

Feature

Development

Trade Liberalization and its Impact on Women : The Case of Bangladesh

by Atiur Rahman

BANGLADESH has been experiencing major reforms in the macro-economic policies including the ones related to trade. These reforms were initiated in the early eighties when life many other developing countries its growth prospects also became vulnerable due to acute international recession. In the face of growing external and fiscal deficits, the country opted for sweeping policy changes under the SAP formula guided by WB and IMF. There was thus a fundamental shift from the national to international option for solution of problems arising out of macro-economic imbalances. In contrast to earlier stronger role of the state in managing the process of growth, the new option began to rely more on the market for regulating the economy. The structural adjustment package for the trade sector aimed at liberalization of import and export and encouragement of exports. And these were to be brought about by measures like devaluation, reduction or elimination of export taxes, removal of import licences, quotas and quantitative restrictions, and introduction of a uniform external tariff.

In order to improve the competitiveness and export orientation, the official exchange rate was gradually adjusted towards the free market rate and more and more imports were diverted to the secondary free exchange rate (called Wage Earners' Scheme). At on stage the Taka was made fully convertible. Almost all the South Asian countries have undertaken similar trade reforms (see table 1 for details of trade and exchange rate reforms across South Asia). While it is quite possible that the impact of the trade related macro policy reforms on the changing gender roles and status may have been significant either ways (i.e. positive or negative), but there are not many attempts at systematic documentations of the same. The growing privatisation, marketisation, informalization and internationalization of the economy which have been accompanying these reforms have been shifting the balance of power among different social groups, shattering old alliance and giving rise to new configuration. Obviously, these have serious consequences for the vulnerable groups which include women as well.

Situation of Women in Different economic roles: Gender Inequalities

The situation of women continue to be dismal despite some successful micro interventions in favour of them. The macro policy analysis has not yet made gender equality the central concern for development. The planning and investment priorities are, yet to be reoriented to develop gender sensitive strategies. The Fourth Five Year Plan of Bangladesh acknowledged that an overwhelming majority of women in Bangladesh are illiterate, malnourished, poor and deprived. By tradition and cultural norms, women enjoy much lower status compared to men. The discrimination in the treatment of male and female starts at birth and continues throughout the different phases of life. Gender inequality is established through socio-economic inequality and

distribution of authority and assets between sexes as determined by the family organization and stratification of society. Even within the same socio-economic class, women are worse off than men in nutritional, health, educational and social status. Women's roles are generally limited to the domestic roles of a daughter, wife or mother in the family. The nutritional and health status of women and girls remained extremely poor. In Bangladesh boys under five years of age receive 16 per cent more food than girls of that age group and girls faced a greater risk of malnutrition in times of famine (UNCTD 1991).

The daily per capita calorie intake by woman (1599 K Cal) is lower than the same by men (1927 K Cal) which also highlights the higher incidence of chronic, long term malnutrition among woman (Bhattacharya 1994). Contrary to global norms, the life expectancy at birth is lower for female in Bangladesh. Average marriage age is 18 year. Female wages are generally lower than male wages for similar work.

Table 1: Policy reforms in Selected South Asian Countries

Countries	Trade Reforms	Exchange Rate Reform
1. Bangladesh	System of export incentives depended by introducing bonded warehouses, duty drawback schemes and back-to-back letter of credit. Quantitative restrictions on imports liberalized considerably: 193 to 112 items in 1993 and about 300 items by the end of the present fiscal year. Level and structure of tariff rates improved: Presently only two products (cigarette paper and alcoholic beverages) still have tariffs over 100 per cent.	Dual exchange rate system abolished in 1992. The Taka is freely convertible for current account transactions

Wage rate for women in Bangladesh are about 58 per cent of men's and go down up to 43 per cent of men's during the slack season.

The contribution of women to the production of goods and services have remained under valued because most of these activities have been provided on a non-monetized basis. However, recently rural poor women are defying tradition out of economic necessity and are seeking employment to supplement their family income.

According to the Labour Force Survey (1989) 20.90 million women were in the civilian labour force which constitutes 41.4 per cent of total civilian labour force. In 1985/86 there were 3.20 million women in the labour force. Note of caution here is that the activities which in 1985/86 were not counted are counted in 1989 as economic activity which drastically increased the participation rate of female labour. Out of 20.90 million female labour, only 1.50 million are of urban female labour. Self employment in rural areas and wage employment in urban areas are the major economic activities of female labour force in Bangladesh. Agriculture, Forestry and Fishery sector is the largest employer of female labour force (90 per cent). Production, Transport and service sectors are second most important sectors (7 per cent). Only 8000 out of 20,762,000 female has been in

the administrative jobs. It should be mentioned that this pattern of female labour force has been changing rapidly. At present around 800,000 female workers are working in the Ready Made Garments (RMG) and it is interesting to note that around 84 per cent of the workers are female workers in the garments industries (World Bank 1994).

Rural Women and Their Work:

Women are at present actively taking part in the field agriculture of surpassing their traditional boundary of post-harvesting. The work of NGOs and Grameen Bank revealed that rural women have the potential of becoming important food producers and earning an adequate income if they are provided with the necessary access to credit, skills and human developments training. (Rothschild and Mahmud 1989). Increased incidence of female headed households resulted in women's active role in monetized economy. In addition, men's increasing rural out-migration has left women as farm managers of marginal

employs 77 per cent of the women industrial employees (Bhattacharya 1994). Female employees share of the total wage bill in the manufacturing sector remained 8 per cent. Female-male wage differential is 49 per cent but this gap has been much lower in the export oriented industries. Majumder and Zohir (1993) found in a sample survey that women workers are young and the proportion of female workers belonging to the reproductive age group 20-30 years of age is 46 per cent. Only 61 per cent of women workers got a written job contract where as 73 per cent of male workers got the same. Vertical mobility of female labour remains very narrow and horizontal mobility sometimes results in lower wage for women workers.

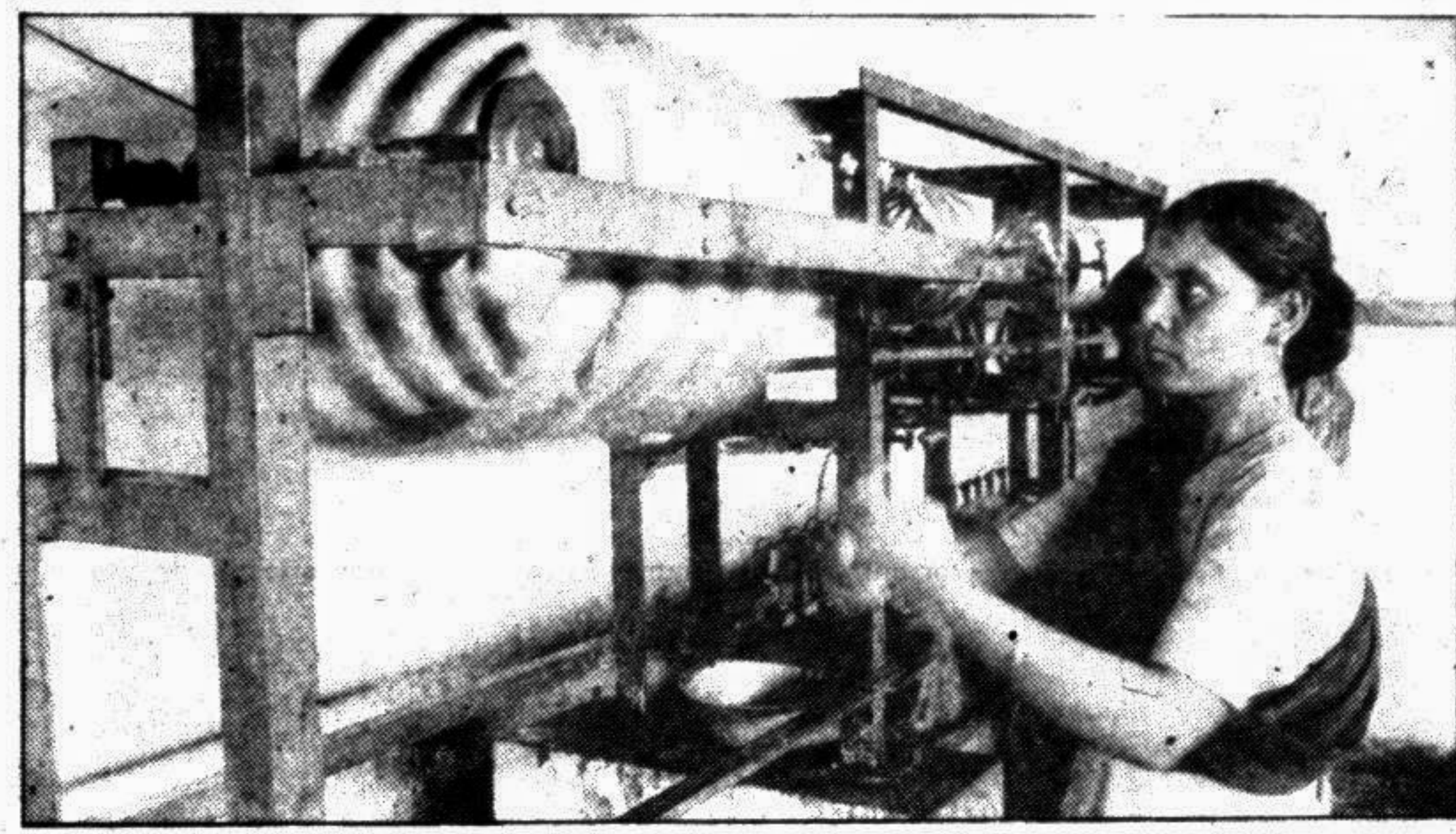
Married women remained more mobile and earn comparatively more than unmarried women and the presence of young children did not hinder their mobility. So they concluded that the characteristics peculiar to female sex seem to be losing strength in hindering women's employment.

and small holdings. The participation of women in small scale fishery is quite substantial. Marketing of fish in the coastal areas is predominantly in the hands of women. (Rothschild and Mahmud 1989).

In some parts of Bangladesh, women take part in weeding, harvesting activities. Gender disparity in wage rates in these activities is quite evident. In rabi season of 1992, the male wage rate was 35 Tk/day whereas the female wage rate was 25 Tk/day in Dinajpur, a northern district of Bangladesh. (IFPRI-CIMMYT Wheat Farm Survey 92-93). The employers argued that although the productivity differential was minimal, the weak bargaining power of women labour force resulted in these disparity.

Urban Women and Their Work:

The female workers accounted for 14 per cent of total manufacturing employees in 1988-89 in Bangladesh (Bhattacharya, 1994 calculated using CMI). Participation of women worker in joint venture projects were highest (35 per cent per unit), followed by Public sectors (20 per cent). Most of the urban women workers are engaged in garments, textiles, pharmaceuticals, electronics and fish processing. Sectoral distribution of female manufacturing employment remains very skewed where garments sector alone



Defying tradition to supplement family income

Impact of Trade Policy Reforms on Women:

The impact of trade policies on women can be examined by looking at the incentive structures of the industries where women comprise the major part of employees. Moreover, the impact of increasing productive activities in both agriculture and industry is supposed to exert great influence on women. Liberalization of economy that reduces the anti-export bias coupled with the international relocation of low-skilled assembly operation in the LDCs resulted in the spec-

ular growth of export oriented garments, food processing and electronic assembly lines in Bangladesh. Since female labour force has been suitable for assembly-oriented activities and light and less skill intensive works, demand for female labour force increased sharply and women proved equal to the daunting task of regimented life in the urban areas breaking the social barriers. But their working condition remains pathetic and their rights as female industrial workers have not been protected. The ILO conventions on labour laws have not been implemented and no serious efforts have been made to raise the consciousness for the rights. The trade unions too, in the new context of globalisation, have lost their strength and status and do not always actively pursue the concerns of women workers in the garments and other industries. The cases of long hours, poor public health facilities and even deaths due to fire in the factories have been reported in Bangladesh. Due to excessive expansion of capacity in the initial days, threat of imposition of quota restrictions, frequent work stoppages for political problems, the garment manufacturing units, except a few, can be under perpetual threat of temporary closure. This may result in cycles of lay-off and re-employment of workers. But not all of them can get reemployment. Women find it particularly difficult to surviving in an urban setting without jobs, even for a short period. The urban life-styles acquired through employment in garments factories make it difficult for them to revert to

earlier status as well. The liberalization of trade has also encouraged expansion in fish and shrimp exports. The proportion of female labour is substantial at the processing stage of fish sector. Commercialization of this sector, while eroded the ecological reserve and traditional livelihoods and safety net for most rural women living in fish shrimp production and processing zone, the conventional market mechanism allowing market price of their labour could not be ensured either the use of force and lack of sensitivity to fragile environ-

ment have very often been undermining the status and security of women (See Rahman et al. 1994). The protected inefficient industries have been worst hit by the recent trade policy reforms. Earlier, the burden of inefficiency fell on the consumers through higher prices and many of the infant industry became perpetual infant industry due to the aegis of tariff protection. Women working in the jute sector, handloom sector and other small and cottage industries got hurt. The competition from abroad resulted in the virtual extinction of some of these activities. Although it is claimed that the loss in employment in those sectors has been adequately compensated in the expanding export related sectors, there has not been an indepth study on this aspect of labour adjustment. In fact, we get evidence contrary to such assertion. Thus Mahmud and Mahmud (1989) indicate that liberalisation some fabric types and the inflow of smuggled Indian fabrics (e.g. Sarees) have been seriously jeopardising the growth prospects of home-based handloom industries.

Liberalization measures for imported agricultural input resulted in import of huge volume of irrigation pumps, the crucial element of HYV technology. In 1988, the standardization requirement abolished and tariff rates were reduced for irrigation pump and it resulted in a huge jump in the irrigated area hence production of food crops. These higher volume of food grain production accompanied by modern grain processing huller displaced a significant number of women workers who were engaged in that processing with traditional 'Dhaki'. But greater irrigation and higher production in-

Agri-Strategies Giving Dividend

by Md Nazmul Huda Khan

"A LLAH has been kind enough. He looked upon us. This year's crop production was very good. From the sale we could repay the due loans. We could do something for the family" — said a passenger in a public bus plying from Mirpur to Gulistan. "So this year's sugarcane and paddy yield has been very good," added the former sitting beside. "If this trend continues, Inshaallah we shall have no problem," said the later. These were the chit-chats between two bus passengers

pand technologies for boosting crop yield by using fertilizer and irrigation facilities. (b) crop diversification for catering the requirement of the people and giving priorities for production of food grain, oil seeds, pulse (lentil), potato, vegetables, fruits and roots, spices, etc.. (c) adoption and implementation of policies for easy availability of agricultural inputs and maximum utilization of land and water, and channelling procurement and distribution of inputs, (d) increasing investment for raising



Agricultural strategies to boost profits

from Mirpur to Gulistan. From their chit-chats one could realise from the sit behind that they were sugar cane growers from Rajshahi who came to Dhaka for their purchase. Yes, timely disbursement of agri-loans, adequate and smooth supply of inputs, better procurement and distribution system if couple, with sincere efforts of the growers which they generally are, agricultural production can be boost upto the coveted height by best utilisation of our man, land, water and other resources.

During the fiscal year 1993-94 Bangladesh has been able to grow 197.20 lakh metric tons (MT) of foodgrains against the targeted 205.50 lakh tons. In 1992-93 the food grain yield was 195.17 lakh tons. So this year's production is 1.04% more than the last year. Sugarcane yield during the last year was 90 lakh metric tones that is 19.89 per cent more compared to the previous years yield. The yield in 1992-93 was 75.07 lakh tones. Similarly high yield trend was maintained in potato 8.38 per cent, cotton 2.77 per cent, pulse (dal) 25.50 per cent, oil seed 26.05 per cent, and sweet potato 33.64 per cent more growth than the previous 1992-93 fiscal year. Of course, our major cash crop jute growth was 11.57 per cent less than the 1992-93. This year's production is only 43.50 lakh bale against 49.19 lakh bale of the previous year.

This success is the outcome of the strategies adopted for development of crop and small irrigation sub-sectors. The strategies set for the Fourth Five Year Plan were: (a) to ex-

income of less privileged poor rural community and adoption and implementation of the projects for landless, small and marginal farmers with a view to alleviate poverty, (e) reduction of import and expansion of base of export of agricultural products, (f) giving priorities to labour intensive agro-based export-oriented industries and ensuring availability of technology for the purpose; and (g) human resource development with greater involvement of women folk in agricultural activities.

In the Fourth Five Year Plan the Yearly National Growth has been fixed at 5 per cent while growth of agriculture sector has been fixed at 3.5 per cent. Against this, taking 1989-90 static, the growth in agriculture was 2.4 per cent in 1991-92, 4.4 per cent in 1992-93, 28.93 per cent of the Gross Domestic Products (GDP) in 1992-93 came from crop sub-sector alone, which is 79 per cent of the total production in terms of valuation.

Ours is an agrarian country, 75 per cent people directly or indirectly are dependent on agriculture. 40 per cent of the national income comes from this sector. The country earns 60 per cent of its foreign currency through export of agricultural products. In the industrialisation of the country that agriculture plays the most vital role can hardly be over emphasized. To pave the way towards a sustained prosperity and progress, we need to make out ways and means to combat deterrent natural calamities and adopt updatate strategies to further augment production. — PID Feature

DRAMA, Music, Song and Stories. People's theatre has enlivened many evenings in villages throughout Bangladesh for hundreds of years. Though illiterate and poor, peasant farmers and their families enjoy watching plays and listening to singers perform on some open space by the light of the full moon as they rest after their day's labours. Today, the poor have no access to books, no electricity to run radios or televisions, and live far from cinema halls. Outdoor drama still provides the entertainment and culture in their lives. Everyone needs amusement in their lives, and people go to the theatre to enjoy themselves.

But people also need education. But the poor peasant has little free time to learn how to read and write, how to use fertilisers and tubewells, how to cope with diarrhoea, how to grow vegetables, how to attend meetings, and how to do so many other things. These women and men, and their children, can only listen and learn in the evenings after their work is done.

RDERS, understanding the poor person's need for education and recreation but the lack of time and energy to do both, has solved the problem. To reach the people with their many and varied messages, RDERS staff perform for the villagers. The actors communicate with singing and dancing, comedy and tragedy. Through the use of people's theatre, RDERS is able to put over development ideas and explain new situations and practices in a friendly, simple and non-frightening way.

These plays and verses are spoken in local dialects, re-

People's Theatre A Tool for Development

by Golam Mostafa

lecting real-life situations that labourers and landless people understand, allowing them to absorb the points easily. Through such cultural events, RDERS clients learn about a wide variety of socio-economic issues: polygamy and wife-beating, immunisation and leprosy, nutrition and hygiene, girl's education and people's organisations.

One song, for example, sings of how a woman, whose husband has refused to build a latrine, becomes ill, being unable to relieve herself in the fields during the day because

of the social and religious taboos about men seeing her body. A simple message; the women relate to it, and the men understand better why RDERS encourages them to build latrines near their houses. Or a play, as in the following scene, shows the benefits to a farmer in joining an RDERS group.

RDERS has used People's Theatre over 300 times in the last two years. The cultural groups, made up of about 30 staff with talent in singing and acting, have devised over 20 plays and 15 songs of love and

hate, struggles and pleasures, life as the people experience it. Some traditional groups from among the local people have also been supported by RDERS. Given in the late evenings, the events have been well attended. Afterwards, performers, development workers, and the villagers sit around and talk about the issues raised. It is RDERS' experience that People's Theatre is a low-cost, approachable, and successful method of disseminating its messages. What's more, its fun.

Scene:

(Kalim and his wife are sitting in front of his hut. Their neighbour Rahim passes by.)
Rahim: Hello, brother Kalim? What are you and your wife doing?
Kalim: Hello, brother Rahim, we are praying to God for rain. You know all the crops in our field were burnt because of drought. Then, I borrowed money from 'Mohajan' to save our lives. This year there is still no rain. If no crops come, how will we live? How will I repay the money? So we are praying to God for rain. But where are you coming from?
Rahim: I'm coming from Bashir's house. An RDERS worker invited me to attend a meeting there.
Kalim: Why? Meeting for what? What did you talk about?
Rahim: The worker talked about our problems, that we are not getting good yields due to drought, how we are always having to borrow money.
Kalim: But, what can we do? Attending meetings! What does he know?
Rahim: He told us that we should irrigate our fields, use fertilisers. Then we'll get good yields. And RDERS had made a cheap, bamboo, pump to do this. He says we should use compost fertiliser.
Kalim: What is compost fertiliser? I've never heard of it.
Rahim: You see! You should have come to the meeting. But I'll tell you. Compost fertiliser is from all our rotten food and household rubbish. If we prepare it properly, and use it like the RDERS man says, then we'll get good yields. (Pause) So maybe we should go to RDERS meetings as well as praying to God for rain. Let me join you tonight, Kalim, and next week you can come to Bashir's house, too.



Spreading messages through drama

Aquaculture to Bridge the Fish Supply Gap

by Juan L Mercado

C AN aquaculture ponds — in Bangladesh and other Asian countries — refill, in 1995, dinner plates partially-emptied by reduced catches in over-exploited fishing ground?

For the moment yes, says the top aquaculture scientist of the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) in Asia: Inre Csavas, a silver-haired Hungarian, based in Bangkok.

But in just five years, larger populations, able to afford improved diets, will sharply lack up demand, FAO studies show this could outrisp supplies, possibly by as much as 19.6 million tons.

This gap will also be partly due to the steep decline in marine fish landings. Maximum sustainable levels of fishing were breached, the United Nations agency thinks, in 1989. (In the Atlantic, Mediterranean and Black Seas, FAO reports marine catches plummeted by 25% to 53% from their peak.)

"Can aquaculture fill this gap?", the towering (6-foot-4) Csavas asks. "Or will the next generation have to face drastically reduced fish supplies?" Asia accounts for 90% of the world's aquaculture output. But alone this region will not be able to fill this supply/demand gap," Mr Csavas told DEPTHNews.

to do so in the near future. Thus, fish prices in Malaysia, Vietnam and other places have surged.

If this decline persists, then per capita fish supply could start to slide, even before the year 2000, the FAO specialist said. "Considering the critical status of marine stocks in some parts of the Pacific, this is real danger."

A transition from hunting to breeding, from fishing to aquaculture, becomes inevitable for Asia, Mr Csavas adds. "In fact, it has already started."

Aquaculture is a mature industry in Asia, the FAO specialist noted. Paradoxically, it remains a major source of protein and income for millions of impoverished small farmers. Asian governments must transfer new technology to them through effective extension.

Asian scientists report breakthroughs in broadening selection: mud crab, reclaw crayfish, etc. In the field, innovative improvements in techniques and culture systems have evolved.

That seabass farmers, for instance, release tilapia into brackish water ponds to feed their stocks, Filipino catfish farmers developed a similar cost-cutting technique. And the Magsaysay Award-winning Asian Institute of Technology mass produces cheap filter-feeder fish in sewage fed pond.

Today, the 'frontier science' of biotechnology al-

ready provides new vaccines, immunostimulants; improved larval feeds; hormonal manipulation.

"In the next century, genetic improvement of culture stocks will become the key area of development," the FAO scientist predicts.

Already, there have been promising genetic improvements of tilapia, common carp, channel catfish and salmon. Other areas of research that could pay off in the 21st century include: freshwater prawn farming; marine fish propagation and brood culture.

Aquaculture's potential, however, has been sapped by ecological problems, in a new paper. Mr Csavas says: environmental problems erupt where ponds, cages or pens overload the carrying capacity of sites.

Social disruptions, for example, ripped through polluted shrimp farms in Taiwan, Thailand and China. Similar problems haunted fishermen in Laguna de Bay of the Philippines and Japan's Seto Inland Sea.

Environmental problems fester mainly in coastal zones. Significantly, these zones provide well over 56% of the world's production. "Sustainability is increasingly an issue where environmental limits are breached," the FAO scientist notes.

For the 21st century, inland aquaculture offers the more feasible option for investments. Decisive action is needed. Otherwise, the supply gap could widen to 37 million tons by the year 2010.

— DEPTHNews