

NGOs

The Moment and the Movement

by Khushi Kabir

In order to understand the vitality and achievement of the NGO sector in Bangladesh, acknowledging the conditions that led to its present stage is essential. Development today talks of participation and empowerment as key factors towards sustainable development. Bangladesh has a unique position internationally. It is often quoted as an example where NGOs have had innovative and positive experiences in realizing the goal of sustainable development for the poor, through the process of empowerment.

The very existence of Bangladesh lies in a long history of people's active participation in many movements, culminating in the great war of liberation of 1971. When the average citizen i.e. peasants, workers, students and all categories within society take up activities and actions which lead to the establishment of their own identity and their own right as a nation, it is empowerment. This forms the basis for whatever success NGOs in Bangladesh may have achieved. The 1971 War of Liberation had its impacts on different categories of people in many different ways. After the war, the task of rebuilding the nation began. A group of people having contributed to the War of Liberation in many different ways, felt it was also their role to come back and continue the work that was started during 1971. In their newly independent nation. Though at that time few international NGOs started working, it was the work of a few Bangladeshi Nationals that made the most impact. Thus, the stage for the development of the Bangladeshi NGO sector was set. A lot of young graduates, who otherwise would have gone into white collar jobs, decided to gain experience and use their time by working in the remotest rural areas, towards the development of the newly born nation. A lot of these graduates, working in the rural areas, using the opportunity to really understand the country, where the majority of people live, where the real problem lies, felt that it was their role and their mission to continue this work further.

based in the rural areas working with the rural people. The work obviously began with the whole question of rehabilitation i.e. housing, agriculture, fishing etc. It was at this time, the realisation that the village was not a homogeneous unit, that the village was stratified into different classes of people based on economic and social backgrounds; along with the concern that women were marginalised and completely left out of most processes actually dawned. It became necessary to specifically design programmes aimed at meeting the needs of the disadvantaged, and the question of targeting specific interest groups began.

The year 1975 was declared as the International Year for women and the beginning of the Decade for Women. The world-wide consciousness regarding women and the need for specially looking at projects designed for women created a momentum, the impact of which was felt in our country; particularly among the NGOs. Special projects and programmes designed for women were thought up and women were also encouraged to start work in the rural areas.

All NGOs working with women have found that women are the more active and positive partners in the development process. It is not only easier to work with women, but that women are the ones looking at development in a much more sustainable manner. The NGOs realized that it is these women who would be bringing about changes in the rural structure. This may be why the NGOs find that most of the people they work with are women, because women are willing to make a change.

The mid-eighties began to see the NGOs having different approaches. It also saw the growth of a large number of very small local-level NGOs content to work within their own locality, the firm entrenching of mid level NGOs with a particular focus and ideology beginning to engage on particular sectors of programme; and the very large NGOs with integrated programmes with the overall focus

of affecting development processes rationally.

The programmes themselves too varied in their approaches, as well as content. Yet credit as a means of economic empowerment encouraged by many organisations, is also confronted by others who address economic empowerment based on the group's own collective savings, using whatever local resources are available, rather than depending on external NGO-based delivery systems. There are debates and discussion between the different groups even with the same focus. The experiences are different, the ways of approaching the problems are also different. This is positive, because this shows that all the NGOs are based on a very healthy competition, and a healthy interaction of different types of approaches is also possible.

Almost all the NGOs work through groups. Because it is the group's sense of cohesiveness, coupled with the group experiences that build solidarity. The strength and the image of the poor as strong, vibrant and positive members of the community is how the NGOs perceive empowerment along with the question of ensuring services and resources that the poorer citizens of this country are now getting access to.

The government has many programmes meant for the general public and there are others that aim specifically at the poor. A lot of these programmes do not reach the poor for obvious reasons. Mainly, due to lack of facilities right at the grassroots. The NGOs' strength lies in the fact that they recruit graduates to work directly at the village, so the access of the villagers is much more easily guaranteed through the building up of group strength and solidarity. The other area the NGOs are emphasising is an attempt to influence the government and policy-makers on matters that affect the poor and that is sensitive to the majority of our population.

It is observed that in areas where NGOs are working,

easier access to and better receipt of services have been assured. Looking at the whole question of governance; of the poor being aware of the rights; determining their local representatives; addressing issues affecting women and the poor mean greater accountability. The poor through the NGOs intervention, are able to look at themselves as positive and active citizens of this country, as people who are contributing to the economy and to the well-being of society. This then, brings up the whole question of development process that displaces people, that degrades the environment and exacerbates poverty. The NGOs act in a manner so that people can voice their opinion and ensure that it reaches through organised discussions, debates and other forums such as the media, to policy makers, and to those who are able to influence society. With the NGOs as a catalyst ensuring that the voice of the people, be heard at the national level so that development concepts are people-centered and that the participation of the people for whom development is aimed at is achieved. This is what the spirit of the Bangladesh's Liberation was all about.

Lastly, the uniqueness of the NGO sector in Bangladesh has been its ability to come together and form their own association. This is probably one of the few countries where the association of NGOs is as united and strong, looking at the interest of the community as a whole, and the interest of the poor in particular through the Association of Development Agency in Bangladesh — ADAB.

The task of strengthening the ADAB, looking at its role and that of the NGOs as a sector through it is a process we have learned from the NGO-organised groups. We can see that the whole process of development has now reached a stage where the government and the NGOs can sit together in partnership to discuss what are the major issues confronting us in attacking poverty, what are the commonalities and how can they be performed within the development plans as determined by our government.

Reminiscences

A Message for Moulana Bhashani in Delhi: Meat and Vegetables For Our Soldiers

by T Hossain

A National Committee was formed to supervise the war, with Moulana Bhashani as its Chairman and Prime Minister Tajuddin Ahmed as Secretary. The whereabouts of the Moulana was however not known. Kazi Zafar Ahmad used to come to me after to know about him since intimacy with the Moulana was well known. I could not ask anyone in the government about his whereabouts and had to keep away from political attachment.

One day, Foreign Minister Khondkar Mushtaque Ahmad asked me to go to Delhi to see the Moulana. I was told that the Moulana was ill and was being treated in the All India Institute of Medical Science. I was provided with a letter and some money to hand over to the Moulana and was asked to buy some fruits for him.

The Bangladesh Government set up an office in Delhi with producers Shahabuddin and Amjad Hossain. These two officers set the example of defection from Pakistani Embassies by defecting from the Delhi High Commission.

Amjad Hossain took me to the Moulana around 3 PM. He was kept in the Prime Minister's suite in the institute. It was a spacious, 5 room suite. The Moulana was alone and could not believe his eyes when he saw me. It had been a lonely convalescence. It was apparent that he was receiving the best medical treatment. A dignified distance was maintained between the patient and staff. Although he received all the courtesy and respect as a VIP patient, was never discussed. The Moulana was a friend of Pakistan. She dissociated from Bangladesh war of independence.

The Moulana had to be watched. Under no circumstances could he be allowed to express any political opinion except in support of Bangladesh. Even if he was allowed to issue any statement, it had to be censored. So, it

was better to keep him in safe custody. And there was no better place than the Prime Minister's suite in All India Institute of Medical Science. The Private Secretary of the Indian Prime Minister used to pay two visits regularly round the clock at 9 AM and 5 PM every day. He used to bring greetings and flowers from the Prime Minister.

The Moulana jumped out of his bed to hug me. It was heart, felt, full of warmth. His main concern was the freedom fighters. He very eagerly asked me: how are the boys?

I did not answer directly. I had long talks with the Moulana about Indian history. He was my patient in Kumudini Hospital for nearly 75 days for the treatment of his intractable urinary fistula following his prostatectomy operation in Dhaka Medical College during early 1967. He had been in the VIP cabin in the 1000 bedded Kumudini Hospital where I was the Chief Surgeon at the time. The roof in front of Moulana's cabin looked like a lawn. We used to chat every evening from 7 PM until midnight on all subjects from birth control to Banprastha, India's past as I knew from the study of Classics, were discussed with the Moulana at that time. I began to talk about Kurukshetra, Gita, Krishna, Arjun, Yudhishthir, Duryadhan and so on.

In reply to his only question how are the boys, — I said: "Our boys are used to meat and fish. They are now sheltered in the jungle camps with inadequate protection from the insects. They get rationed chapati and dal or fried potatoes. They need good food. Their health is our only resource. I wish, they could get some meat and fish."

The Moulana got the point. He confirmed: This was the most correct prescription. He assured me, he could do something about it and asked me to

wait until Prime Minister's Secretary arrival. I was introduced with glowing tributes and was asked to be present there next morning at 9 AM.

The next morning I was taken to Prime Minister's residence. She saw me twice before. Personal relations with her became informal and more social. My earlier introduction to her was done by Dr Triguna Sen, her Political Advisor on Bangladesh. Dr Sen had an outstanding career. He was the Education Minister of Pandit Nehru. He was from Kularua, Sylhet. His introduction of me to the Prime Minister was very impressive. Manubhai Bhimani was a philanthropist social worker who had free access to the privacy of Nehru's family.

The private secretary was taking me to the Prime Minister's living room. The Prime Minister was met at the exit door of her residence. As soon as she saw me, she raised her folded hands and said: Namaste. Doctor Shahab: What is your problem? I replied with a smile: this time, it is a food problem. She said: Please meet Manikshaw. The Private Secretary took me out and I caught a glimpse of the spacious lawn. They were about 50 visitors located in different spots. Mrs Gandhi would visit them all in an hour. Mrs Gandhi would take a group photo in different costumes as she walked in front of the waiting visitors. Incidentally, she was shot down at the very spot where I met her, in 1984.

The Indian C in C seemed to have had the information of my visit to him. He received me in front of his residence and showed me the way to the living room where I sat on a cushion. He took his seat on the carpeted floor. I got up. He looked at me. I said, "general, please do not kid me. If you sit there, I'll sit by your side." He said, "doctor, you are a Secretary of a Government. I am only a soldier to take orders from a

Secretary." I replied, "you are the C in C of the fourth largest army in the world. I am a Secretary of a refugee Government. I have come to beg for food. My freedom fighters need meat and fish at least two days every week. Otherwise, they may defect."

He said, "Alright doctor, it will be arranged but it may take as long as six weeks to ensure supply all along the border. In some places, it may be delayed. I replied said that this was understandable although six weeks was a very long period during war time especially when the morale of the soldiers was at stake."

He made the arrangement within a fortnight and the boys were very happy. They got plenty of fish and meat, each for two days.

I was taken back to the Moulana's suite. He was delighted to have an account of my performance and remarked: you look like a fish in water every where! I wish you all the success. Please tell Mushtaque and Tajuddin that they are playing with the destiny of a nation.

I took leave. I wish I had been assigned to look after the Moulana! The Moulana did not discuss any politics with me or any strategy. He did not desire anything either. I felt like a real captive in vast India. I'd be free if only I got my little Bangladesh.

As I was flying back, the air hostess asked me: "Are you a vegetarian?" I spontaneously answered, "yes!" She looked at me and asked: "Are you sure?" I replied, — I was not but you made me so. Please supply me a plate of vegetarian food; it is very tasty!"

Later, I was sent to Kagmari during the last week of August 1975, with another packet to the Moulana. This time, the Moulana said, — a person like you should not serve as a Secretary. If you want, I am tell to make you a minister. I politely replied that I had no such ambition.

Reactions

Bangladesh at War— A Smokescreen of Confusion

by Major General MSA Bhuiyan, psc

about the way Subed Ali led his troops in this attack. Although the attack was conducted under several constraints, the overall performance of Subed Ali in leading the operation was unsatisfactory and demoralising for the troops. (3) Subed Ali was the next senior to command but I could not repose confidence on (sic) Subed Ali any longer after what he did in the road block North-East of Chandura.

The writer, by way of explaining the reasons for this, says, "Subed Ali, confirmed having completed the road block when remaining battalion had reached Paikpara near Chandura." Besides, the writer has made some sarcastic comments on valiant freedom fighter Dula Miah. If the writer's assertions were based on facts and logic, one would have had little to complain about. The unfortunate bit in the whole story is that General Shafullah has given vent not only to his proclivity way of looking at condition, but has also permitted his imagination to run wild. I raised the question of the battles of Kumira and Dharmagarh, the blockade at Chandura and the sacrifice of Dula Miah in my book, "Muktijuddhey Noi Maash," first published in 1972. I might note here that in 1972, once I had completed writing my book, I approached the then Chief of Army Staff Colonel Shafullah for his opinion. He went through the manuscript and advised me to include a portion about the battle for Akhaura in the book, which I accordingly did. Once that was done, the army chief gave me permission to have my book printed. I have acknowledged my gratitude to General (then Colonel) Shafullah in the pages of my book. I did the same in the case of Group Captain Islam. Now the point remains one: had there been any inconsistency, or information devoid of facts, in my book, General Shafullah would surely have not given me the authority to publish "Muktijuddhey Noi Maash!" The amazing thing is that what he had approved earlier was contradicted by him later in his book.

The author of Bangladesh At War has accused me of having left my soldiers to their fate in Kumira on the particular night in question. However, he has also admitted that the reason behind my act was best known to me. Of course he had little

every effort made, it was not possible for me to return to Kumira. Later I came to know from Freedom Fighter Major Rafiq, Bir Uttam that it was his troops under whose mistaken attack I had come on my attempt to trek back to Kumira. The reason was that the jeep I was travelling in belonged to the occupation forces. The author of Bangladesh At War was yet to decide on his course of action in Joydevpur. From Joydevpur Shafullah went to Mymensingh. About a week after I began the battle for Kumira, Major Shafullah joined the War of Liberation. It is therefore not natural that he would not be aware of the real picture at the time.

I have already said that I started the battle for Kumira on March 26. I directed this battle through gathering a force of 102 men coming from the East Bengal Regiment, EPR and police. Apart from a single heavy machine gun, a few light machine guns and some rifles, there was little of ammunition my men had. I had to approach the SP, DIG and DC to solicit arms for my soldiers. Since I happened to be an army Captain, some rifles were made available. At the other end, the enemy had artillery, mortar and heavy weapons. Eight hundred well-trained soldiers of 24 FF Regiment were posed for action against us. But we confronted this force with indomitable will and succeeded in wiping out 152 of the enemy, including their commanding officer Col. Shahpur Jan Khan and a lieutenant. Many others were injured. Col. Shafullah has mentioned this exploit in his book, but has given no credit to anyone for it. After two hours of fighting, we exhausted our meagre ammunition. At that point, I had to explore ways of getting more men and material. First I went to Sitakunda, where my aim was to establish communication with EPR Captain Rafiq. I had the firm belief that from him I would get some amount of arms to carry on my struggle. Sadly I did not find Rafiq there. Like one possessed, I rushed to Chittagong. But when fate goes haywire, it does so all the time. In Chittagong too, Rafiq was missing. After that, I started retracing my steps back to Kumira. On the way back, I came under attack twice. Consequently, despite

circumstances that Lt Badiuzzaman and Subedar Chand Miah found themselves wrenched away from the main platoon. At the same time, our wireless set went out of order. Unable to deal with nature, four soldiers lost consciousness. Subedar Chand Miah lost consciousness owing to snakebite. Even after this, we waded through water and came close to the camp of the enemy. "H Hour" was close at hand. In the meantime, after a lot of efforts, the wireless set was somehow made workable. It had been agreed that prior to the attack, necessary artillery support would be given. In reality, apart from insignificant number of artillery fires, no credible support was forthcoming. Major Nasir Uddin refers to this aspect of the war in his "Juddhey Juddhey Shadinata." He has said that the camp of the enemy at Dharmagarh was well secured, nature was hostile and mudslides together with ceaseless rain were common. It is clear from such observations that no commander, no matter how skilled, could order an operation in such conditions.

The comments of the author of "Bangladesh At War" about the battle of Dharmagarh are contradictory. There have been many in history, including Napoleon and Hitler, who have had to succumb to the ravages of nature. General Shafullah should not have been unaware of this fact. Yet he has said that the overall performance of Subed Ali in leading the operation was unsatisfactory and demoralising for the troops.

The reality is something else. The writer has revealed some facts, and at the same time concealed some others. He has spoken of difficult conditions, but he has refrained from going into a description of those. He has papered over the wrong decisions and directives that he made regarding Dharmagarh. I feel I must set the record straight in the interest of history.

Dharmagarh was the first conventional battle in our sector. The plan was to launch the attack on September 3. It was a deep dark night in autumn. There were high winds, ceaseless rain and an unsettling cold. Then there was the possibility of snakes commonly found in hilly areas. Hardly any object could be seen at a distance of a yard. It was in these

the night of 28th September under the Joint Command of an Indian Brigadier and Lt Col Shafullah. The attacking force consisted of one Battalion of 18 Rajputs, one field regiment artillery, one heavy mortar battery and one thousand freedom fighters. Despite having such a large force and strong fire power the attack was not only a total failure, but at one stage it became very difficult to extricate our troops. In that attack 1600 artillery shells were fired and the time taken to extricate them was seven hours. In the action two, including Major Sharma, the company commander, died and four were injured. The writer was ruthless in bringing aspersion on my attack at Dharmagarh with 135 inexperienced men, whereas he very cunningly avoided his own failure with a very large force against the same enemy. What does it mean?

The criticism that a commander has levelled at one of his under command officers regarding the Chandura episode lacks objectivity of any kind. The writer, should, I believe, have at least asked me before going into his reminiscences about the facets of the battle. The reason why I say this is that both of us are still alive. It is quite unfortunate that in the last eighteen years the author of "Bangladesh At War" has never once raised any

question with me about the battle for Chandura. Instead, he has in his book tried to pass responsibility for his failure on to my shoulders.

The fact is that on the order of my Battalion Commander Major Nasim I reached Kana — Buduntal at about 1000 hrs on 6th December with my company. There I took up a road block position awaiting for the enemy. Around 2:30 pm Lieutenant Kabir came to me and handed over a written order from Major Nasim asking me to abandon the present position and take up new position south of Chandura bridge. Accordingly, as I was planning to move to the new position, two vehicles belonging to the occupation forces sped past towards Chandura/Shahbazpur. These two vehicles caught Lt Col Shafullah unaware from the rear while he was moving on the road towards Shahbazpur. This turned into an armed conflict, resulting into two deaths and few, including Major Nasim, seriously wounded from our side.

This move of Lt Col Shafullah was non-tactical. To our knowledge he was supposed to be present in Akhaura front. But his sudden appearance on that road at that very moment took many of us by surprise. The whole event took place due to lack of coordina-

tion for which he is solely responsible.

In fact the Chandura event was just an accidental incident. But Major General Shafullah has been trying to depict the same as his heroic action in his different publications for the last 24 years.

Regarding Freedom Fighter Dula Miah, the comments of the writer are regrettable. Dula Miah happens to be one of our valiant freedom fighters. In my book I have spared no pains to pay adequate tribute to this valiant son of the soil. The incident relating to him was one that I solved. Major (at present Major General) Matin and many others were witness to the matter.

On a personal level, I have no wish to denigrate the writer of the book in question. I am not willing to say how many days I saw him at the front, since soldiers are not expected to scrape away at their commonality of purpose. But let me say that I took part in the War of Liberation from an urge that came from somewhere deep inside me. I may add here that among the handful of soldiers who initiated the war in Chittagong to free the country, I happened to be one. That was and remains my pride. I have absolute belief that I shall live with this pride for the rest of my life.

It is difficult to escape the wrath of history if one tries to distort the course of history.



Freedom fighters waiting in ambush.

— Muktijodha Shriti Trust Album.

Courtesy