

Wee Little Schools For Retarded Children

—Urmi Rahman

THE wee little girl Manjari frolicking in the yard, a shock beautiful black hair on her head. Her colourful dress bounces with her. Suman always has a smiling face and Ehsan an innocent look. Nancy is rather calm and Lubna just the opposite. She is always talking "Please come to our place, we stay at Dilu Road. Did you watch T.V. yesterday? They won't be showing Six Million Dollar Man any more. The boys of that school came here yesterday, but they did not talk with me. They say I am mad".

None of these children are mad. They are mentally retarded. Seeing them no one can realise that these beautiful lively children are somehow stunted. Their slow mental development has separated them from the rest of the society.

Clinically this is a psychological problem—but otherwise it is a social one, and has spread over the whole world. It has increased with the mechanisation of life in the industrialised nations and a corresponding increase in the number of broken homes. The poorer nations also could not escape. They had their poverty and malnutrition and lack of health care.

According to a WHO report (1975) 40 million mentally retarded people of the world are deprived of any form of treatment. Ten per cent of the world population are disabled among whom three per cent are mentally retarded. In Bangladesh the number is one million. Manjari, Nancy, Lubna, Ehsan, Katal, Masum, Suman are the lucky few. They had the chance of special schooling. They can spend hours in a lively atmosphere.

Three such schools are run by "The Society for the Care and Education of Mentally Retarded Children". The society also conducts a special class in a slum area. Often, the society arranges workshops where their parents are guided as to how to handle their retarded children and how they could help their children develop. The society also runs a free clinic at the Dacca Medical College Hospital every Friday.

On an initiative of Dr. Sul-tana Sarwat Ara Zaman, Professor of the Department of Psychology, Dacca University and a few guardians of such children, the society was formed in 1977. The school was started in 1978.

The society had two schools— one was the joint venture with

the Will's Little Flower School and the other with Girls' Guide Association at the Guide House. A third school has been established on October 1 at the Dhanmondi Placid Tutorial. The special class, two hours in the afternoon is conducted at a slum of Mouhak.

Mrs. Zahirunnessa Saveed is the principal of the school. Mrs. Saveed had been teaching in a school of mentally retarded children for eight years in London. The other teachers of the school had their training in USA, Nepal and India. Mrs. Salma Huda, mother of Ehsan (10) and Mrs. Mamata Rahman, mother of Masum (16), both students of the school, are also teachers.

Schools have a total roll strength of 34. Children of 5 to 16 years of age can take admission in these schools. An I.Q. test is necessary before admission. Then case history is taken by a psychiatrist who makes a thorough medical check-up.

Besides their regular academic studies they have special classes on music, handicraft, art and physical exercise. The monthly fee of the school is Taka 100. But then this is adjustable to the parent's paying capacity. Some students are

admitted on payment of half the amount or even free. The organization does not have any regular donation. The teachers have to be paid from the donation received on different occasions from the guardians and other people. UNICEF helps the society by donating books and toys. The government in its second Five Year Plan has sanctioned Taka four million. Tk one million has already been paid for purchase of land and the rest will be paid gradually in the Second Five Year Plan period, that is within 1985.

The I.Q. of the children of these schools varies from 15 to 73. Twenty seven per cent of the children have small I.Q., 57 per cent have medium and 17 per cent have a very small I.Q. But after schooling the number in the last group is decreasing.

It is assumed that Bangladesh has one million mentally retarded people. But the actual number is not yet known. There are only nine mental specialists in the country. There are 400 seats in the Pabna Mental Hospital and 200 in other places of the country. Only 0.2 per cent of the hospital seats are reserved for mental sickness i.e. one seat

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