The Bangladesh Times 021

Education in Arab world

Family life has always been regarded as one of the most important elements in Arab society. Most modern Saudis, for example, expect to marry and raise their own families. Their lives are likely to be vastly diferent from those of their forefathers; the economic boom after the discovery of oil on the shores of the Arabian Gulf propelled Arab society into the modern world. While traditional values remain an inherent part of local culture, the march of 20th century progress has had an inevitable effect on family life in the Gulf.

SAUDI ARABIA

Unquestionably the fastest-growing system of modern education in Arabia has been that of Saudi Arabia. In 1925, seven years before the Kingdom's formal establishment under its founder, King Abdul Aziz, there were only four primary schools; by 1975 there were 2,065, with an enrolment of 391,405 pupils. To this essential six-year base have been added intermediate and secondary schools, preparing Saudi pupils — boys and girls—for tertiary or university education.

Across the causeway in Bahrain, a social researcher notes that one of the most remarkable changes has been in the size of family. "Today the average Bahraini family numbers six", he says, "while before families would have been much larger, maybe 12-14 members. However, it is difficult to judge what was happening years ago because nothing was registered then".

The researcher, who works for the Bahraini Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, has compiled one of the first books on family life in this small island state. His fascinating study, which took a year to complete, documents changes in the family since the economic boom, and his findings can equally be applied to the rest of the Gulf.

Not only is the size of the family today much smaller, but its structure has also changed. "The emphasis is now on the nuclear family of just two generations including mother, father, and children and maybe aunts and uncles. Before, we had the extended family. The sons would work with their father and when they married they would remain in the family home".

BAHRAIN

Perhaps one of the greatest influences on family life has been the introduction of formal education in Bahrain. 'The sons were encouraged to learn a skill and work separately from their father. The second generation gradually became more independent and began to break away from the family. They had their own salaries and homes'. The role of the head of the family also changed. Years ago it was common for the grandfather in the household to make major decisions on marriages and jobs for junior family members. "But when the sons became more independent and better educated, the grandfather lost a lot of his authority".

Further down the Gulf in Dubai, the boom in educational development is typical of the GCC states. When the United Arab Emirates was formed in 1971, the emirate had no more than 15 schools. Today it has about 90 government and private schools, with about 50,000 students on the rolls. Encouragement to education has formed a vital part of the state policy implemented in all seven emirates by the federal Ministry of Education, one of the first federal institutions to be formed in the state.

UAE

In the early years, the Ministry's efforts to induce parents to send their children to school included grants for schoolgoing children and the provision of hostel facilities near the few schools located in the main urban centres. "Today there are schools in every locality, however distant from the main city, and the only inducement is that the parents do not have to pay anything, even transportation costs", says the officer in charge of educational services planning in the Dubai regional office of the Ministry of Education.

Free education is a feature of the 55 government schools in Dubai. These include coeducational kindergartens for children 4-6 years, separate girls' and boys' primary schools for ages 6-12, intermediate schools for ages 12-15, and secondary schools for ages 15-18.

In Qatar ,the only schools remained traditional Islamic ones until the 1950s. Even today, religious teaching has a prominent place in hte curriculum, right up to university level, but now other subjects are given equal importance and school and university eduaction has been considerably advanced. When the first elementary school was opened in 1952 it has six teachers and 240 boys on its rolls. The number of students in Qatar today, including girls, is over 50,000.

In fact the number of girls is usually equal to or, as is the case at university, greater than that of the boys, and a primary reason for this is that parents prefer their daughters to study within the country. A large number of Qatari boys, on the other hand, study abroad. The university also recommends students who should be given scholarships to study abroad.

QATAR

A measure of the importance attached to education is the fact that this ministry is the biggest employer in Qatar, managing more than 150 schools. The number of schools increases every year, and the target is to have 300 schools by the end of the 1980s. In the separate schools for boys and girls there are no shortages either in staff strengths or such facilities as libraries, laboratories, recreational facilities, and playgrounds.

Though swelling oil revenues have enabled many ambitious projects to go ahead in the Sultanate of Oman, the Omanis have not forgotten that a country's main resource is its people. Since 1970 schools have proliferated throughout the Sultanate to cater for the primary, preparatory, and secondary educational needs of the Omani people. Omani children of today are being trained—academically, technically, and professionally—to be able to steer their country to a peak of development in the future.

The atmosphere of Sultan Qaboos University is permeated by the Islamic spirit and the Islamic way of life. The daily observance of prayer as a routine of campus life; the inclusion of "Oman and Islamic Civilisation" as a curriculum subject the attachment of a religious counsellor to each residential unit—all sustain the guiding influence of Islam. Men and women students are segregated in much of the academic and campus life. Extracurricular activities such as tennis, squash, footbal, and swimming provide recreation for sports enthusiasts.

OMAN

The importance which Oman attaches to its younger generation is perhaps best illustrated by the declaration of 1983 as the "Year of Youth" in Oman, since when several National Days have been dedicated to youth. The Youth Year, which was successful beyond all expectations, achieved its aim of focussing the role of Omani youth and providing them with every opportunity to play their part in serving their country. Youth processions and rallies, scouting events, cultural competitions, sports meetings and boat races were frequent occurrences throughout the year.

A feature common to the whole of the Gulf, but particularly pronounced at Kuwait University, is the growing number of girls in tertiary education.

KUWAIT

Girls already form 55 per cent of the student body of Kuwait University, a feature which is at once a blessing and potential source of imbalance. Today girls are tending to score better and claim most of the top positions at secondary school leaving level. They go on to enter university and apply for posts as heads of department. The Kuwait University Secretary-General is not, however, particularly disturbed by this situation. He points out that equal opportunities for women, and the ideal of an educated mother at home, are very much in keeping with national goals. Moreover, boys also have access to other fields not yet approached by women, such as engineering, business, the Army, and the police.

It is a well-known fact that 'All work and no play makes Jack' (or Ahmed 'a dull boy'. And on the fun side of life, while Space Invaders and other western games such as hopscotch and hula-hooping are popular with Gulf children, traditional games still have their place in childhood play.

GAMES

Loabat mismar ir-roha mostly played by girls, has been compared with the European 'Ring-a-Ring-a-Roses'. Mismar ir-roha refers to a grinding wheel; the girls form a ring representing this and circle a solitary girl in the middle who represents the centre pivot, or nail, of the wheel. The girl tries to break out of the ring while the others close in singing 'Mismar Ir-Roha T.galgal, Slute-Bli e-Hoote...' a reference to the breaking-loose of the nail.

Loabat ad.dawwama, said to be purely a boy's game, involves spinning a top. In the classic method a piece of string is wound around the top starting at sharp end and reaching about halfway up the body of the top. Then, holding the loose end of the string the boy throws the top sharply on to the ground to start it spinning. The top can also be picked up to spin on the palm of the hand.

Loabat al-safqa is a version of 'Pat-a-Cake' played mostly by girls. The players divide into two groups and sit facing each other. They clap as they sing, and without breaking the rhythm of the clapping try to touch their opponent's hand. Then there is loabat al-dhaboy, or 'Wheels'. This can be played with old bicycle wheels, but in the past boys would use oil drum rims, or even discs made of palm leaves. The winner is the player who keeps the wheel running longest.

'Our children are our future' says a leading oil official during a seminar organised by the UAE's Ministry of Foreign Affairs. 'Despite the oil wealth, the only way to ensure a bright future for the Gulf people is to arm them with education. For education is our insurance against the risks of tomorrow.

Up and down the Gulf today the children of Arabia are being groomed to react in a positive manner to the challenges of a changing world. And at the same time they are encouraged to preserve their heritage and uphold the social and moral values of Islamic society in the modern era.