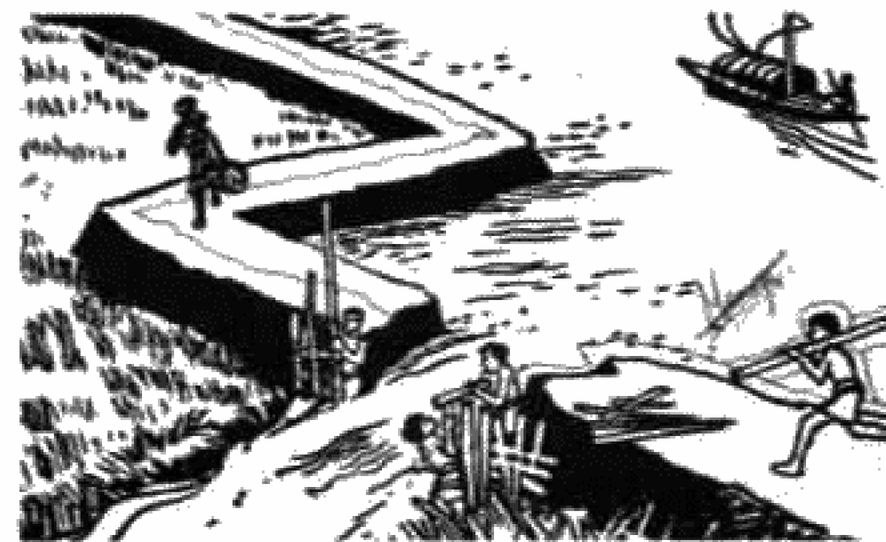
I immediately met with the group and asked them how they felt about the lessons—about the entire approach. What I heard then was not just frank, it was downright shocking. Everyone seemed to think the teachers should give lectures to the villagers and that the classes should focus on literacy almost exclusively; that the learners should be taught the ABC's first before confronting words. In effect, the group wanted to go back to the old method used last year.

Anwar also brought up the old issue of standard Bengali vs. local Bengali, Shahid and Uncle expressed their doubts about using discussions, and everybody wondered if the teachers would really be able to teach in a different way. Back to Square One!

I had a long talk with Abed about this relapse. I don't want to impose my views nor do I think it would be good for the group to produce something they don't really believe in; the materials would suffer as a result. Abed understood the situation quickly, called a meeting of the materials production staff and in the end everyone agreed with him that we should go ahead with our present approach. Abed, without actually telling the people what to do, is extremely persuasive. We had earlier agreed to test out literacy approach with some nonreaders in the BRAC office, and Abed emphasized this point, which gave everyone a feeling that the decision to push ahead would be tempered with some reality testing.

August 14, Wednesday

I felt it was necessary to have an honest discussion of the problems the group saw. So we went back to the very beginning. I asked everyone to write down all the reasons they could think of for holding the functional education classes. I then asked them to rank their goals. We then put everyone's first two choices on the board and discussed the other goals they had also listed. The first choices of the seven members of the group were as follows:



- to raise critical consciousness
- to realize that students are not stupid
- to change attitudes and create awareness
- to create interest among learners, to change their human behavior by themselves
- to improve their awareness to of their needs
- to help students discover their inherent power to change their environment
- to increase participants' sense of freedom and self-esteem

We discussed these, examined the relevance of literacy to such goals and their implications for the types of the literacy materials we might produce. We had done all this two weeks earlier, of course, but this time everyone seemed much more involved.

Shahid commented, in effect, "All this is fine, but what we really have to do is tell the villagers how to change their lives. We have to show them what problems they have."

I asked: Don't the villagers know what problems they have? What does it mean to say someone has a problem but doesn't know it? Who determines what a problem is?

We then all played the role of villagers and discussed our problems. Besides the problems mentioned in the baseline survey, the players mentioned as problems the

continued on page 14

the forum:

Do cultures that value written language above spoken language enjoy the benefits of literacy at the expense of the more affective and personal uses of language?

These pages are a regular feature of REPORTS Magazine designed to provide a space where people with new ideas relating to the field of nonformal education can publish short essays presenting their viewpoints. It is hoped that our readers will respond audibly — whether it be positively or negatively — to what they find here. Space will be reserved in each issue for those who would like to comment. Such comment should be limited to 300 words.

*This issue's **Forum** is by David R. Olson and Nancy G. Nickerson of the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education.*

The Literacy Trap

by David R. Olson and Nancy G. Nickerson

Written language diverges from spoken language in a small number of important ways. In western culture it is precisely those divergencies that we take as indicative of human intelligence. We can trace the personal and cultural effects of this disposition to some previously overlooked consequences of writing. First, writing permits the realignment of the two predominant functions of language—the logical function whereby statements transmit information that may be true or false, and the interpersonal or social function whereby social relations between participants are maintained.

To illustrate, when Henny Penny claims "The sky is falling," the utterance may be judged in two ways. First, is it *true* that the sky is falling? Secondly, whether or not it is true, *is it in order* for the speaker to declare that the sky is falling? This last aspect of meaning depends upon the interpersonal relations holding between the speaker and hearer—the speaker's authority, his reliability as witness, his relation to the listener and so on.

Ordinary language normally meets both sets of conditions. Speech is always directed to a particular audience with whom one has some particular social status or lack of status and who may or may not be influenced by information. Hence in common interchanges, the interpersonal function is predominant over the logical function. If you fail to maintain appropriate social relations with the listener, the conversation simply terminates.

Now, it becomes clear why the invention of a writing system has such a dramatic effect on language. What is said in writing need not be suited to the requirements of the listener, because the listener is absent. Consequently, the interpersonal or social functions of the language are inert while the logical functions have free rein. To put it another way, the rhetorical conditions are collapsed onto the logical conditions so that if the statement is merely true to the facts, that is sufficient condition for its being "in order."

Further, by suppressing the interpersonal functions of language, statements become the specialized instruments of description and explanation. To serve this specialized function, language is brought up to a much higher level of formal and explicit conventionalization. Meaning has to be formulated in a set of explicit definitions; grammatical structure has to be shaped up to indicate logical structures; and the logical apparatus for specifying implications and assigning truth is rigidly conventionalized.

The result is a language refined and biased under the impact of literacy. It is the specialized language of science and philisophy, the tool of analytic thinking and explicit argument. It is the language taught in school, a vehicle distinct in both structure and function from the ordinary mother tongue.

No one would deny that the mastery of this literate, highly conventionalized language assumes and/or develops an important form of human competence, a form particularly significant to a specialized technical society like our own. But here is the problem. In our society this form of competence has become completely predominant—"standard English" is the language of literate, explicit, logical prose.

More important, the concept of intelligence, in our

culture, is coterminous with the mastery, not of an oral conversational language, but with the structures of literate prose. The result is an extremely restricted conception of competence. Let us consider this form in some detail.

It is usually assumed that intelligence is a quality of mind that manifests itself in any context. Hence, according to conventional theory, I.Q. is largely independent of experience; it is the work of genes. However, it may be argued that such quantified intelligence is nothing other than the form of competence that results from the use and mastery of the particular specialized, literate form of language.

Intelligence, thus considered, is summed up in the terms *abstraction* and *rationality*. Abstraction refers to the habit of representing objects or events, not in terms of the concrete reality of their functional or perceptual qualities, but rather in terms of verbal or semantic structures. To illustrate, an apple and a peach are alike, the Binet I.Q. test tell us, because they are both fruit but not because they are both to eat or both round. Classification at the level of function is universally depended upon in ordinary oral language. Classification by means of defining relations (such as apple, peach = fruit) is a distinctive property of the conventionalized language of a literate culture. Yet it alone is taken as an index of intelligence.

Rationality, the second characteristic of intelligence, refers to the quality of argument. Thus, if a conclusion is a logical entailment of a given premise, it is rational. Here again, we encounter the biasing effects of literacy. In ordinary oral language, statements themselves are rarely taken as logical premises. Rather, one relies on a form of natural logic to draw inferences, form impressions, and test conjectures.

Written logical prose, in contrast, like measured intelligence, requires that one actually seize upon a particular statement and treat it *literally* as a logical premise from which entailments can be drawn. To those skilled only in the oral use of language, this procedure is quite foreign. A famous anecdote of the Russian psychologist A.R. Luria illustrates the point. An unschooled peasant was told, "All the bears in Pinsk are white; Ivan saw a bear in Pinsk." Then he was asked, "What color was the bear?" He answered, "Ask Ivan, I've never been to Pinsk."

Not realizing that our own habit of treating sentences as logical premises is peculiar in this regard, we draw prejudicial conclusions about the rationality of others. Moreover, in so doing we exclude our own primary intellectual resources—our oral conversational language and our common-sense intuitions. Our models of reality become impersonal and objective—the "output" of the "disinterested search for truth." Knowledge loses its tie to social and personal values, while thinking—the activity of creating and evaluating that knowledge—loses its tie to feelings.

Ordinary language with its depth of resources, with its multitude of paths to the same goal, and above all, its ground in interpersonal "intersubjectivity," may be an instrument of limited power for exploring abstract ideas. It is, nonetheless, a universal means of sharing our understanding of concrete situations and practical actions. The development of the most specialized forms of linguistic competence should not be allowed to eclipse these more fundamental abilities.

There is a little doubt that a larger and larger proportion of our society is becoming literate. There are concerted efforts everywhere to "wipe out" illiteracy. In 1970 it seemed like a perfectly humane enterprise to declare a war on illiteracy via the famous Right-to-Read program in the U.S. and Unesco's world campaign for the eradication of mass illiteracy.

In 1976 it seems that these programs were hopelessly naive; it is difficult to believe that their proponents could have been so optimistic about the outcomes of such ventures. It had been assumed, without critical reflection, that universal literacy was an unqualified good—everything was gained and nothing was lost and that literacy was the unique road to all major forms of human competence.

It is true that a complex technological order requires highly trained personnel who can be relied upon to carry out highly specialized activities in highly predictable ways. Human variability and personal idiosyncrasy contribute little to the achievement of fixed institutional goals, and if given free rein place the entire institution in some jeopardy. Literacy is the primary device for achieving this specialization. But the unintended consequence of specializing people and immersing them in highly bureaucratized institutions appears to be a loss of personal meaning, a loss of personal competence, and a loss of interpersonal or social coping skill. The language of text is specialized for the representation of an objective reality, not an intimately personal one. Hence, the individual, born to the one, but nurtured on the other, can become a victim of this severe discrepancy.

The current emphasis on literacy as the only valid use of language, and the emphasis upon schools as the only valid institution for the development of competence, is therefore widely inappropriate. While literacy *is* the means to a restricted set of personal and social goals, it is quite inappropriate to the achievement of others. Hence, the simple all-out attack on illiteracy is both misguided and dangerous. Literacy is the panacea neither for social ills nor for social and personal development.

A society must acknowledge the value of both the interpersonal and the logical functions of language and provide occasions for the development and expression of both. If it does not, it will only serve to foster that form of competence which operates powerfully with objective reality, but at the expense of sensitivity to other human beings. □

Responses to this article should be addressed to REPORTS Magazine, World Education, 1414 Sixth Ave., New York, New York 10019.

"The women asked when they could come back, but we didn't know if it was because they enjoyed the food, or the class, or both."

continued from page 11

loss of food to the urban area, the excesses of wealth, concentrated in the urban dwellers, and the ineptitude of the government. We found that the only problem we really shared with the villagers was the "ineptitude of the government."

We did a little role-playing and concluded that we, the urban dwellers, had as much to learn as the villagers; that we, from the point of view of the villagers, had problems (or were the cause of problems) that we weren't even aware of.

We also agreed that a problem was by definition felt by the person who had the problem; if it wasn't felt, it wasn't a problem.

Shahid didn't really accept the conclusion of the group. He said: "How about family planning? The villagers may not feel a population problem, but that doesn't mean it's not there."

What followed was a fascinating debate, an unplanned role play, between Shahid and Jyoti, with Shahid playing the family planning worker and Jyoti playing the villager. Jyoti took the position that large families are not a problem for parents, so long as most of the children are not girls. The only way to get ahead, the only way to buy land and get out of debt, is to have sons who can go to work and earn money, starting as early as the age of eight. And what happens if most of children are girls? Then Allah had not been good to you. But you can't stop having children, because they are your only hope. Jyoti convinced us that large families are better off than small ones. As a native of the project area, he could tell us from personal experience that large families are the ones that get ahead; small families face financial problems. To ask parents to limit the number of children they have for the sake of society at large is to ask them to cut their own financial throats. Even Shahid was daunted, and the experience was discouraging for all of us in a way, because, on a more detached, abstract level, we do in fact think that smaller families are desirable.

The point of all of these exercises, however, is not to arrive at some abstract truth, but to consider the most immediate problem of how to communicate with villagers. If we do not address ourselves to their problems and if we do not appeal to their self interest, then we will never even begin to communicate.

Fascinating and fruitful morning, I think.

August 17, Saturday

The big day finally arrived. We had hoped to have eight to ten women for the experimental class, but the UNICEF man who volunteered to find the students was able to bring only five. Three of them had had some experience with reading so we eliminated these women from the group, leaving only two.

Bahar taught the class, with Khushi sitting in. The rest of us remained outside the room, waiting expectantly, like fathers in a maternity ward, for the results. (We didn't observe the class for fear of inhibiting the women).

Two hours and ten minutes later, the doors opened. I could see by the expressions on Bahar's and Khushi's faces that the class had not gone as well as they (and we) had hoped.

Bahar reported that the women were able to learn the sounds and to make words. (Sighs of relief.) However, they did not remember the sounds perfectly and needed a little more guidance than we had anticipated. And they had lots of trouble writing the words they had created. They also had difficulty in recognizing the drawing of the house, with chickens in the courtyard, drawn to illustrate "home." This was a surprise to us and a disappointment to Asem, who had worked so hard on his drawings.

After lunch, the women, who had been given fish and rice, asked when they could come back. This was encouraging but we didn't know if it was because they enjoyed the food, or the class, or both.

It was a sobering but profitable experience. Most of all it gave us a taste of the reality of teaching nonreaders.

August 18—August 23, Sunday—Friday

A fast and furious week: completed training manual to lesson 13, worked on pre- and post-tests, reviewed games, collected photographs for the lessons, and designed a few more lessons. Everybody is working extremely well now and making valuable contributions (could my imminent departure have a liberating effect on them?) and brainstorming about other possible lesson techniques.

I may be in a mild state of euphoria—brought on by the sheer enthusiasm, willingness, and kindness of the people at BRAC.

I left the office with that sweet sorrow that overcomes all consultants—knowing that brief but deep friendships have been made but may not have a chance to grow, and feeling that much has been accomplished but that so much more needs to be done. I guess the most important thing is that we tried, we worked together, and that's what it's all about. □

Indonesia Revisited

Our readers will remember that the cover story of the April issue of REPORTS was a report from Indonesia written by Nancy Piet. Entitled "Four Women," this article provided a view of Indonesia's national family planning effort through the lives of four representative women, one from the top of society, two from the middle class, and one from a remote rural village. Ms. Piet wrote her article in 1974 and revised it in September of 1975. We published it eight months later.

Since publication, we have received letters from both Dr. Haryono Suyono of the National Family Planning Coordination Board in Jakarta and from Ms. Piet herself pointing out that, because of the rapidly advancing family planning effort in Indonesia, the article did not accurately reflect the conditions existing in Indonesia at the time of publication. We, of course, regret this.

The report that follows is drawn from a paper sent to us by Dr. Haryono entitled "Village Family Planning: The Indonesian Model," written by Dr. Haryono, three other members of the Family Planning Coordination Board, and an officer from USAID Indonesia. We hope this will update our April report, although as Ms. Piet pointed out in her letter: "The data changes daily as the effects of this . . . rapidly expanding program are felt."

Copies of the complete paper can be obtained by writing to REPORTS Magazine.

Since 1967, when the Indonesian government first began actively to encourage family planning among its people, it has waged a vigorous and progressively successful campaign. In 1970, the National Family Planning Coordinating Board was set up, and the statistics reported from its various projects show a steady gain of family planning acceptors.

In Java and Bali, where 83 million of Indonesia's 125 million people live, 53,000 new acceptors were found in 1970. By 1973, over one million were reported, and in 1975, the figure was 1,800,000. (These figures are for the number of new acceptors each year and thus represent only a fraction of the total number of acceptors.) Among Indonesian women between 15 and 44, this is an increase of from less than one percent to better than 10 percent each year.

After family planning services were successfully incorporated into the provincial health clinics, the Board started focusing its attention on ways to integrate family planning into other government services. An effort was launched to set up village contraception distribution centers and at the same time encourage sub-village family planning groups. When a contraceptive distribution center has been set up in each village, the Board will try to integrate family planning with other developmental programs at the village level.

In its initial stages, the Indonesian program has depended on clinic bases with fieldworkers moving out into the villages to motivate and encourage couples to seek services.

But at the heart of the Indonesian effort is the desire to see the people use the resources within their own villages to solve their own problems. In some parts of the country a member of the village is responsible for contraceptive supplies and for keeping records that are coordinated with the clinic. (One of these groups recently expanded its range of activities and set up a chicken cooperative.)

Family planning at the clinic level alone is insufficient to generate a transition from a large family norm to a small family norm. The village itself must become involved in the process of supplying its own services. The Coordinating Board's report asserts: "Local people, using local resources to serve local problems is powerful medicine." The Board's village level approach has evoked a surprising enthusiasm: "In some areas, a development dynamic seems to have been created by joining family planning acceptors together.

"The idea that rural people are not future oriented, that they are pre-Newtonian is wrong. Though uneducated or under-educated, we have found in village after village people concerned and determined to improve not only their lot, but especially that of their children." □

Educator Earns Literacy Award

The Welthy Fisher Literacy Award, presented by World Education for outstanding contributions to the cause of universal literacy, was awarded this year to Dr. T. A. Koshy, project director of the Council for Social Development in New Delhi, India.

Wealthy Honsinger Fisher, the 97-year old American educator for whom the award is named, made the presentation herself at the ceremony which took place in New York City on September 15, 1976.

Mrs. Fisher worked with Dr. Koshy in the early years of Literacy House, the educational center in Lucknow, India, that she founded in 1953.

Dr. Koshy, who was director of Literacy House from 1958-63, has also been named winner of the 1976 Nehru Literacy Award. □

Reports Magazine

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Editor: Gus Hedberg

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HAZARIPUR

Rahat Uddin Ahmed (see interview on page 6) remembers the village of Hazaripur where the Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (see story on page 1) helped change things.

"One village I will remember all my life is Hazaripur. There is a peculiar sort of economic condition in this village. For six months of every year all the males go off to other villages and seek employment as agricultural laborers. They borrow the money to do this from the landlord in their own village. After six months they get paid for the agricultural work in the other village, and then they come back and pay back the landlord at home his money plus interest.

BRAC gathered everybody around this problem. The only solution that they could see was to become sharecroppers in their own village. But the peculiarity was that their landlord didn't rent land to people from his own village but instead to people from a neighboring village. So the villagers formed an association, a cooperative society, and BRAC advanced a loan.

Then the people went to the neighboring villagers and said, 'Look, our landlord will only give land to you. You are poor, and we are also poor. But we are poorer than you are. So here's how you can help us. We want to be the sharecroppers in our own village.' And they talked and talked for about one month, in a kind of campaign. Finally they convinced their neighbors to work some other land that year.

Then they put pressure on the landlords: 'Now you have to give us the land. We will pay you the same that the others paid to cultivate, on the same terms and conditions.'

So they got the land and became sharecroppers, and when they did, BRAC advanced them another loan for six months—about 400 dollars. They used this money to buy fertilizer and food and things for the families. They had a very good harvest, and paid off the landlord.

They directly deposited one third of their money to their cooperative. They built their own school for functional education. Two of them came to BRAC and were trained to be the facilitators in this program. They were so crazy about the education that they also started morning classes for the children. They then applied to the government to register the center as a primary school.

So they became sharecroppers, but they still were very poor. There was a great desire among the villagers for some kind of capital that they could use to develop themselves economically. It is very difficult to buy land, very costly.

There was some common land, about three acres, owned by the whole village—39 families. The landlord also had a share. The villagers decided to work their land together and after about a year and a half they had a savings of 400 dollars. They used this money to buy the landlord's share and it became theirs totally.

Later they asked us for a loan to dig a pond so they could cultivate fish. They said, 'We'll dig it ourselves but we need money to eat for the time it will take us to make it.'

We gave them the money and they managed everything. We gave them no extension worker or agent. In the first year they raised enough fish to pay off one third of the loan. And now, they have also started a horticultural program. They are growing bananas. In the water they are growing fish and on the bank they are growing bananas—all on three acres."