

Useful Record that Fills a Gap in Our Knowledge

It has been slightly more than a year since the catastrophic cyclone slammed the shores of Bangladesh, leaving behind it a trail of unimaginable damage to the country's infrastructure and unmitigated misery for the victims of its fury. Has the march of time dulled people's memory of last year's awesome natural disaster? Lincoln Chen, Director of the Harvard Center for Population and Development Studies, writes in the Boston Globe: "Press coverage of disasters in the Third World suffers from imbalances. Constrained by space and time, the reporting is invariably episodic. Tragedy is suddenly thrust upon the reader by intensive and selective coverage. Then the crisis disappears." A sad observation but true.

Hence it is heartening to note the publication of "Cyclone '91" by the Bangladesh Centre for Advanced Studies, not so much as a grim reminder of tragic events we may rather forget; but as an accurate record in a country where essential reports of significant events are either not carried out or lie buried in the dusty files of a bloated bureaucracy.

The editors have accomplished the difficult task of compiling a host of reports by distinguished experts in their particular fields and compressed their findings in a highly readable book replete with moving photographs of the human suffering and environmental degradation as well as informative tables with breakdowns of relevant statistics. The contributors include noted practitioners of disaster preparedness and management and they range from Fazle H. Abed (Executive Director, BRAC), Jeffrey S. Pereira, (Executive Director, CARITAS) to R. W. Timm (Executive Secretary, Commission for Justice and Peace) only to mention a few. That such a cohesive overall picture has emerged from so diverse a set of materials is a tribute to the editors' methodical approach to a vast topic of this kind with its multitudinous aspects.

Because of its geographical location with the Himalayas to the north and the funnel-shaped coast to the south, the Bay of Bengal is an ideal breeding ground for the likes of

tropical cyclones and tornados. This is an inescapable fact of life which the country has to live and deal with.

There has been numerous cyclones in the past, too many to detail and recollect in this review. However, what stood out most in last year's event was the utter indifference and disbelief with which it was greeted by the potential victims. Postmortem enquiries revealed that little blame could be delegated to the warning system. Intensive and extensive warnings in the form of radio, TV announcements and loudspeaking systems (in the remote villages and chars along the coastal areas) blared news of the approaching storm and its growing intensity; frequently and at regular intervals. Huge losses of lives is attributed to the people's reluctance to abandon their homes (for fear of looting) and the fact that past cyclones have not been as fierce as the warning signals made them out to be. Alas, cyclone-watching is not so exact a science and there is always an element of unpredictability in cruel nature.

Those who heeded the warnings in time made their way to existing cyclone shelters and survived. The tragedy here lies in the inadequate numbers of cyclone shelters and their advanced state of dilapidation. If there were more of them and if they were not so scattered and were closer to people's homes (along the coast and offshore islands such as Sandwip and Kutubdia), many more lives could have been saved.

For those who had never in the vicinity of a cyclone-hit area before, the book gives electrifying first-hand accounts of the awesome event. A survivor of a village in Kutubdia recalls: "The water came simultaneously from the north-east and the northwest of the Bay. The stormy wind was howling, and it was like a heatwave, but the drizzle was sometimes icy cold and sometimes steaming hot. It was red between the sky and the earth, it looked like hell with fire clouds."

In Chittagong where similar natural phenomena took place numerous gardens were ruined

BOOKS

Cyclone '91: An Environmental and Perceptual Study

Edited by Raana Haider, A. Atiq Rahman and Saleemul Huq. Published by Bangladesh Centre for Advanced Studies, 620 Road 10 A (New), Dhanmondi, Dhaka, GPO Box 3971, Dhaka -1205

Review by Nancy Wong

and trees scorched to cinders. Another survivor who managed to hang on for dear life to the branch of a tree compared his experience to that of scenes depicted in the Koran of "Judgment Day". Press reports there have been aplenty, but none so vivid as the accounts given in this book.

Described as a "general

documentation" of the event, "Cyclone '91" is a project study undertaken one month after the disaster. Its main objective is to discover the cyclone's impact on the lives and livelihood of the affected populace. The book is based on eye-witness accounts, interviews with survivors and researched statistics on subjects ranging

from the estimated mortality

rate of men, women and children

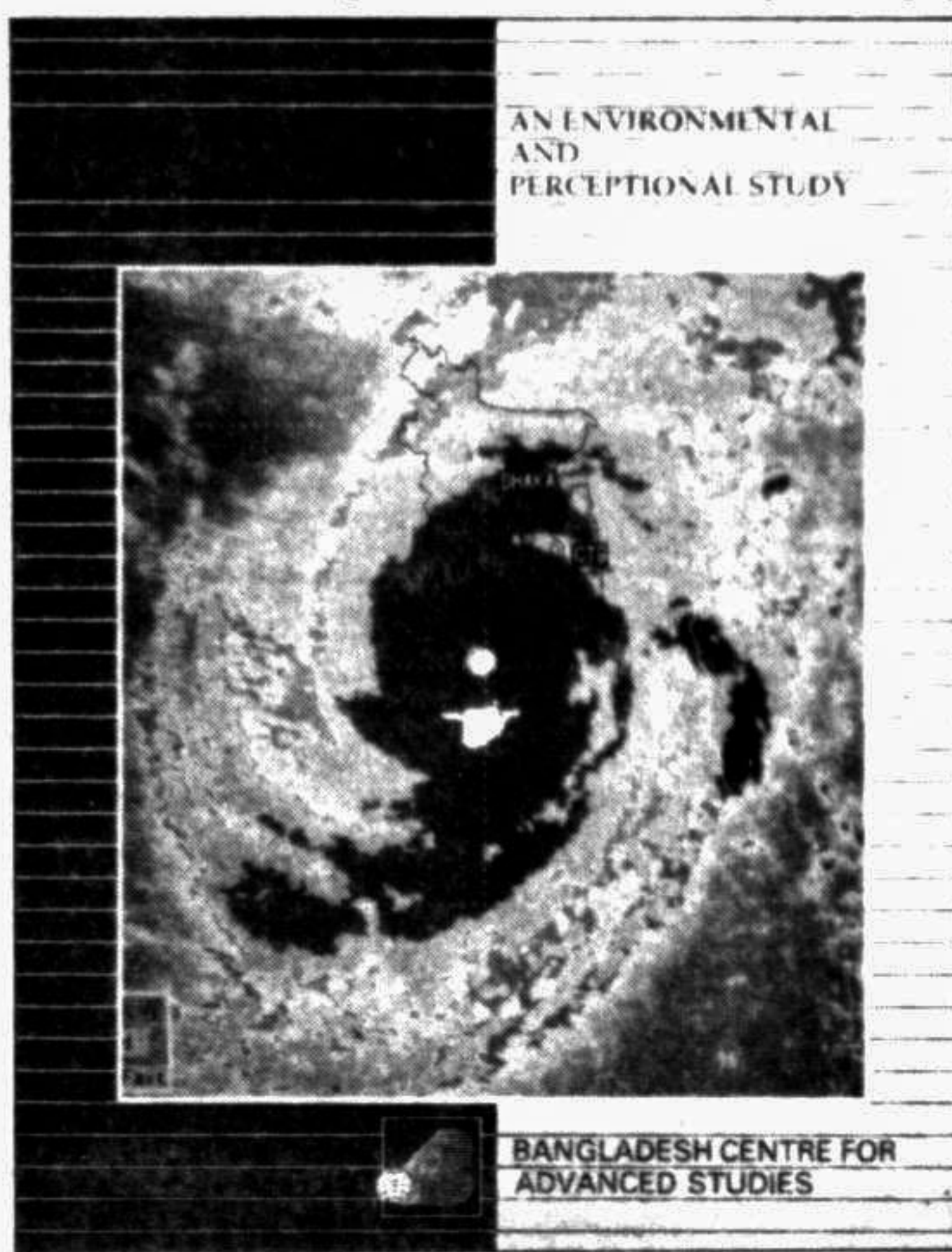
to the analysis of paddy field soil in the cyclone affected areas. These facts are well illustrated with tables which are easy to read and digest, thus giving a wealth of information at glance.

Despite an ample store of hard facts, the human element in seldom out of sight, which is one major reason why this book grabs the reader's attention. Hence, a study in poignancy arising out of total deprivation is seen in the statement of a woman survivor of Kaier Beel in Kutubdia: "I have lost everyone and everything. I have lost my last dignity by queuing up for relief. I don't even get that. I wish another 'big one' will come and wash us all away." These cameo-like pictures are seen throughout the book.

Divided into specific topics, sections are devoted to the indispensable role of the NGOs such as the Red Crescent, BRAC CARE, ADAB, OXFAM and CARITAS: all of whom gave invaluable and unstinting help in the implementation of relief activities. "Operation Sea Angel" deserves special thanks for its part in saving numerous lives and going to places inaccessible by normal transport.

There are many stunning photographs of the horror, misery and stark poverty of human beings as well as the indescribable desolation of the post-cyclonic landscape. Unfortunately, captions have not been given and readers are left to do their own guesswork as to the incident, state of the victims and above all, location of the event. This, I think, is one major flaw of an otherwise extremely well researched book which can serve as a useful guide to future disaster preparedness and management.

Although conceived as "a general documentation of the natural disaster", Cyclone '91 far exceeds this in its broad insight in other related aspects such as Relief Administration, Coping Strategies, Rehabilitation and Reconstruction and the Role of the Print Media. Based on the team of experts' findings, their recommendations are vital and practical. For much as we would love to wish cyclones away, tragically, they are here to visit these shores on a regular basis.



Women Forging Ahead

by Fayza Haq

WOMEN For Women" is a research and study group that is a pioneer non-governmental, non-profit, voluntary women's organisation involved in research and public education programmes on gender issues with the aim of enhancing the status of women in Bangladesh.

It was established in 1973 by a group of committed women professionals, representing a variety of academic disciplines, who strongly feel the need for establishing a sound information base. This is to identify the issues relating to the disadvantaged status of women in Bangladesh and for creating public awareness with a view to improving the existing situation. Since then, women for women has been engaged in research, information dissemination, public motivation and awareness programmes aimed at achieving its goals and objectives.

The main objective of the group is to promote, organise, develop and assist research and study on the needs, issues and problems affecting all spheres of lives of Bangladeshi women in general, and to focus on the specific issues and constraints which limit or obstruct their integration into the total national development process, in particular.

The main objectives are: — To popularise research on gender issues and to promote such efforts by organising workshops and by imparting necessary training to groups of young researchers and students.

— To collect, analyse and disseminate information and to exchange ideas on issues relating to women and development through conducting research and publishing reports, organising discussion sessions, seminars, workshops, conventions, etc., producing video films and regularly publishing a newsletter in Bangla, the national language, for reaching a wider audience.

— To create awareness among Bangladeshi people, particularly among development planners, policy formulators and public functionaries about the need for enhancing the status of women and to mould public opinion, through information dissemination and motivation programmes, in favour of actions/campaigns against oppression and exploitation of women.

— To extend co-operation to the government as well as other national and international agencies involved in the area of women and development and to maintain links and collaborate with similar women's groups at home and abroad.

— To encourage formation of similar local groups of women in other locations of Bangladesh.

Structure
At present, the group consists of thirty-four members (including full, associate and affiliate) who voluntarily offer their time, expertise and efforts to achieve the objectives set forth by the group. The implementation of the group's policies and programmes as well as the general administrative affairs are vested in an executive committee of six members who are elected by the general body for a term of two years.

Since the activities of the group are multi-disciplinary and diverse in nature, it functions through a number of sub-committees, each established with specific responsibilities, maintaining close and continuous link with the executive committee. The executive committee, as well as the sub-committees, are accountable to the general body of members.

Membership requirements

Membership of the group is open to those women who have high academic background (a masters degree at least) and who have demonstrated an active interest in women's issues through research on women and/or association with development programmes designed to enhance the position of women. Full membership is open to Bangladeshi women only. But, the group also offers affiliate or associate membership to eligible women, local or non-local, who are interested to have such membership for the purpose of conducting any particular research or development project on women for a specific period of time.

The prime capital of the group consists principally of the time, expertise and efforts of its members who voluntarily

contribute these to achieve its goals and objectives.

The financial resources of the group comprise mainly of the subscriptions paid by its members, donations and contributions, grants from national and international funding agencies, funds received for specific projects and sale proceeds of its publications.

Research is conducted by members, within the group's overall policy framework, on selected issues of pressing concern to the women of Bangladesh and dissemination of the findings through publication of reports.

Publication of a quarterly newsletter in Bangla entitled 'Eshon' for sharing information and news on women's issues with a wider audience.

Organising seminars, discussion sessions, workshops and similar programmes on women and development.

Conducting short course and discussion sessions for students on women and development in the institutions of higher learning in the country specially targeting the university students.

Holding training course on 'Research Methodology and Women's Issues' designed by the group for selected groups of young researchers and development workers.

Organising an annual national convention on specific women issues for delegates of concerned national and international agencies, policy planners, researchers and academicians.

Correspondence and exchange of ideas and materials with other women's groups at home and abroad.

Among the 25 books that the group has published so far are: "Women for Women: Bangladesh" written by a board of writers, "Disadvantaged Children in Bangladesh: Some Reflection" by Parveen Ahmed, Mahmuda Islam and Roushan Jahan, "Women in Bangladesh: Some Socio Economic Issues" by Jahannara Huq, Hamida Begum, Khaleida Salahuddin and S. Rowshan Qadir, "Legal Rights of Muslim Women in Marriage and Divorce", "Women, Development and Technology" by Jahannara Huq and Mahmuda Islam and "Women, Health and Culture" by Mahmuda Islam.

Farmer Jeremia Turns the Desert into Green Land

by Kaleni Hiyalwa

As you arrive in Gainachas, you greet people and they say "We are surviving" or "We are still alive". It has become the habit to refer in this way to their hand-to-mouth lives.

Until recently things like tomatoes, onions, fruit and vegetables were not grown — and therefore not eaten — by most people in Gainachas. Today some buy them from shops in the nearby towns like Keetmanshoop and Mariental.

In 1989 one farmer, Jeremia Baisako, decided to make the desert land green. He started gardening. His land is near the public water windmill which helps irrigation.

Baisako explains: "Poverty compelled me to garden. I set down to think of what I could do and I came up with this tremendous plan."

Today Baisako grows tomatoes, carrots, pumpkins, and water melon and his family eats fresh food from the garden.

Baisako has 13 children and 32 grandchildren. Feeding and clothing them is difficult, so he often sells produce from his garden to get money to pay school fees and buy uniforms for his children.

Independence for Namibia two years ago has brought more hope to the Gainachas population. People yearn to make the place greener, but they say they have no seeds, water or technical farming implements.

The people's dream of making Gainachas a green land turned into hope when President Sam Nujoma visited the village in 1990. He urged them to take farming seriously and many started trying to make the government policy of food sufficiency a reality by working on small backyard gardens.

But now disillusion is setting in. They say the government promised to help supply the farmers with farming materials to set up an intensive farming project in Gainachas — but they are still waiting.

The staple food of the people of Gainachas is meat and sometimes milk, though in recent years they have learnt to eat mealie-pap like rest of the population.

There is often famine in the village. Children from many homes sometimes find no food at home when they come back from school. Some have to drink a lot of water to fill their empty stomachs.

Since many people have no money to buy mealie-mealie, they still depend on meat alone. Yet rain is insufficient and grazing very poor. Goats and sheep die from drought.

Preservation of meat is a problem. Because of fear that

the meat may be off if kept for days, a family may eat up a full goat in one or two days. On the day when there is meat children and their parents feast, and then when all the meat has been consumed there is hunger for days.

If the family cannot afford to buy mealie-mealie, then they eat mealie-pap with sugar or simply add salt to it.

Well-to-do farmers slaughter three goats a month. The animals are slaughtered only for consumption within the family, but it is also the custom to share things. So, once slaughtered, neighbours, friends and relatives get a share.

For the people of Gainachas sugar, coffee, tea and salt are important. Coffee and tea drinking is regarded as something that can quench hunger. Despite the hot sun of Gainachas, people sip their hot coffee or tea at all times of the day from their steel cups. They complain that such items, bought in shops, are too expensive.

The people's economy revolves around their goats. The old people receive a monthly pension, but for many others their only income comes from selling a goat or meat. One big goat is sold at R150 and a small one at R70-90.

That way debts and school fees can be paid, but sometimes parents take their children away from school to look after the goats in the surrounding farms. Some parents still think in the traditional way that their animals are more important than school or white-collar jobs.

Ouma Higoam, who is 85, warns his 36-year-old son, who works on nature conservation in Mariental, that he should leave his job, come back home and look after the family goats which he says "are going astray".

Since pastures are poor in Gainachas all the people drive their goats 8-20 km away in search of better grazing.

Early last year, the government provided the people with maize mealie, beans and cooking oil and warned them that they should not wait for the government to do everything for them.

Ouma Josephine Kahuika says: "We need to produce our own food like other people elsewhere, but how are we going to begin since we have no seeds?"

This year Baisako is working on a second garden. This one is located near a prospected water pump belonging to the Council of Churches in Namibia (CCN). He is beginning to prepare the ground for vegetables.

There are only seven water pumps and windmills in the whole of Gainachas village. Most of the machines are ancient and, since most people in Gainachas are children, women and old people, they have no strength to do the pumping.

goat is sold at R150 and a small one at R70-90.

That way debts and school fees can be paid, but sometimes parents take their children away from school to look after the goats in the surrounding farms. Some parents still think in the traditional way that their animals are more important than school or white-collar jobs.

Ouma Higoam, who is 85, warns his 36-year-old son, who works on nature conservation in Mariental, that he should leave his job, come back home and look after the family goats which he says "are going astray".

Since pastures are poor in Gainachas all the people drive their goats 8-20 km away in search of better grazing.

Early last year, the government provided the people with maize mealie, beans and cooking oil and warned them that they should not wait for the government to do everything for them.

Ouma Josephine Kahuika says: "We need to produce our own food like other people elsewhere, but how are we going to begin since we have no seeds?"

This year Baisako is working on a second garden. This one is located near a prospected water pump belonging to the Council of Churches in Namibia (CCN). He is beginning to prepare the ground for vegetables.

There are only seven water pumps and windmills in the whole of Gainachas village. Most of the machines are ancient and, since most people in Gainachas are children, women and old people, they have no strength to do the pumping.

Oupa Higoam wakes up each morning, sits on a chair and begins to pump. The water is used in house chores and to water the few plants in his backyard. Oupa is now too old and tired to do such heavy work. He says: "I have to do it because nobody can do it for us. My wife and I are both weak."

Says one villager: "What we need in this village are modern types of water pumps or windmills for irrigation."

Gainachas people are waiting for good rains, for good grazing — and, most of all, for the government's proposed agricultural scheme to start so that they can till the land and plant crops. Then their dream of regular meals will come true.

— Gemini News

Grim Race to Save China's Food Stores

by Li Can and Yuan Jiang

A fresh green has begun to reclaim a huge swath of denuded mountains and hills along the Yangtze River.

In rugged Langzhong County of Sichuan Province, southwest China, mountains and hills covering a total of 15,000 hectares have been carpeted with greenery. The county has announced that all the barren mountains and wasteland suitable for afforestation in its area will have been covered with young forests by 1992.

This county started the afforestation drive in 1989, and the progress means it will fulfil its 12-year afforestation plan in four years, according to the county forestry bureau. In all, 60 counties have made similar progress.

Running 4,500 kilometres from west to east, this new "Great Green Wall" is the second giant tree belt project in the country, after the one already taking shape across northern China.

The Yangtze is the longest river in China. The river basin, which embraces the most fertile and developed parts of China, nourishes one-third of the population.

Wanton felling of trees and reclamation of sloping land — pushed by population growth — have led to soil erosion, mud and rock flows and floods that alternate with drought.

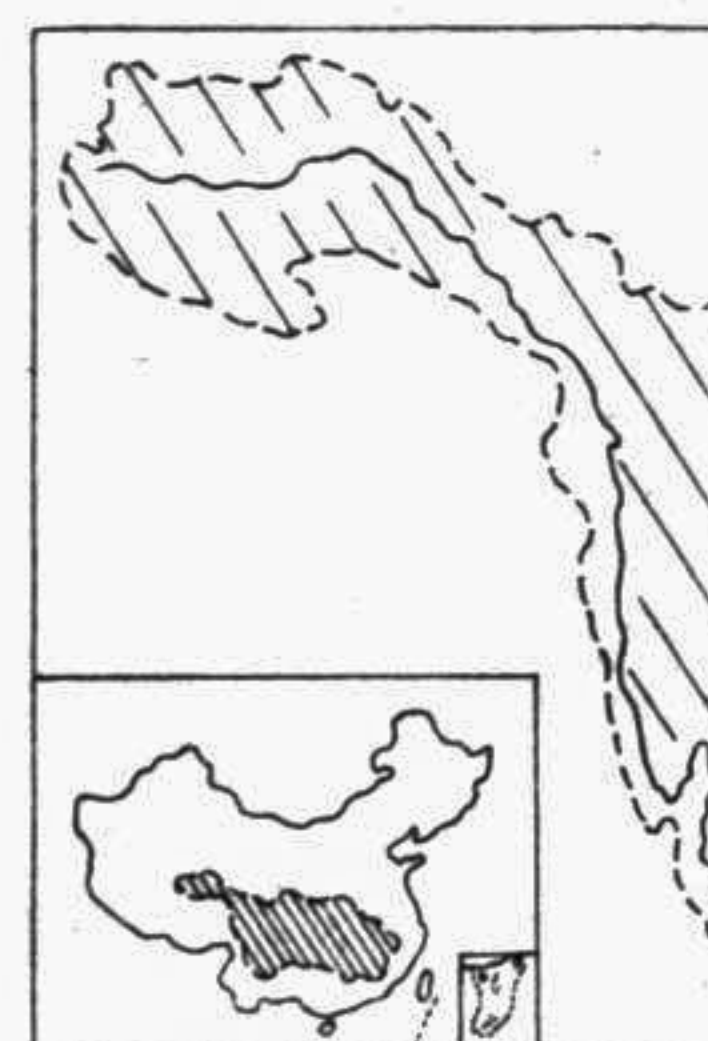
The Yangtze is the lifeline for one-third of China's agricultural output. In its basin lie densely-populated plains which are China's famous granaries: the Chengdu plain in southwest China, the Jiangshan plain in central China, the plains around Dongting and Boyang lakes and the Yangtze delta.

Many industrial giants — the cities of Shanghai, Wuxi, Nanjing, Wuhan and Chongqing — stand on the Yangtze's river banks. The Yangtze basin also produces 40 per cent of the nation's annual industrial output value. The river itself carries three-fourths of the national inland river cargo tonnage.

In the 1980s a number of scientists have warned against the danger of the Yangtze becoming like the Yellow River. The second largest river in China, the Yellow River has

been known as a source of disasters for its recurrent floods and droughts.

Along the Yangtze River, the area under soil erosion has increased alarmingly in recent years, from 360,000 sq km in the 1950s to 560,000 sq km in the 1980s.



The Jingjiang section of the riverbed in western Hubei province, where the river surges from the famed Three Gorges to broad plains, is choked with silt and now rises ten metres above the land outside the dykes.

The most serious soil erosion is found in the upper and middle reaches where the Yangtze and its tributaries flow across highlands and mountainous terrain. In some mountain areas, heavy rainfall has washed away the thin layer of topsoil and exposed rocks underneath, making farming impossible.

If nothing is done to avert this destructive process, "losses will be irretrievable," says Gao Dezhao, Minister of Forestry.

He calls the regreening of the Yangtze an "urgent" project. "The project will improve the environment and benefit this and coming generations," he says.

Started in 1990, the regreening covers the upper and middle reaches of the Yangtze River. The first of two stages, to be completed in year 2000, involves Yangtze River. The first of two stages, to be com-

pleted in year 2000, involves 145 counties.

Millions of farmers, carrying pickaxes and shovels, turn out in afforestation drives every spring and autumn. In all, 1.7 million hectares of denuded mountains and wasteland were planted with young

trees by March 1991, accounting for one-fourth of the planned afforestation area for the 11-year programme.

Liu Menglong, the Ministry of Forestry's deputy director in charge of the project, says progress has been faster than that across northern China. The climate along the Yangtze is milder and more humid and more experience has also been gained, he says.

"About two billion tree saplings are needed for planting the projected shelter belts every year," Mr Liu says. To obtain such a large number of saplings, tree nurseries have been set up for each county, township and village involved.

In addition to the planting of trees, large tracts of depleted forests have been cordoned off for natural regeneration. Aerial seeding has been carried out in remote, secluded mountain areas in Shaanxi, Jiangxi, Gansu and Hunan provinces.

Apart from firs — which will provide construction timber — bamboo, tea bushes, fruit, mulberry and tung-oil trees that give quicker economic returns are grown. Shrubs are

also planted to provide fuelwood.

The policy is: "Whoever plants owns the trees." The number of workdays put in by each farmer is kept on record and the incomes of the forests are to be distributed according to the workdays contributed by each farmer. Farmers own small groves near their homes.

The whole project is estimated to cost 3.3 billion yuan (US\$620 million). About 30 per cent of the cost is being financed by the central government, another 20 per cent by local governments, and the rest borne by farmers, mainly in the form of labour investment.

Incomes from the forests are expected to be enough to cover the whole cost two years after the completion of the first-stage project at the end of this century.

By 2000, tree coverage in the upper and middle reaches of the Yangtze is planned to increase from the present 6.6 million hectares to 13 million hectares, accounting for 40 per cent of the total land area. Plans are being drawn up for the second stage of the project which is estimated to take another 20 to 30 years.

also planted to provide fuelwood.

The policy is: "Whoever plants owns the trees." The number of workdays put in by each farmer is kept on record and the incomes of the forests are to be distributed according to the workdays contributed by each farmer. Farmers own small groves near their homes.

The whole project is esti-

mated to cost 3.3 billion yuan (US\$620 million). About 30 per cent of the cost is being financed by the central government, another 20 per cent by local governments, and the rest borne by farmers, mainly in the form of labour investment.

Incomes from the forests are expected to be enough to cover the whole cost two years after the completion of the first-stage project at the end of this century.

By 2000, tree coverage in the upper and middle reaches of the Yangtze is planned to increase from the present 6.6 million hectares to 13 million hectares, accounting for 40 per cent of the total land area. Plans are being drawn up for the second stage of the project which is estimated to take another 20 to 30 years.

The greening of the Yangtze valley will not only curb soil erosion but also reduce the amount of silt washed into the reservoirs of hydroelectric power stations on the Yangtze and its tributaries, including the planned Yangtze Gorge Project, one of the largest in the world.

— Depthnews Asia



A garden in Gainachas