



PROSHIKA

A Laudable Experiment in Nation Building

It has been The Daily Star's persistent effort to highlight the development experiences of some of our leading private sector development organizations, better known as NGOs. We have already done special features on the world famous Grameen Bank and BRAC. Today we focus on PROSHIKA, another outstanding development organization with a superb track record. Set up in 1976, PROSHIKA today works in 4,602 villages, reaching out to 5,81,359 households, with a total of 34,88,154 beneficiaries. Working through primary groups of 15-20 members, then federating into broader networks at union and thana level, the PROSHIKA programmes emphasize people's participation, social justice, sound environmental development and establishment of democratic values at the grassroots level.

To know more about PROSHIKA's development work and experiences, The Daily Star invited Qazi Faruque Ahmed, Executive-Director, Mahbubul Karim, Director, Planning, and two of their colleagues, Md. Shahabuddin and Shahnewaz and interviewed them over a period of three hours. Below, we publish extracts of the long interview which, we feel, brings out the most salient features of the extremely valuable work that PROSHIKA is doing and conveys to our valued readers concrete evidence of the fact as to how the genuine NGOs have become our significant development partners.

The Daily Star interview team consisted of Mahfuz Anam, Editor, Anwarul Haq, Chief Reporter and Sharier Khan, Staff Correspondent. (Photographs are by PROSHIKA)

The Daily Star (DS): We are very happy to welcome you to our office today. We are aware of the tremendous development work that your organization is doing. Dr. Faruque, we begin by asking you what the word 'Proshika' means.

Qazi Faruque Ahmed (QFA): Proshika is a Bengali acronym drawn from three words: *proshikha, shikha* and *kaj*. We like to interpret this as training, development education and action. You will also notice that our full name is *Proshika Manobik Unnayan Kendra* — a centre for human development. In fact, human development has been at the core of our development strategy since long before the UNDP cognate of the term.

We were established in 1976 and we have had this human development component from the very beginning. Our organization is unlike other NGOs that have graduated from relief and rehabilitation. We began with what are called participatory human development programmes, where we emphasize people's participation, social justice, sound environmental development and establishment of democratic values at the grassroots level. So these are, you may say, the core values of Proshika and they guide us in formulating our development strategies.

The challenge that we faced was to elaborate, in practical terms, these values and philosophical ideas, and we have succeeded in crystallizing them into clear programmes and strategies.

DS: Many people refer to people's participation. Tell me exactly, in concrete terms, how do you practice this in your work?

QFA: First of all you have to understand why participation is important in development and how it can inject energy into the development process. The mainstream development approach does not take into account people's participation and therefore the benefits of development do not accrue to the people. It goes to a small minority.

So how do you enlist people's participation? Just claiming people should participate does not make it happen. You need a concrete set of programmes. We begin with raising the consciousness of the people. We call it the conscientization process. This we do through development education, training and other education processes like people's theatre. Through and other methods, a person can understand the position he or she is in, and understand his or her own potential and develop strategies for overcoming difficulties. This is consciousness raising. A person has a cognitive understanding of his or her surroundings — social, economic and cultural — and learn to overcome the oppressive situation.

DS: How do you tell a person to realize his or her own potential? How do you make people aware?

QFA: This is a long-drawn education process for which we have developed participatory methodologies. You develop learning. We do not import learning. People discover their realities. You take them

through a discovery process. It's hard to describe this but it happens!

DS: When you say: "They are analysing" basically isn't it you who are telling them what they should be analysing?

QFA: You have to bring in information to them. You have to cultivate in them, in another way of looking at things. But basically they have to take initiatives themselves to understand this. For example a landless labourer or a poor farmer is very much engulfed in his daily struggle and doesn't understand the problems in terms of collectivity, in terms of how other landless people are facing the same situation. Once they are brought together they discover that they have common experiences. Also, they can discover how they are losing land or how they are not paid just wages, and how women are oppressed under the social system. So this discovery process also shows how they can do something about it with their own resources. It shows them how they can pull together what little resources they have and develop a sizeable pool of human, social, economic and cultural capital.

The discovery process not only takes them from individual experience to the collective understanding of a problem but also leads them to make an in-depth analysis. For example a poor farmer is indebted to a moneylender. He thinks that the problem is related to his not having enough capital. But his situation is limited by the imperfect operation of the market where he is

BRAC to improve their income situation. That will make them relatively self-reliant so that they won't have to borrow at moneylenders rates.

DS: Do you let them know that alternative sources of credit are available?

QFA: We say that you have to develop your own savings, mobilize your own resources and use your own savings so you don't have to go to moneylenders. Sometimes their own income is not enough to do that. Then it has to be supplemented by a source of credit from somewhere else. They are, however, denied access, in most cases, to institutional credit. Therefore there are programme opportunities from Proshika, Grameen Bank and BRAC.

But we also make them aware that they have not just formed groups to receive credit. They form groups to solve their development problems and in this context receiving credit from a benign source helps them to improve their employment and income situation substantially. They are thus empowering themselves in the credit and employment market. One of the solutions to the problems is to get involved in employment and income generating activities. When they need credit they can receive it from what I would say are more benign sources of credit. That empowers them in the market.

DS: These are the same government schools?

QFA: Yes.

DS: How many examples do you have?

QFA: We are working in 4,600 villages so you may say that this is happening in at least 3,000 schools.

They are aware of their rights and responsibilities and they have become economically autonomous. They are better citizens now. This changes the whole relationship in the rural setting where they are now thought of as an important institution. Their views and concerns are now taken into consideration.

Let me give you one example. Many of the group members are now being elected on the school boards. What normally happens in primary schools is that poor children cannot get enrolled. Even if they get enrolled, they drop out. There are many reasons. One is that they do not give fair treatment to poor children. So when the poor are sitting on the school board, the teachers behave differently. They get the free books they are supposed to get and they are also taught properly. Teachers come on time. We have documented this process because in almost all of the areas in which we are working, group members are on the school board and they pressure schools to function better and give just treatment to the poor children. The national dropout rate is about 60 per cent and in schools where the organized poor are sitting on the school board the dropout rate is about 25 per cent.

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lagers for years. They are also going through a learning process of formal and non-formal training and adult literacy programmes. So now the poor are sending their children to schools and show more interest in how the schools are functioning. They inquire about the government mandate and why it's not being applied. They are asking these questions in the board. They are putting pressure from below so that the management behaves well.

QFA: Most of the teachers get their jobs not because they are very well qualified, but by other means. They don't feel responsible that they have to teach. If the school board is not making them accountable, then they are not so. The organized poor make sure that they are.

The way they do it is that every year at the beginning of the session in each village there is a village coordination committee. They list the number of children who are of school going age.

DS: This is the village coordination of Proshika?

QFA: Yes.

Mahbubul Karim (MK): It is the Federation of Proshika-organized groups.

QFA: They represent about 70 to 80 per cent of the poor in the villages. All the landless, small peasant and artisan families. They belong to these groups of about 15 to 20 individuals. Two representatives from each group come together to the village coordination committee.

DS: How many groups in the normal village?

QFA: Eight groups on the average.

DS: And what are the criteria for forming the groups?

Mohammad Shahabuddin (MS): We form the groups from amongst the poor households in a community. The poor are the small, landless peasants, weavers, fisherfolk, potters etc. in the rural setting and slum dwellers in the urban setting. The women of these socio-economic categories are also organized into groups. Theoretical and empirical evidence suggest that mixed groups having membership from diverse socio-economic and professional categories do not work well. So, one of the most important criteria of the group formation process is that group members should be homogeneous in terms of social, economic, professional and gender categories.

DS: In how many villages can you say that the villagers are totally free of moneylenders?

QFA: About 90 per cent of the villages where we work.

DS: Out of the 4,600 villages?

DS: They don't necessarily have to live close to one another?

MS: Yes, they do. The membership of the group in the rural areas has to be from one village and, if possible, from one 'para'. In fact, most of the groups have membership from one 'para'. In the urban areas the groups are formed within a particular area of the slum.

QFA: They list their members. They'll take all their children to the nearest government primary school.

Where there are no government schools, we are making efforts to set up non-formal primary schools. Our schools will be additional to those of the government. They will not be competing. We have already set up 121 non-formal primary schools and we will be setting up another 10,000 schools in the next five years.

We feel that the government primary schools should be functioning much better than they are at the moment. This can be done if you are conscious about education rights — villagers can make the

therefore there is a need for more schools. There is no shortage of conscientized villagers. The question is how the school can respond to this and function better. One way is to set up more schools and the second is to improve the functioning of the existing schools.

DS: Would you say that you have any special incentives to encourage these children to attend school?

QFA: No. I think the best incentive is that the parents realize the benefits of good schooling. I really do not believe in giving any form of monetary or other form of incentive. I think it's totally disastrous. We do not have to provide any carrots to the parents of these children.

DS: Why do you say that this approach is a disaster?

QFA: First of all this is not a sustainable way to do this. You cannot go on giving. Secondly, there will be scope for 'inappropriate' management practices.

DS: You're deliberately not using the word 'corruption'?

QFA: It might lead to this.

DS: Basically then, the trick of the trade is to make people conscious.

MK: One of our objectives is to make public institutions more responsive to the needs of the people, since there are public services extended by the government for these purposes.

QFA: Secondly, what is most important for participation after conscientization is that they become socially and economically empowered. By empowerment we mean they cut the dependency relationship.

To do this they get involved in many employment and income generating activities which we support by providing technical assistance and training. Also they use their savings.

We have disbursed over Tk. 750 million and a further Tk. 120 million in technical assistance to which the villagers have added Tk. 200 million of their own savings. This has resulted in improved income and employment. In many areas they have doubled their income levels. We have seen that they have become completely independent from moneylenders.

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they have all of these problems but they have not matched all these experiences together.

And it is not an accident that they are poor. It's not fate. Then they try to find an alternative social process through which the problems of poverty can be countered. This investigation tries to see what can work here. But now we don't have this problem. They have heard about Proshika.

DS: So the credibility question is no longer raised?

QFA: No. Now what is happening is that the poor are organizing themselves and coming to Proshika. Say we have covered 50 villages in an area; another 25 remain uncovered. Here the poor themselves have formed groups and come to us saying, "Register us". There may be another 5,000 groups waiting.

They have seen what benefits they can get. Not only economic but also social. And also

agricultural wages are higher compared to other villages. Through our Health Education and Infrastructure Building programme over 80 per cent of children are immunized, close to 100 per cent of households have access to tubewell water and about 60 per cent of households have low cost sanitation facilities.

Massive tree plantation through our participatory forestry programme has resulted in 26 million (over two and a half crore) trees planted in the last few years on 3500 rural roads, embankments and denuded forest areas. Thus the villages where we work have immensely more trees and vegetation.

Our Livestock Development Programme has also made a significant difference in the villages where we work. Livestock mortality has been markedly reduced and the number of cattle and poultry stock per family has increased substantially. Expansion of our fishery programme has brought almost all derelict ponds under fish culture by the landless groups.

One of the most striking features in the villages where we work is that women can be seen participating in all walks of economic and social life of the village. Their dignity and social status have improved greatly. There has been a marked reduction in all forms of patriarchal oppression of women such as through dowry, polygamy, divorce, desertion and physical violence.

DS: These set Proshika villages apart from other villages?

QFA: Yes. Furthermore, although we are not doing any family planning work, the contraceptive prevalence rate is almost 30 per cent higher than in areas where we are not working. And as mentioned, some 90 per cent of the villages in which we are working are completely free of moneylenders. One of the reasons identified for the rise in agricultural wages is that the poor have alternative means of income and have savings. So they don't work for wages.

DS: You make the Proshika way sound so simple. What would be your reasons for the fact that development is not taking place in Bangladesh?

QFA: Our process is not that simple though the principles are. It is based on people's energy and participation. We make sure people participate and actively steer the development process.

There are six problems for which development is not

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Adult literacy: A primary stage in social and economic empowerment of men.

getting a very raw deal. And his social position as a poor farmer doesn't allow him to bargain equally with those who are powerful socially. The market itself is not functioning neutrally as it should, therefore, he is powerless.

How should he be empowered in the market? What should be the development strategy? First of all the poor should try to develop and access alternative development opportunities. They should try to build up savings so that they don't have to go to moneylenders and can utilize whatever resources they can get from development organizations like Proshika, Grameen Bank or

these institutions are meting out rough treatment.

When the poor are organized on a large scale they effectively participate in the decision-making processes of these institutions. They have influenced local body elections in their favour. Our impact assessment exercise conducted recently has also shown that these local institutions, in the areas where we are working, are acting in the favour of the poor as opposed to what they were doing in the past.

DS: Do these people become vote banks? Is that the key?

QFA: It is because they are organized. They became aware.



Youthful enthusiasm in bounty: children outside classes of Non Formal Education programme.

DS: How do you select the workers? From the same village?

QFA: Mostly this is from outside but as time goes by there may be some recruitment from local areas.

DS: Why a seven member team?

QFA: One