

Grameen Trust Programme for Research on Poverty Alleviation

# Taking Research into Our Own Hands

There can be no denying that research agendas in Bangladesh, as in many other developing countries, up to the present time, have been very much donor influenced. Poverty alleviation and development issues are decided, in the main, through donor directives and, as such, have perhaps failed to adequately fulfil our own requirements in terms of national demands and people-based needs. The poor of our nation are hardly capable of finding a voice within a framework of externally defined research agendas.

Grameen Bank, by allowing the people of Bangladesh to help themselves, and providing the right environment for self-help and independent thinking, Prof Rehman Sobhan, Chairman of Grameen Trust's Steering Committee, observes. "Donor influence in development research in Bangladesh is seen in the domination of consultancy driven research over academically derived or politically driven research priorities."

participate in research on poverty alleviation. The programme seeks proposals for research projects to fund, from institutions as well as individuals. Individuals may include those who are just starting a research career.

students doing dissertation research or anyone with viable and innovative research ideas. Research topics may cover a wide range of poverty alleviation concerns including the redesigning of poverty programmes, addressing specific macro-policy interventions, redefining allocative priorities and designing pro-poor technologies.

According to many academics in the field of development, while donor driven research has undoubtedly delivered some beneficial effects, it nevertheless remains in keeping with their own interests by contributing more to their particular development agendas. Furthermore, as Prof. Sobhan points out, "Donor driven research is mostly kept invisible not just to the public but even to the professional community in Bangladesh. Much of this research is therefore not tested for its academic worth, functional worth or social relevance in serving the purposes for which it was intended."

He adds, "It is hoped through our programme to be able to invite Bangladeshis to think through their own research goals, independent of the needs of the donors and the demands of the consultancy market. The reach of this programme is too small to transform the dominant culture of research in Bangladesh. But it may accumulate its own critical mass in influencing a broad community of researchers to acquire control over their own research priorities."

## Senators Indicate Support for CBI Parity with NAFTA

by Bruce Odessey, USIA Staff Writer

MEMBERS of the Senate Finance Committee have indicated support for legislation giving imports from Caribbean Basin countries the same US treatment as those given Mexico under the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA).

At a May 15 hearing of the Finance trade subcommittee, Chairman Charles Grassley said the bill would correct unintended consequences from NAFTA, which gives Mexico better US market access than Caribbean countries have for key exports, especially apparel, footwear, leather goods and petroleum.

NAFTA has thus diminished the value of preferential tariff arrangements the United States has with 24 Caribbean countries under the 1983 Caribbean Basin Initiative (CBI).

Companion bills for giving CBI parity with NAFTA are under consideration in the House of Representatives and the Senate.

While the Office of the US Trade Representative (USTR) and House members have worked out their differences in the House bill, which has already been approved in subcommittee, that process has only just begun in the Senate.

Deputy US Trade Representative Charlene Barshefsky told the Senate subcommittee the Clinton administration sought to delete outright one provision in the Senate bill that would authorize the president to reallocate US sugar import quotas to benefit Caribbean countries.

Making such reallocations not only would require giving the president more discretion

than the current US sugar program does, but also would violate US obligations under NAFTA and the World Trade Organization (WTO), she said.

Barshefsky raised concern about another provision, one authorizing the president to negotiate exceptions to the textile rule of origin, called tariff preference levels, allowing US imports of goods produced from foreign fabric but cut in the Caribbean.

Senator John Breaux of Louisiana objected that such a provision could be used by East Asian countries to circumvent their US quotas by transshipments.

Barshefsky said the administration would oppose any legislation requiring tariff preference levels, but could accept a bill simply giving the president discretionary authority to negotiate them.

Both the House and Senate bills would authorize the president to withdraw tariff benefits if USTR reviews made every three years determined that the Caribbean countries had not improved intellectual property, market access and investment protection to US satisfaction.

The parity bills have more narrowly defined standards for these improvements than do the 1980s laws authorizing CBI, Barshefsky said. USTR was unable to conduct such reviews under CBI because of the vague wording, she said.

Still unresolved on either the House or Senate side was the problem of paying for the estimated US tariff revenue loss from CBI parity, estimated at more than \$700 million over five years.

— USIS

by Rashida Ahmad

by the poor themselves, but instead merely shelved for "reference" purposes or stored as yet more development data, then surely something is amiss.

Another consideration that cannot be overlooked is the possible conflict between what is perceived as meriting research by donor countries under their shifting agendas, and country-specific research criteria that are a felt need within a developing country such as Bangladesh. All too often our own research goals go unheeded and unfunded because they do not fall within the scope of internationally sanctioned aid programmes.

The Programme for Research on Poverty Alleviation undertaken by the Grameen Trust is an attempt to address these problems by giving us the opportunity to take research into our own hands.

As such, the programme is very much in keeping with the policy of Grameen, and Prof Yunus' ethos in founding the

ment agenda and national priorities. Furthermore, the Steering Committee comprises fourteen professionals of varying disciplines (including university professors, NGO representatives, social scientists, human rights activists, etc), making it unique among NGOs in Bangladesh, and thus promoting an academically-inspired research environment.

There is a growing belief in developing countries that any concurrence between the research agendas of donor countries and the research priorities of recipient countries is usually a matter of chance rather than due to shared research goals between developed and developing nations.

Erection of low cost housing by women in Bangladesh — just one of the projects funded by the Grameen Trust Programme for Research on Poverty Alleviation.

The Programme for Research on Poverty Alleviation has already funded 35 research projects, four of which are briefly described below. Most of the projects were fully funded for less than fifty thousand taka.

**Vulnerability and Survival Strategies of Women in Disasters in Bangladesh:** Women and children have a higher mortality rate than men in times of disaster. This project looks at specific problems women face, how gender and social power relations make women more physically and economically vulnerable during times of disaster, and what are their methods of crisis coping.

**Appropriate Technology — Scientific Cultivation of 'Mele' for Mat-making:** In the Sathkira area, mele grows wild and has provided a natural resource for a traditional industry. This project tests the feasibility of commercial cropping of mele for increased employment generation particularly among women who are mainly involved in this craft.

**Socio-economic Context of Child Marriage:** An analysis of reasons for the continued prevalence of child marriages in Bangladesh despite government and NGO intervention. It provides case studies with specific reasons in these individual cases and discusses the limits of current strategies for prevention.

**The Adwasis in North Bengal — Limits to Current Credit Strategies:** Systematic oppression has led to a decline in population of the Adwasis from 28 lakh in the '60s to 8 lakh. The Adwasis have no private property rights due to their seasonal migration in search of employment. Much of their produce, from homestead gardening, is therefore appropriated by forest officials, or landowners. In addition their migration limits the effectiveness of many credit strategies which are based on participants residing in one programme throughout the year. Alternative strategies are suggested to ensure proper benefits.

## Impoverished by Economic Exploitation— The Plight of the Santals

MUKUL Ekka in his childhood days loved to tag along with his father whenever he visited his farming fields. All Ekka could see was acres and acres of paddy fields — green and golden. He sensed a feeling of security whenever his father pointed at that horizon as their limit. Happy and content Ekka was growing up only to face cruel detours his youth had in store for him. That limitless boundary has been reduced to the size of his backyard now; from a vast 60 acres of land he is left with a mere five acres.

Mukul Ekka as the name suggests is a Bangladeshi alright but not a Bengalee. He is one of the earliest inhabitants of the land. He is a Santal. The Santals are the largest homogeneous scheduled Tribe in India, most of them being in Bihar and West Bengal. In Bihar, the Santals are mainly concentrated in the districts of Santal Parganas, Singhbhum, Hazaribagh, Dhanbad, and Purnea. In West Bengal, they are mainly in the districts of Midnapore, Purulia, Burdwan, Bankura, West Dinajpur, Birbhum and Malda.

Ekka and his other tribesmen were in Bangladesh since time immemorial. There are approximately two to three lakh Santals residing in Rajshahi, Dinajpur, Bogra, Rangpur, Takurgaon, Nilphamari, Naogaon, Sylhet, Panchagar, and mostly around the border belt as informed by Ekka, a Bachelor of Arts student in Dhaka. Most of the Santals in Bangladesh owned lands as the economy of the Santals like elsewhere depended primarily on plough cultivation.

These short to medium statured, dark skinned and wavy to curly hair Santals are very easy going people. Their epicurean outlook of eat drink and make merry while you are prosperous and never care for the future has been the ruin of many Santal families who fell in the clutches of the money-lenders, (mahajans) according to Santosh Soren, Accountant of Notre Dame College. Land not only provide the Santals with economic security but is also a powerful linkage with their ancestors. No land is taken possession of unless 'the spirits' approve of it. The land is thus part of their spiritual as well as economic heritage. "As a result of the extortion by landlords and money lenders, the Santals had no security in the possession of the very lands they themselves had made fit for cultivation. In the course of time more and more land was mortgaged by the Santals and acquired by the Muslim or Hindu Bengalee settlers who slowly but deliberately encroached on our villages", says Sunil Douglas Haembran also a student residing with Ekka in a mess in Dhaka.

"Our ancestors here in

by Raffat Bint Rashid

Bangladesh owned hundreds of acres of land, starting from a minimum 50 to even 200, 500 acres. And as a matter of fact they never actually had to do anything for a living. They were so much lost in the luxuries of life that the basic need for educating their next generation or modern ideas of development never bothered their minds." Haembran continues explaining the history of their clan here in Bangladesh.

But like all turns of all decades, they were trapped in the tension of changes. "During the liberation war days, some of our fathers and brothers

for a maund or two of wheat, rice, other grains or any sort of help they asked us to exchange it with land," he explains their present state. Since they had no food this seemed their only best alternative. Santals because of their simplicity and ignorance were exploited and oppressed and this has been going on for centuries.

The single most important event in the history of the Santals is the rebellion of 1855-57. This unsuccessful rebellion as described in the book of Tribal Religion by J Troisi says that "The Santal rebellion was not a mere spasmodic out

the future," Hembran continues bitterly to which Ekka agrees.

Things became even worse for the Santal. Now they are involved in farming profession but working on other people's land, working as day labourers. "Most of our younger generation and living ancestors are bitter and frustrated now this is mainly because of the discrimination they face and consequently dependence on others," explains Soren, also a senior friend of Ekka, Haembran and other Santals living with them. "Economically we were quite better off during the pre Liberation years but now many, rather majority of our tribesmen are landless peasants," he explains sadly.

Another reason for this degrading social status of the Santals, according to Soren is their attitude towards life. "They never gave the future a serious thought, in fact they thought that this was not their own country, they belonged somewhere else and were simply trapped in changing times here. To this Haembran agrees emphasising "whenever we asked our ancestors where we came from they pointed the East."

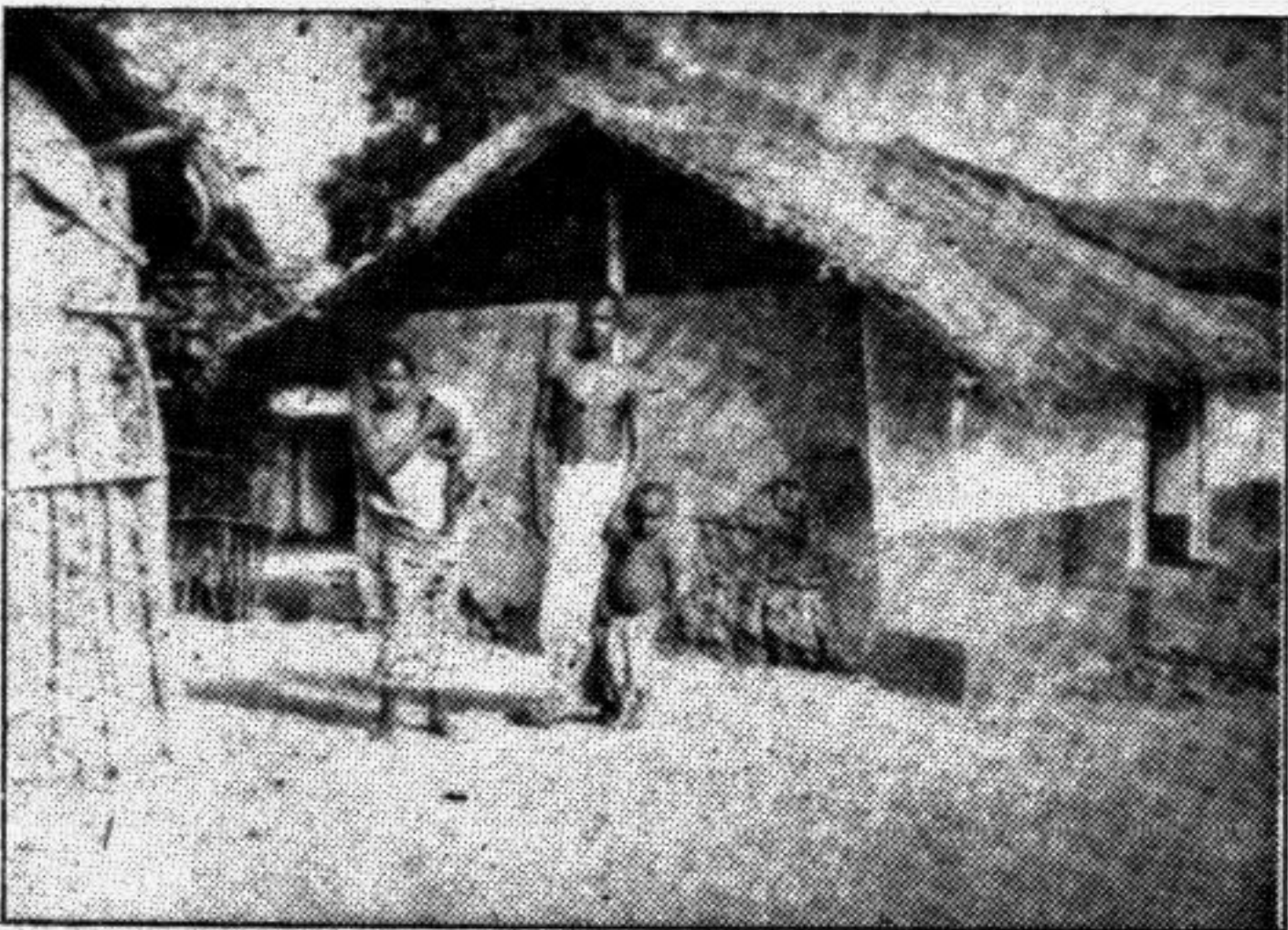
(The Santals have no recorded history oral tradition being the only document of the past. Live other human beings they have tried to explain the mysteries of creation, history and life by means of myths and legends. The traditions of the Santals represent them as a race wandering from one land to another," — as explained in Tribal Religion by J Troisi.

This sense of not belonging, exploitation, ignorance, dramatic downfall in their financial sector could however make them realise the need to educate their children and take up more confident steps. Up until the mid eighties contesting for a seat in the Dhaka University was out of question for them. This was not because of competition but because they never felt the need to be educated. Only a handful of Santals crossed their cultural barriers and chose to build careers like joining the government service, being lawyers or working in NGOs.

Slowly but steadily a change is taking place in their thought process. Santals are now making it a point that even a shepherd boy in their tribe should go to school.

It might be long before Ekka can recover his father's land or acquire new land himself like his parents. But with education, this energetic Santal has found the means to improve his standard of living. Perhaps enough to feel as secure as he did in his childhood days.

This feature was written under the PANOS fellowship programme.



A Santal household — With no land and very little skills making ends meet is becoming increasingly difficult for the once rich Santals. Courtesy: Tribal Religion.



Trying to keep old traditions inspite of growing impoverishment. Courtesy: Tribal Religion.

joined the war while most of them left all their property behind and fled to India," says Haembran and this brought the end of all their good life he explains.

After they returned to Bangladesh again, they came back to nothing, no land, no cattle nothing to eat, no savings, not even a roof that they could call their own. They started asking for help from their Bengalee neighbours, who were said to keep good relationships with these Santals. "But they used our faith in them against us. Since we had no money whenever we asked

burst of the crude instincts of the semi-savage Santals," but the outcome of a long course of oppression silently and patiently submitted to by these unsophisticated people unaccustomed to fight for their own rights in the legitimate ways of their neighbours." And as history kept on repeating for them, "they fell into the traps of their Bengalee friends, and as told earlier not a single one of our ancestors were educated, they signed legal papers using thumb sign and of course trusting their old neighbours and thinking that things will not remain so in

## Helping the Poor to Help Themselves

The task of reducing poverty is daunting, but by no means hopeless. We know that rapid and sustained development is not a dream but an achievable reality. The Social Summit has offered an opportunity to focus the world's attention on global poverty and to agree on strategies for faster progress to reduce it.

A person born in the developing world today can expect to live 63 years — longer than at any time in human history. Many countries have achieved striking gains in health and education. In the past 25 years alone, average per capita incomes in the developing world have doubled.

Yet, despite these achievements, the stark reality is that between 1.1 billion and 1.3 billion people in developing countries are still desperately poor, living on an income of less than \$1 per day. Hundreds of millions more have incomes so narrowly above this threshold they live at constant risk of sinking below it. Their poverty is not just a lack of income. It is a deprivation of welfare and, very profoundly, a lack of capabilities, social power and opportunities.

### Investing in Poor People

What must developing countries do to increase the well-being of their people? Sustained economic growth is essential, but it is not enough. Efforts to reduce poverty are unlikely to succeed in the long run unless there is greater investment in (the human resources of) the poor themselves. Improvements in education, health and nutrition directly address the worst consequences of being poor. And investing in people, especially in their education, also attacks some of the most important causes of poverty. Improving social services is an integral part of any long-term strategy for reducing poverty.

To be cost-effective, interventions must be well-targeted and carefully designed to meet the specific needs of poor people. This means developing technologies suited to the risky environment that confronts small farmers, devising credit schemes to serve small borrowers, combining feeding programs for especially vulnerable groups with education on health and nutrition. The success of these programmes usually means involving the poor both at the design and implementation stages.

Shifting the allocation of funds from higher-level services to basic health and primary education will help to offer more efficient and equitable services to the poor. In Brazil, for example, 23 per cent of the public education budget goes to higher education, even though only 2 per cent of the student population



tion attends university. In Morocco, only 5 per cent of young people eventually obtain university degrees, but those in this fortunate minority receive 35 per cent of total government expenditures on education.

Recommending a shift to funding more basic services does not mean denying the importance of higher-level services; it does mean shifting the emphasis and targeting first things first. In particular, any country that wants to compete in the world economy needs a comprehensive education policy that includes spending on higher education, science and technology, and professional training.

### Investing in Health

The world is facing serious new health challenges. By 2000 the growing toll from acquired immune deficiency syndrome (AIDS) in developing countries could easily rise to more than 1.8 million deaths annually, erasing decades of hard-won reductions in mortality. The malaria parasite's increased resistance to available drugs could lead to a doubling of malaria deaths, to nearly 2 million a year within a decade.

Rapid progress in reducing child mortality and fertility rates will create new demands on health-care systems to provide for ageing populations. Yet, despite increasing demands for health care, millions of lives and billions of dollars could be saved if governments pursued sound macroeconomic policies that focus on the poor. Governments need to adopt a three-part approach to improving health, re-directing funds towards:

• Fostering an enabling economic environment for households to improve their own health. This includes policies

primary or secondary school. And in all countries, children from poor families are less apt to enroll in school and more apt to drop out than children from more affluent families. It is disconcerting that even children, who complete primary school often have not learned the core skills in their national curriculum. Students in low-income countries tend to perform poorly on national and international measures in mathematics, science and reading comprehension.

Education must reach beyond the fortunate few. Those living in rural areas, women, the poor and minorities suffer most from limited access to education. In all regions of the world, except Latin America and the Caribbean, women and girls, in particular, face economic and cultural barriers to attending school at each level of education.

Many schools in developing countries fail to reach or teach children because of inadequate resources or because available resources are not used efficiently. In primary schools, drop-out and repetition rates are high, so that countries have to pay for as many as nine years of education simply to produce one pupil who has completed the fifth grade — something few nations can afford. In many countries, a disproportionate amount may go for salaries instead of books, educational supplies and teacher training. The same constraint hampers secondary schools and universities.

Weaknesses in school management systems have been identified in almost all developing countries as rapid expansion of education systems has increased the need for managers and administrators. The absence of effective managers is evident at the intermediate and higher levels of education. Strengthening managerial capability at all levels of the education system will require substantial resources and a long-term perspective. To maintain managerial competence, countries eventually must develop specialized institutes for training educational managers.

Resource constraints are a principal barrier to bridging the widening education gap between developing and industrialized countries. Industrialized countries typically invest almost 6 per cent of their gross national product (GDP) on education and training while low-income countries invest scarcely more than half (i.e., 3 per cent) on average, although their school-age population is 75 per cent larger.

For low-income countries to be able to provide a place in primary school for 95 per cent of their school-age children, they would probably have to spend as much as 3.5 per cent of gross national product on this goal over the next ten years. Their actual resource commitments fall far short of such a goal.

Published by the United Nations Department of Public Information