

THE BANGLADESH OBSERVER

DHAKA THURSDAY AUGUST 27 1987

Traditional Centres Of Education

It is not generally remembered nowadays that one of the consequences of the advent of British rule in Bengal—which paradoxically coincided with the beginning of modern education in the country—was a sharp decline in literacy, especially in rural areas. This resulted from the sudden withdrawal of state support from traditional institutions, the extinction of hundreds of educational endowments, and the disappearance of the aristocracy which used to be their mainstay. But until about fifty years ago, private institutions called maktabas, attached to many households, provided some kind of basic instruction in the three R's from which children from rural homes used to benefit. Training in basic social morality and ethics was an unwritten part of the curriculum, so that the pupils who attended them were thoroughly drilled in the do's and don'ts without which social stability is impossible to maintain. These are those ground rules which text-books seldom teach and which almost everywhere children absorb from the conduct of their elders and mentors.

The maktabas like the educational institutions of pre-British days, have succumbed to the economic changes of the last few decades. The state acquisition of rent-receiving interests, which came in the fifties, sounded the death knell of the few which had survived until that time. That measure liquidated the class of people who could afford to maintain maktabas in their homes, without creating a substitute which would take over their functions.

The primary schools which exist in most villages these days are very different in structure and organisation from the maktabas. The teaching is done by salaried teachers who do not care to go beyond the prescribed books and do not bother about the ethics and morality of their public conduct. Those who graduate from these schools and later arrive in urban centres to join high schools and colleges seem most often to be totally devoid of what social ethics and morality mean.

It is nowadays almost overlooked that the majority—nearly all really—of these children come from illiterate backgrounds; there is little their parents can afford to teach. It is only when they come in contact with people from different backgrounds in the towns that some of them see for themselves that there are such things as rules of social behaviour and that their text-books have not taught them the whole truth about education. Many young people have been known to express surprise when advised that cheating in examinations or the pursuit of success by any means whatsoever regardless of its nature must be condemned as criminal. They have been allowed to grow up with conceptions of crime and virtue which have little in common with what the rest of the world think of as good and evil. Unfortunately, what is not learnt in childhood and early adolescence is seldom assimilated when a person reaches the age of seventeen or eighteen, so, that many who belong to this generation are destined to go through life with warped notions of what is good and right.

It is a situation which must engage the attention of public leaders and educationists. To let it continue is to keep the floodgates of degeneracy perpetually open. The maktabas cannot perhaps be revived without their patrons, but something could be done to incorporate their methods of instruction in today's primary schools. It has to be realised that mere literacy in a moral vacuum is virtually useless, particularly in a poverty-stricken society like ours.

65

134