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THE BOOK BUS AND THE ALIF LAILA SOCIETY

by Don de Silva

On a green patch of land in the heart of Lahore, the capital of Pakistan's most populous state, Punjab, stands a brightly coloured double-decker bus. Unlike other buses, it is not used for transporting passengers. Instead, the bus helps to shift the minds of children in the area to wider horizons. Inside the bus, both the upper and the lower decks are neatly stacked with books.

The book bus, as it fondly called by the local people, is the first children's lending library in Pakistan. It was the first project of Alif Laila, a non-governmental organisation dedicated to improving the standards of education among disadvantaged communities in Pakistan. The organisation was established in 1978.

Several "education experts" cautioned Midhat and Basarat Kazim, directors of the Alif Laila Society, against setting up the bus project. You cannot trust the children in the area, they were warned. The response would be poor, and the parents would not send their children to the library. The children might take the books and not return them. Alif Laila's experience has proved otherwise. The library has been much in demand. Books are returned in time. The library has a membership of over 1,000 children.

After this experience, Alif Laila persuaded the Punjab government to construct a reference library next to the double-decker bus. The reference library also contains magazines, games, puzzles, photocopying facilities, and a TV set and video cassette recorder. Educational films are shown regularly.

Every day after school, the children in the area make a bee-line for the libraries. Both libraries keep a number of books on environmental issues in several languages, including Punjabi and English. A volunteer teacher from the Alif Laila Society is present at library hours and sometimes holds discussions on problems that affect the children and the community.

Basarat and Midhat Kazim are concerned about the quality and standard of education among the disadvantaged communities in the developing countries. They are critical of stereotyped education methods and rote learning. "Many children drop out, as state schools have poor facilities, and education is largely irrelevant to the needs of the community," said Basarat Kazim.

The Society constantly searches for innovative education methods. Four years ago, Alif Laila's hobby clubs were born in a rented house, about a five-minute walk from the libraries. The place is

now a major education resource centre. The centre conducts hourly classes in computer science, art, photography, crafts, aero-modelling, mechanics, and wood-work. The emphasis is on practical training.

The centre also uses drama and puppetry to communicate messages. The children put on plays for their communities. The content touches on themes like the importance of education, preserving the environment, and health and sanitation. "Readosaurus," a green dinosaur, is a popular character in several plays that encourage children to learn rather than drop out of school and become educationally "extinct."

Using the hobby clubs as the base, Alif Laila tried out an interesting experiment: to facilitate contact between rich and poor children. They invited children from a leading private school in the area to help children attending the hobby clubs to learn English. The exercise benefited both sides. According to Midhat Kazim: "All children developed a healthy relationship. There was a feeling of give and take. The poor benefited in learning English. The rich children were also educated in the causes of poverty and life in the slums."

Alif Laila's latest venture began when Basarat Kazim investigated the conditions of the schools around Lahore. During one of her visits, an old school master confronted her and forced her to listen to the poor conditions that teachers had to work with. Basarat informed him that she was not from the Education Department. But the school master went on. "At this point, I realised that hobby clubs and libraries alone were not enough. We had to go deeper into the community," she added.

As a result, Alif Laila began schools in slum areas. The first was started in a Bihari community. The teachers had a difficult time during the first six months. Some parents demanded money for sending their children to school as the children were earlier sent to work to earn money for the family. Although attendance initially was low, gradually the numbers began to grow. The mothers, in particular, grasped the importance of education. Across fences and at water taps, word about the community school quickly spread around the area. The Pathans living next to the Bihari community asked Alif Laila to also set up a school for their boys and girls. This request surprised the organisation as that community had been thought to object to the education of women.

Alif Laila has written up the syllabi and teaching aids that are used in their education programmes. Based on their experience, they have also evolved a 90-day functional literacy programme, which requires one hour of teaching and learning per day. The organisation is keen to share their experiences with other NGOs, and also to set up libraries, hobby clubs, and community schools in other parts of Pakistan. "Our methods are not only effective, but affordable as well," said Midhat Kazim.