

Environment

Living with wrath of nature

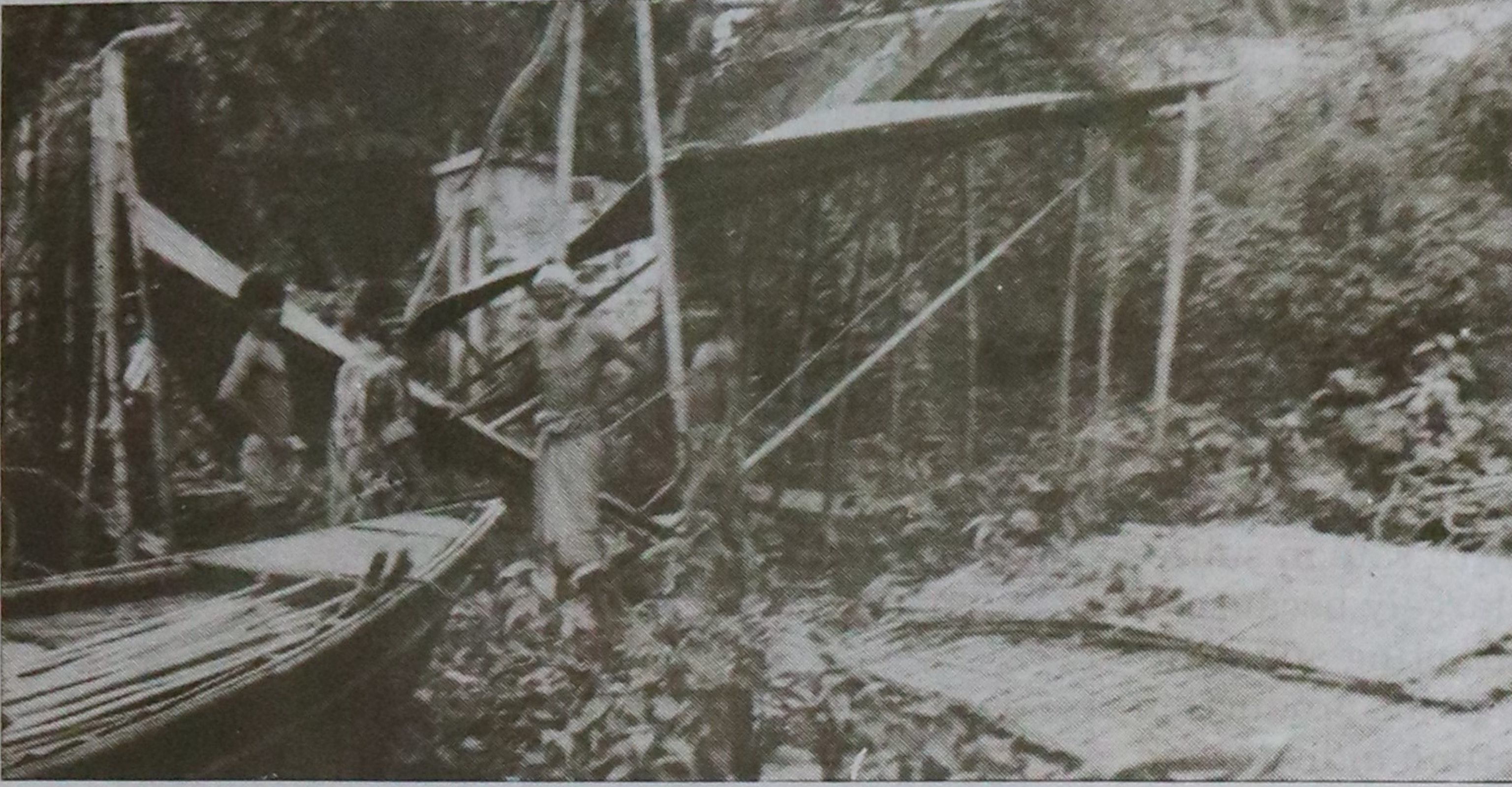
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 the Great Earthquake of July 12, 1897; the Srimangal Earthquake of July 8, 1918; the Dhubri Earthquake of July 3, 1930; the Bihar-Nepal Earthquake of January 15, 1934; and the Assam Earthquake of August 15, 1950. Of these, only the Bengal Earthquake of 1885 and the Srimangal Earthquake of 1918 had their epicentres in Bangladesh.
 The damages caused by these shallow focus earthquakes however were restricted to narrow zones surrounding the epicentres. The greatest damage was caused by the 1897 earthquake. The tremors were felt all over the country and severe damages were caused in the northern parts of Sylhet and

Mymensingh districts and in the eastern part of Rangpur district. The 1950 earthquake was also felt all over the country though no damage was reported.
 Thus we see that Bangladesh is not entirely free from the menace of earthquakes. Especially the northern belt of greater Sylhet, Mymensingh and the eastern part of Rangpur Districts could be vulnerable. Bangladesh should develop adequate facilities for detection and study of earthquakes.
 Satellite Remote Sensing can easily identify earth's fault zones where the earthquake mainly occurs. High-resolution satellites are being used for the detection of tectonic movement of the earth.

Natural disasters and national economy
 If one looks at the effects of natural disasters on the national economy, there are startling revelations. The growth rate of the economy is tremendously retarded by natural disasters. To give some examples, the GDP growth rate dropped from 11.6 to 3.5 per cent due to the 1974 flood. Again, it dropped from 6.9 to 1.2 per cent by the 1979 drought and from 3.9 to 2.5 per cent by the 1988 flood. However, the government has managed the 1998 flood very well. There has not been any corresponding reduction in the GDP growth rate. Rather there have been two bumper crops in 1999 and there has been a steady growth rate

above five per cent. This shows the advancement in disaster preparedness in Bangladesh. Similarly in the case of 1997 cyclone, casualty was restricted to a mere one hundred whereas on previous occasions of similar cyclones of 1991 and 1970, casualty ran to hundreds of thousands.
 Thus we see that the fortunes of Bangladesh depends on how effectively we tackle the effects of natural disasters. Had there been no effects of natural disasters, Bangladesh would have attained the status of an emerging tiger.

Disaster preparedness in Bangladesh
 Bangladesh is very much a disaster-prone country. But



Shattered by storm: Down but not out

Natural disasters pose a great threat to our national economy. Disasters cause immense loss of crops which could affect food security of the country unless adequate measures are taken to replenish the loss. Thus proper monitoring of disasters and adequate measures to deal with them are of utmost importance for national economy.



Affected by flood: Trying their best to save the eroding embankment

Bangladesh can take pride of its high degree of disaster preparedness which has received world-wide acclaim. This has amply been demonstrated in the catastrophic flood of 1998 and the catastrophic cyclone of 1997. Bangladesh has elaborate arrangements to deal with natural disasters. As far as the technical side is concerned, the concerned organisations like Bangladesh Space Research and Remote Sensing Organisation (SPARRSO), Bangladesh Meteorological Department (BMD) and Bangladesh Water Development Board (BWDB) have satellite receiving stations for detection of these calamities. The government in a Standing Order has set out duties and responsibilities of various ministries, departments and other concerned organisations connected with disaster management in case of an impending disastrous situations delineating pre-, during and post-disaster operations. There is a guidebook on disaster management for every one concerned with disaster management. There are many national committees on disaster management. The Disaster Management Council is headed by the Prime Minister which reviews the disaster management policies and issues directives to all concerned. The Inter-ministerial Disaster Management Co-

ordination Committee is headed by the minister for disaster management and relief. This committee is responsible for implementation of disaster management policies and decisions of National Disaster Management Council. The Cyclone Preparedness Programme Implementation Board is headed by the secretary of the disaster management and relief ministry and decides issues on cyclones. There is a disaster management committee at each tier of administration. All these committees go into action on war footing in the case of an impending natural disaster. The Cyclone Preparedness Programme jointly operated by the ministry of disaster management and relief and the Bangladesh Red Crescent Society has got some 32,000 volunteers who join in action in the event of a cyclonic disaster. They are equipped with wireless sets and warn people on the basis of various cyclone warning danger signals and help people evacuation to safer places. Disaster Management Bureau co-ordinates different disaster management activities and arranges training at different field levels.
Regional Collaboration: There is regional and international collaboration in disaster preparedness. The country gets meteorological data through

Global Telecommunication Network (GTN) of World Meteorological Organisation (WMO) via New Delhi. Under a joint collaborative programme between Bangladesh and India, flood data from the upstream are transmitted to Bangladesh during the flood season every year for eleven sites in major rivers like the Ganges, the Brahmaputra, the Barak and the Teesta.
Conclusion
 Bangladesh has demonstrated a high level of disaster preparedness during the course of 1998 flood and 1997 cyclone. However, there is no room for complacency. Whatever competence has been developed must be sustained. There has been constructed some two thousand multipurpose cyclone shelters in the coastal zone. According to a UNDP survey, some one thousand more are needed to cater to the needs of the present population in the coastal area and this must be done without delay. The coastal afforestation programme must be expanded further. But there may be new areas of disasters that will assault us. According to the statistical estimation, a devastating earthquake may strike our region soon. And we may not be spared from its effects altogether. Though Bangladesh Meteorological Department is tak-

ing steps to install three seismological stations in the country, there is more public awareness needed on the parts of the general public. The public should follow the building code in their construction of all structures according to the prescription set by the expert body. There is no point in digging one's grave prematurely either by ignorance or for saving money. Another danger that is coming is from the greenhouse effect whose effect may have been underestimated so far. There is report that sea level is rising in the Bay of Bengal at three times faster than estimated earlier. There is report that in some US coast the rate is even ten times faster. These are very alarming. The Antarctic ice which did not melt earlier may start melting suddenly and set a chain reaction which will be disastrous and there is already evidence that this has started happening in some places in the Antarctic and the warming has been as much as 10 degree Celsius in those places. Bangladesh should start giving more importance to this problem than given hitherto. I am sure we can tackle this problem as we have done other problems very efficiently.
 The author is the chairman, Bangladesh Space Research and Remote Sensing Organisation (SPARRSO)

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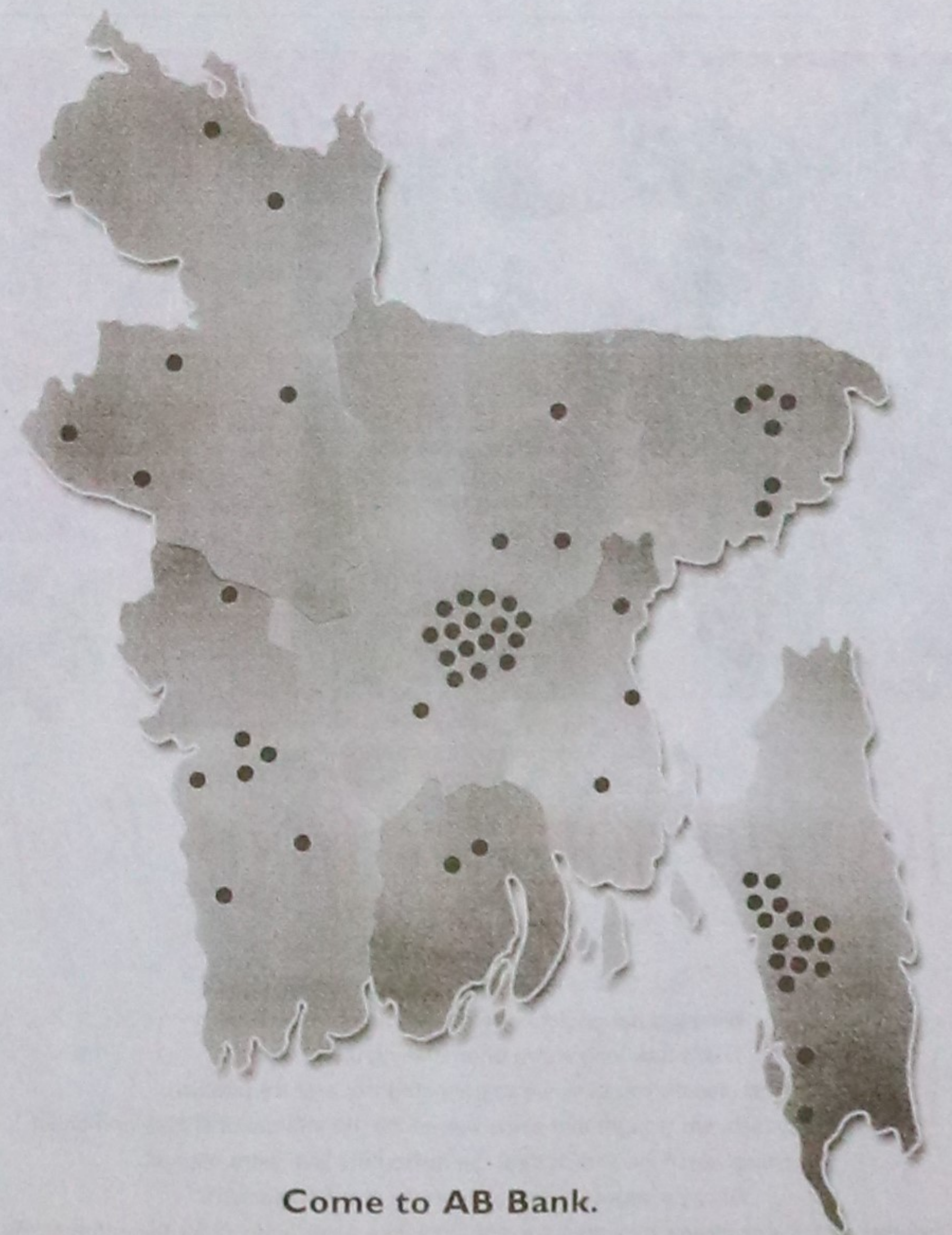
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