

Bangladesh is Lucky to Have NGOs

Dr. Kendall W. Stiles tells Mir A Zaman

Stiles believes that the NGOs have been successful in improving the lot of the poverty-stricken rural population. If other players of the civil society can be integrated into the NGO movement, a more progressive, liberal and democratic Bangladesh will no longer be a distant dream.

ALTHOUGH not a development expert, by his own admission, Dr. Kendall W. Stiles, an associate professor of political science at Loyola University, Chicago, has always found the non-governmental organisations quite intriguing, especially since they are exponents of the civil society that seeks, in his words, "to ensure state accountability to societal interests and promote tolerance and fairplay in resolving broader social problems." Also, he has noted a discernible shift in policy of the international donor agencies, both bilateral and multilateral, towards circumventing the state and reaching out to the NGOs in their efforts to ensure "deepening of democratic institutions as well as an improvement in service delivery to the rural poor" of the developing countries.

The soft-spoken American academic has recently been in Bangladesh on a Fulbright fellowship to conduct a five-month research programme in and around the capital city in order to "determine the effect of this donor initiative on the NGOs and broader civil society". During his stay he has talked to "donors, NGO executives, and leaders and activists of other civil society organisations such as journalists, academics, trade unions and chambers of commerce," and, in the process, has formed an optimistic, albeit "tentative", view on the contribution of the NGO movement in Bangladesh.

"At this point, for all of its flaws, compared to any other group of organisations in Bangladesh, I think, they (NGOs) have the most promise for curing some of the ills in the country and helping the ordinary people."

They are reaching out to the common people much more than other organisations. I am not a development expert and I am not in a position to judge the results of their programmes, but I get the impression, from the donors especially, that they are using resources fairly wisely. Before, they were concerned about trying to reach the poor, now they are talking of reaching the hard-core poor, which is a group most people don't even know exists, let alone think about them."

He has come across different stories and rumours about some NGOs on their manipulative activities; however, instead of letting these cloud his observation, he checked the stories with other people, directly or indirectly involved with the NGO movement, and the con-

clusion he has reached is quite on the contrary.

"I have found the leaders of the NGOs to be sincere and hard working, and I have great admiration for them. They are highly motivated. Bangladesh is very lucky to have an NGO community like this."

The NGO movement, in his view, is actually spreading around the spirit of democracy among the poor:

"By providing education and helping build self-confidence among the poor, they are creating the foundation of democracy. If you have an educated electorate and if you have a literate population that can begin to judge between different candidates and this sort of things, elections are going to be meaningful. That the NGOs are accomplishing. Proshika and other NGOs have also been involved in specific voter education programmes which coincided. I don't exactly know whether it has caused it, with a very high voter turnout in the 1996 elections. In addition to that, the NGOs are supporting democracy directly with awareness programmes between elections."

Some NGOs are providing legal assistance, they are working with donors and government, chairman and union parishad, helping women to vote and get elected to union parishad. Many churn out influence in the salish system, trying to promote judicial reforms, trying to promote policy reforms. There are tremendous amount of efforts taking place to gear up the democratic institutions and government. Frankly, I don't know of any other organisations in Bangladesh that are trying to do this."

According to Stiles, the government-NGO relationship has never been so smooth. True, they (NGOs) are, to some extent, suspicious that "working with the government will be more difficult than working by themselves", still at this point of time, there is a perceptible eagerness among them to work with the government:

The NGOs are actually impressed with the policies of the current government. Many of the NGO leaders that I have spoken to are eager to do large-scale joint ventures. They talk about basically doing non-formal education programme for the government; I think that this is openly discussed in many circles."

On the other hand, Stiles believes, the government has been able to successfully negotiate with its initial misgivings about the NGOs:

"There was a time when the government completely ignored the NGOs because they were so small. They were not interesting. Then there was the time when the government was antagonistic to the NGOs because they became a threat. Now the government has sort of resigned itself and accepted the NGOs as facts of life. And the donors, I think, have also made it clear that they are going to continue to support the NGOs and the government ministries have to accept that. So, in many ways, it is the best of times in NGO-government relationships."

The tension between the NGOs and fundamentalists has not evaded his attention, either:

"I have spoken with at least one Islamist and few other people who are very conservative. In part there is a deep animosity. As you know ADAB's (Association of Developing Agencies of Bangladesh) position is very clear that they will not associate their work with people who are women abusers and reactionary in their politics. That is not an imaginary conflict."

However, he is of the opinion that the "conflict is somewhat imaginary" in broader perspective:

"I get the impression from what I have seen that NGOs are not anti-Islamist and NGOs are not anti-Islam. On the contrary, many of the NGO directors are quite devout and have great respect for religion and spirituality. So, I think, aside from the genuine conflict over principle, much of the problem is that of perception."

He thinks the NGOs should take the first step to dispel the misgivings on their position:

"I think that the NGO need to do a better job in articulating their position. One of the ideas that I tossed out which, I know, is very controversial and I don't expect it to be implemented, is that it might be wise for the NGO community to think of some way to talk to at least the most moderate of the imams and mullahs and madrassah leaders. In Indonesia, for instance, the Islamist groups are included in the national development plans which the government and the NGOs are developing. In the Gaza Strip, even international organisations work closely with Hamas which is quite effective and quite successful."

There is a possibility that it may not work in the Bangladeshi context, he recognises that, but nevertheless, he believes, it is a worth the try, especially since there is a common ground:

"One of the things that the Islamists talk of is about preserving family values and traditions and, as I said, I believe that most NGOs strongly support family, that women should be equal partners to the husbands as a general rule. But why not have a national family initiative, some sort of events and that reach out to all groups. I know that many NGOs invite all the political parties to their rallies. Why not consider having a more moderate Islamic leaders? I think that would go far in having to persuade other intellectuals and observers in the Bangladeshi society that the NGOs are not against Islam, spirituality or other traditions."

And, he believes that the NGOs possess the ability to get the Islamists involved in development activities:

"I don't know whether the Islamists can be changed much in their attitude but, on the other hand, I am fascinated with the capacity of the NGO movement to include groups that you would not normally expect would be included. Some cultural organisations that have a very strong nationalist and even radical orientation are becoming part of the NGO movement. Many of the NGO leaders have very radical backgrounds. And over the last 10 or 15 years, many of these radical activists have become outstanding leaders of the NGO movement. I think their passion and their concern for the poor has been of great benefit for the NGO movement."

Are they sending across the message?

"Not clearly no. I don't think that it is a huge problem. The problem is that they attack the fundamentalists. That many of the fundamentalists deserve to be attacked is something that I do not totally disagree with. I don't have a problem with the position that the NGOs have on this, but I think they need to take care of how broader society perceives their position. Just because they have identified certain elements of the Islamic movement as an adversary certainly does not mean they (NGOs) are adversaries to all of Islam and I think they need to remind people of that."

On the whole, Stiles believes that the NGOs have been successful in improving the lot of the poverty-stricken rural population. If other players of the civil society can be integrated into the NGO movement, a more progressive, liberal and democratic Bangladesh will no longer be a distant dream.

Liberation and Beyond

by J N Dixit

(The Daily Star is serialising extracts from the book through exclusive contract with University Press Limited (UPL), publisher of its Bangladesh edition.)

1974: The Fragmentation of Bangladeshi Politics

Part-II

PRESIDENT Giri's visit to Rangamati proved interesting. Rangamati is a beautiful town dominated by a lake and surrounded by unspoilt forests. The only moment of anxiety was when Giri disregarding his age (he was well into his seventies) wanted to be taken down to the lake shore. The lake could be approached only by descending a very steep set of steps. He was in no condition to either walk down or climb up the stairs. So he was seated strapped on an easy chair and carried to the lake and brought back. Many of us remained scared and apprehensive till he returned for a mishap would have been disastrous. If the men carrying the chair stumbled, walking down or up the steps, the portly and aging President would have come hurtling down. Fortunately he returned safely in time for lunch. By then we were faced with another logistical problem. The President and his party were to fly by helicopter back to Dhaka by about 3:30 or 4 pm. The sky was overcast with low clouds. Alternative plans were set in motion to travel by road to Chittagong and then fly from there by an aircraft to Dhaka. Mr. Giri was not agreeable to travel by road. He asked us not to worry and forecast that the clouds would clear by the time of his departure. He was quite sure that he would be able to fly back to Dhaka directly from Rangamati by helicopter. He brushed aside our protests by saying he was certain that this was going to happen. He proved prophetic. The clouds thinned by about 3:30 pm. His helicopter took him back in time with senior officials while the rest of us meandered back to Dhaka by road and the normal air service.

Nothing of very great political significance resulted from this visit. It was the visit of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto which followed that brought out all the contradictions in Bangladeshi politics and the negative complexes historically nursed about India in sections of the people of Bangladesh. I had a premonition about tensions emerging when my High Commissioner, Subimal Dutt, sent in his resignation to Delhi the moment the precise dates of Bhutto's visit to Dhaka were announced. He still had another year to go as High Commissioner, under the contract he had signed. When he called me in and informed me that he had sent a letter to Mrs. Gandhi and the Foreign Minister giving the reasons why he wished to relinquish charge I protested that he could not leave the mission without the benefit of his leadership during this very crucial visit. His answer was direct and



Phani Majumdar, the only Hindu Minister in Mujib's cabinet with Ashok Sarker, of the Ananda Bazar Patrika.

simple: he said: "I do not wish to be in a position where I have to receive this fellow Bhutto at the airport and shake his hands drenched with the blood of the people of Bangladesh. I cannot reconcile myself to this, nor do I wish to embarrass the Government of India or Government of Bangladesh. I am old and I am clear in my mind at this stage of my life that I do not want to get involved in situations which are deeply disturbing to me. He left Dhaka within a week or so of the conclusion of President Giri's visit.

Bhutto arrived in Dhaka in July 1974. I drove to the airport through dense crowds lining both sides of the streets all the way from the Tejgaon airport to "Banga Bhavan" resounding with slogans like "Bangladesh-Pakistan Maitri (friendship) Zindabad" and "Zulfikar Ali Bhutto Zindabad". This was a far cry from the massive anti-Bhutto demonstrations held in Dhaka in the second fortnight of March 1971. All the heads of the diplomatic mission were lined up at the tarmac. Bhutto descended from a special air force aircraft in the uniform of the supreme leader of the People's Party of Pakistan. The black bandala with a gold collar band, I was introduced when he reached me in the reception line. Shaking me by the hand, he turned to Mujib Rahman and said: "So, he represents the country which rearranged the map of the sub-continent in 1971." Then, addressing me, he said: "May be he (would) help us a second time in rearranging the map by resolving the Kashmir problem which has been pending for such a long time." I could not help my irritation. I said: "Excellency, if you wish India to re-arrange the

map as it did in 1971, we would be quite happy to resolve the Kashmir problem also." He glared at me, and moved on to greet the High Commissioner of Malaysia who was standing next to me.

It was the journey back from the airport which was a politically and emotionally disturbing experience for me. As the motorcade moved out, the frenzied enthusiasm of the mass of the people lining the route reached a high pitch, with slogans and shoutings in favour of Bhutto and Pakistan. The new and striking feature of this show were the many slogans very critical of the Awami League and Sheikh Mujib Rahman. I was told later that people threw garlands of shoes at Sheikh Mujib Rahman's car on his journey back to the President's House. My flag car was vandalised and the Indian flag tampered with by the crowds as it slowed down near the road crossing at the then Inter-continental Hotel. Abusive slogans were shouted against the Indian High Commission and the Government of India. I have to confess that I had tears of anger in my eyes when I returned to my office and sat down to draft my telegram reporting on the arrival ceremonies and attendant political events.

Bhutto's behaviour with his Bangladeshi hosts was arrogant, calculatingly casual and unyielding on matters of substance. He emphasised that Pakistan recognising Bangladesh and endorsing its joining the OIC and the United Nations were gestures of a fair distribution of assets between Pakistan and Bangladesh. He also turned down a suggestion from Sheikh Mujib Rahman that Pakistan arrange to take back all the stranded non-Bengali residents who wished to be repatriated to Pakistan. There was no expression of regret, or any sign denoting a desire for genuine reconciliation with Bangladesh in his banquet speeches or public pronouncements. He refused to lay a wreath at the Martyrs' Memorial for students who were killed during the February 21, 1952 language movement. He was also reluctant to go to "Savar" to place a wreath on the Martyrs' Memorial of Bangladeshi freedom fighters who had laid down their lives during the liberation war. After much persuasion and cajoling he agreed to go to "Savar", but he indulged in number of gestures which showed his lack of reverence or respect for the martyrs. First, to show his lack of seriousness, he deliberately delayed his departure for the memorial saying he could not proceed before performing his late afternoon namaz (prayer). It was well known that he was never very regular in his prayers. He delayed his arrival at the "Savar" memorial by nearly two hours. He also insisted that when he placed the wreath there should be no guard of honour by the Bangladeshi armed forces. There should be no sounding of the 'Last Post' or gun salute for the martyrs. He argued that he could not possibly participate in a full protocol ceremony paying homage to those who fought the armed forces of his country. Bangladeshi compromised. They agreed to all his conditions provided he went to the memorial and laid a wreath.

Bhutto then indulged in the final churlish act of disrespect. He arrived at the memorial not in formal or semi-formal attire. He came wearing casual clothes (a T-shirt and a golf cap), placed the wreath and drove back immediately, refusing to speak or participate in any other function at the memorial.

The central message throughout his visit was that if Bangladesh desired to become a fully accepted member of the community of Islamic countries, it should distance itself from India and not have too close a relationship with it. His entourage re-established contacts during the visit with pro-Pakistani elements in the Bangladeshi civil service and armed forces. We received definite information that ministers accompanying Bhutto established close and confidential contacts with two ministers in Mujib Rahman's Cabinet, Khondaker Mushtaq Ahmed and a junior Minister, Taheruddin Thakur. A message was also conveyed to a certain number of armed forces officers of Bangladesh that Pakistan would be willing to revive defence contacts with the Bangladeshi armed forces if they could exercise influence on the Mujib government to bring about basic changes in Bangladeshi's foreign policy favourable to Pakistan. Another tempting message conveyed was that were Bangladesh to reorient its foreign policy along the lines suggested, it could expect a greater responsiveness from China.

Mujib's reactions throughout the visit were subdued and defensive. He was taken aback by the public enthusiasm for Bhutto and Pakistan. He was equally surprised at the levels of resentment expressed against him and the Awami League by the general public as also in certain sections of the Bangladeshi media.

The Bhutto visit was a watershed marking a qualitative shift in Mujib's attitudes relating to domestic political processes as well as on Indo-Bangladesh relations. This was destined to have a profound and tragic impact on events which followed till his disappearance from the political scene.

The contradictions in Bangladeshi politics and the erosion of the commitment to Bangladesh free from its Pakistani umbilical connections which were only festering undercurrents came out into the open during the Bhutto visit. The crisis was compounded by very serious economic difficulties which Bangladesh had been facing for six months and which lingered almost till the assassination of Mujib Rahman in August 1975.

Inverted National Policies

by Alif Zabr

MANY of our national policies look like inverted pyramids.

QC (Quality Control) is ignored as a public service undertaking, while financial subsidies are being injected officially into the bad systems with monotonous regularity. The results of the surveys, monitoring, evaluation by the regulatory bodies are not released for public information. As for system losses, the scenario is similar.

The problem looks pretty bad already and if we could correctly calculate the margin of error in the aforesaid report, then the drug situation could actually be worse than it seems. So, at least for our sake, we must leave no stone unturned to arrest the drift towards a situation where it couldn't get any worse. Those who know the history of opium in China know that drugs take the "life" out of a human being. Had the Chinese not been able to ward off the evil of opium addiction from amongst its populace, maybe there wouldn't be a China as it is today. We, the Bangladeshis, wouldn't want to be remembered, say, 50 years down the road of history as a nation that perished from the scourge of drugs. Through favour — awareness and rehabilitation programmes, promoting religious and family values —, or fear — enacting legislation with provision for severe penalty for drug traffickers coupled with strong law enforcement —, by whatever means necessary, we must stop people from using drugs. Time is running out and we must act now or it may be too late.

Another plausible cause of vulnerability to drugs could be the waning of religious and family values in our society today. Continuous disintegration of the family as a social unit destroys the social fibre and it follows that prevalence of such families in a society only

increases — it is the next generation.

The telephone sector is non-transparent, as the supply is always kept below the demand, pushing the waiting list well beyond three years. The beefy part of the sector is not being released to the private sector, for reasons not explained. There is one semi-official explanation: Telecoms is a money-making sector, therefore it should be controlled. On the other hand, the telephone grey market is not regulated.

The power sector is adulterated. The PF or the power factor in the electric power supply is low. Huge number of corrective capacitors are being added technically from the engineering point of view, but the craving factor of human beings is rising rapidly in a flourishing market. It is the crow principle in action — the crows go away from locations where food is not available; and vice versa.

The police need a policing system, before they can police others. Since it is a core issue,

elaboration is not necessary, because the problem remains: how to maintain law and order.

Corollary 1: one cannot see the tip of one's nose. Cor 2: Why man cannot see his own face? It is a mystic and philosophical question, hence no comment.

When we do it, it is right; when others do it, it is wrong. The readers may complete for examples.

The border is porous. Smuggling is suspected to be of such staggering proportions that no attempt has been made officially. Some stray data about seizures and detections leak into the press from time to time, which is reckoned to be less than three per cent of the total smuggling trade. It is the crow principle in action — the crows go away from locations where food is not available; and vice versa.

The monopoly of the Chittagong port is said to be harmful to moral character. Competition is being resisted at the semi-official level, judging by the CCC

behind-the-scene activities, as conjectured in the press. This is one example where silence is golden.

One-stop service centres are not good for corruption, the participants fear. Paper work in a country is inversely proportional to its development factor. The definition of 'Development' is controversial in the informal sectors. However, in the grey and black markets, development activities are flourishing, which cannot be recognised officially. Certain topics are taboo for official recognition.

Terrorism is an exercise to overcome laziness. To attract the lazy minds, there are incentive schemes flourishing in the underground market. For further information refer to the nearest Godfather's office/eden.

The huge session jams at the university level is reckoned to have disastrous effect at the national level during the next decade. The effect on GDP is being calculated.

Garfield



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by Jim Davis

