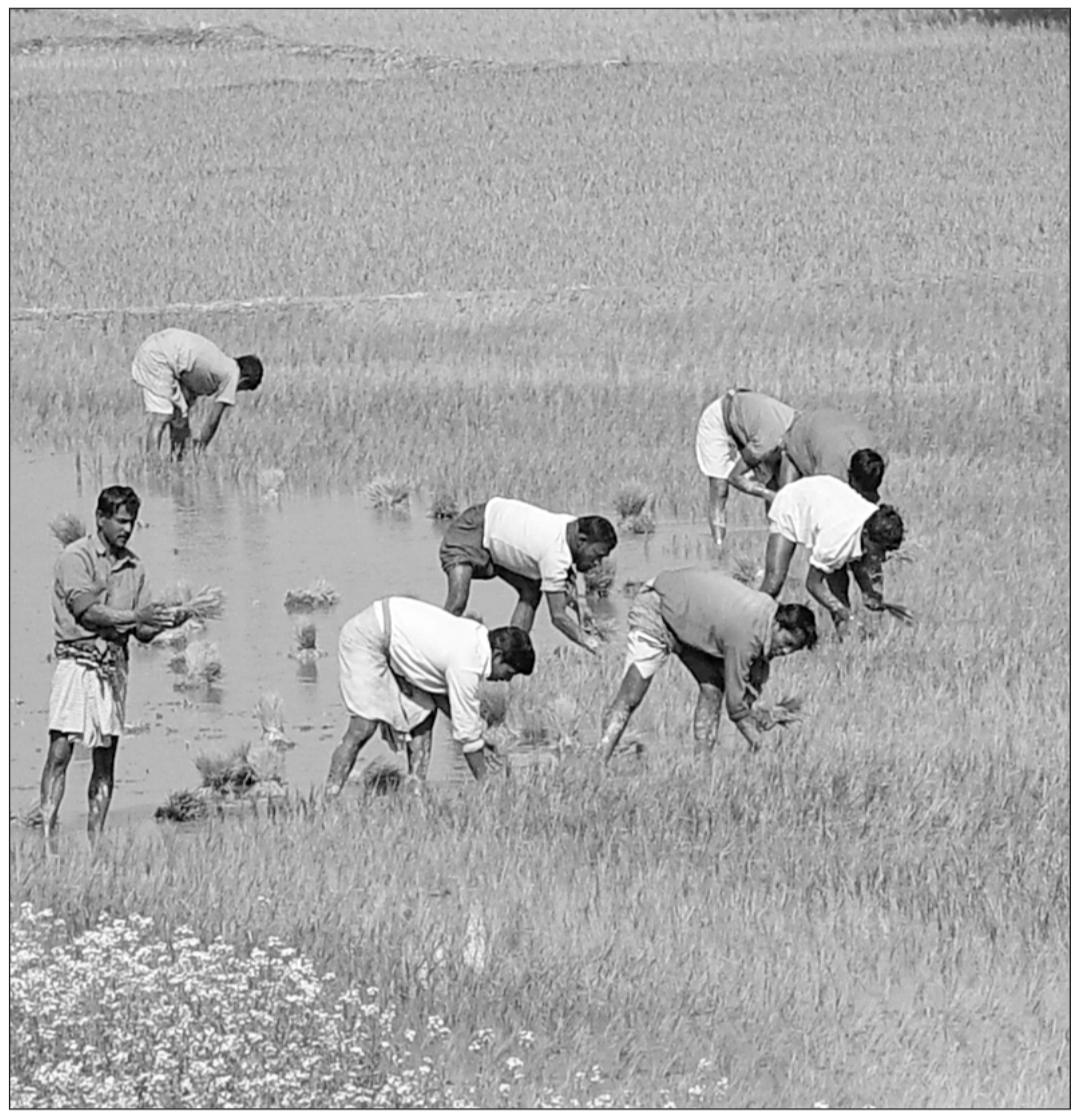


Consigning monga to the museum



There is a need for all concerned to work as a team, as was done in the research under consideration, to consign monga to the museum. It is eminently do-able, and can be achieved sooner than we can think, only if all the actors could put their acts together -- the governmental organizations and NGOs, scientific and academic communities, grassroots activists, the media and the civil society.



SHAMSUL BARI

NOBEL Laureate, Prof. Mohammad Yunus, has called for concerted efforts of all concerned to send poverty to the museum. Whether or not this can be achieved in Bangladesh within the time frame he has set forth, I am now convinced that this can be done within a very short time, at least for monga (famine-like situation) which visits the poverty-stricken populations in pockets of the northern districts of Bangladesh almost every autumn. Let me explain why I think so.

On April 8, I had the occasion to participate in a workshop in Rangpur, organized by RDRS a well-known NGO based in northern Bangladesh, to share the findings of a research project that my organization, Research Initiatives, Bangladesh (RIB), had funded.

The overall objective of the research was to test the efficacy of a new variety of rice, known as BRRI Dhan-33, developed by Bangladesh Rice Research Institute (BRRI), to mitigate monga in a sustainable manner through creation of farm employment during the monga months (roughly October and November).

The specific objectives of the research were to find out whether: 1) farmers would agree to cultivate BRRI Dhan-33, replacing the traditional amon variety of BR-11 and shwarna; 2) the early cultivation and shorter harvesting period (100 days instead of 145 to 160 days) established in field-testing of BRRI Dhan-33 could be translated into practice in the real fields by farmers, so that rice sown in June, instead of normal sowing of amon crop in July/August, could be harvested in early October instead of a month or two later, thereby providing employment to farm labour during the monga season; 3) the direct seeding drum-seeder method prescribed for BRRI Dhan-33 will be acceptable to farmers who are used to labour-intensive

transplanting methods traditionally practiced for amon; 4) the time gained by early harvesting of BRRI Dhan-33 could be beneficially used to plant potato, mungbean, or other winter crops in quick succession; 5) there would be other benefits accruing from this changed planting cycle; and, of course, 6) to identify the problems that may be faced by farmers in adopting the new variety.

For RIB, an additional objective was to bring the scientific community, the NGO community, and the farmers together to promote interaction between them so that they could benefit from each other's knowledge and experience.

It may be noted that a basic policy of RIB's research support is to involve the common people, wherever feasible, in the process of research and knowledge generation through what is known as participatory action research (PAR) or gongobeshona in Bengali.

The research was coordinated by the Focal Area Forum (FAF) in northwest Bangladesh, a novel concept for coordination among regional actors in the field of agriculture. It was budgeted for activities during a period of six months extending from June to December 2006.

The research objectives were set in a joint meeting between FAF and RIB in April 2006. The implementation of the objectives was undertaken by three NGOs (RDRS, USS, and TMSS) and a governmental organization (BRDB) working with farmers in four northern districts of Rangpur, Lalmonirhat, Nilphamari, and Kurigram. BRRI-Rangpur provided TOT to DAE and the four implementing organization staff.

The latter, in turn, provided training for farmers in the four project areas. Supervision, follow-up, and technical support were provided by concerned FAF members. It was, thus, a truly combined effort of a large number of agencies and dedicated persons.

Apart from a few setbacks, which I shall describe later, the results obtained from the project were, to say the least, very encouraging for all concerned and most heart-warming for RIB. The findings, both positive and negative, were shared with a large gathering of top scientists from agricultural and other universities of the country, senior officials from agricultural research institutes like IRRI, BARI, BADC, BRRI and BSMRAU, officials from DAE of the districts concerned, NGO and media representatives, and a number of farmers who were directly involved in the process.

All in all, it was perhaps one of the most inclusive gatherings of people concerned with agriculture-related activities in the north. Credit goes to the staff of RDRS for successfully organizing the workshop.

I was honoured to have been asked to moderate the meeting where so many scientific experts, highly experienced field activists, and committed people dedicated to the advancement of agriculture in the country were eager to share their views, experiences, and expertise to promote the objectives of the research. The coming together of so many stakeholders was perhaps justification enough for RIB's support to this excellent initiative, not to speak of the very important knowledge it generated.

Positive findings of the research

The research findings jointly presented by the project coordinator from RDRS and the head of BRRI in Rangpur, supplemented by representatives from the four implementing agencies were, as mentioned earlier, extremely impressive.

Foremost among these, to my mind, was perhaps the fact that our farmers who, like farmers anywhere, are normally hesitant in adopting new varieties and methods of agriculture, can be made to become willing partners in experi-

ments to promote new ideas if they are given due respect.

And if there is a combined effort from all concerned to be with them, to hold their hands, so to say, to guide them with ideas, provide them with the necessary knowledge and training, ensure timely supply of inputs such as seeds and fertilizer and, of course, to help them with solutions to the problems they face on the way.

This was pointed out particularly by those who had experienced non-cooperation from farmers in similar efforts in the past. In their view, a combined approach in which all the concerned stakeholders participate in a committed manner, respectful to each other's points of view, is essential for behavioral change and advancement.

In the experience of one implementing partner, the gongobeshona approach, in which the concerned population is brought together to discuss the pros and cons of the whole exercise among themselves, finally led to agreement to participate in a situation where earlier there was no agreement, thus delaying the sowing of seeds in time.

The findings also showed that BRRI Dhan-33 sown in late June to early July could, indeed, be harvested in early October. However, delay in sowing in a number of sites caused some delay in harvesting. Notwithstanding this slight setback, the overall experience was very positive.

The results in different sites led to the employment of a large number of agriculture labour during October/November. Some statistics from the exercise would be useful here. Altogether some 100 acres of high and medium-high land were chosen for cultivation by 166 farmers through direct drum-seeding and "lithau" methods. (Lithau is a small agricultural implement originally developed in the Philippines for preparing shallow furrows to sow rice seeds in dry soil.)

Harvesting and post-harvesting activities took place between October and early November, during which 23,188 agricultural labourers were employed. In other words, 24 persons found employment for each acre of land cultivated, people who would otherwise have remained unemployed.

Moreover, the income of the workers had increased from the normal Tk 30 during this period of the year to Tk 55 per day. Thus, their buying capacity increased, ensuring greater certainty for higher food intake.

The cost of production for BRRI Dhan-33 was also found to be less than for normal amon variety: Tk 8,500 per acre versus Tk 9,311. This was the case even though the average per acre yield was slightly lower than of the normal variety. The lower yield was compensated for by lower input cost since, among other things, its cultivation is less labour intensive, because seed-bed preparation and transplantation is avoided in direct seeding.

Moreover, because of the timing of its arrival in the market, it fetched a higher market price. For the same reason, the straw from the paddy got a higher price as cattle fodder. The overall experience of the farmers, both large and small, on BRRI Dhan-33 was, thus, very positive.

An added advantage of the cultivation of BRRI Dhan-33 was the fact that, because of early harvesting, the same land could be used for cultivation of potato, which provided a higher per acre yield and higher income because of earlier sowing and harvesting than normal, less pest and disease infestation and better quality of the harvest due to avoidance of winter

blights.

In addition, it was also found that the cultivation of mungbean (pulses) immediately after potato harvesting was profitable in terms of higher yield, and for the fact that its cultivation improved soil condition through adding organic matter to the soil.

In short, the cultivation of BRRI Dhan-33, followed by potato and summer mung, was considered by the experts as the most suitable cropping pattern for the area. Some experts suggested the cultivation of relay maize, with the caution that maize, which is fast gaining ground in the region, is one of the most exhaustive crops and should be accompanied by the addition of sufficient organic matter to the soil.

All in all, the participants felt that the overall findings could be considered to be positive.

Some negative findings

- There were, however, a number of negative experiences. These may be summarised as follows: The drum-seeder technology, because of its newness, had caused an acceptance problem for farmers in two of the sites, compelling the implementing agencies concerned to change project sites and undertake gongobeshona first, thereby delaying the cultivation and harvesting which affected the yield slightly.

- There were some problems in the use of the drum-seeder itself, because the technology requires puddling of the soil before sowing germinated seeds. This can be obtained either through irrigation or rainwater, in the absence of which it becomes difficult if not impossible to use the technology. In such a situation, however, the "lithau" technology described earlier was found more appropriate for sowing the seeds in a dry field, without waiting for rain or irrigation water.

- Another requirement for the use of drum-seeder is even and flat land, without which its use becomes difficult and problematic. There is, thus, a need to ensure that the land is made suitable before using the drum-seeder.

- There was also the problem of excessive rain following sowing in some areas, which washed away some seeds or caused heavy soil cover on the germinated seeds. However, their overall impact was negligible.

- Excessive weed growth was another problem experienced in the cultivation of BRRI Dhan-33. Farmers had to incur additional expenses for controlling weeds by using chemical weedicides.

- The non-availability of quality potato seeds immediately after harvesting of BRRI Dhan-33 was a complaint voiced by all the farmers. This is a matter that should receive urgent attention in the future.

- The number of training sessions provided by experts was considered inadequate by some. More such trainings, motivational meetings and gongobeshona could have avoided the reluctance of some of the farmers to undertake the experiment. This delayed sowing in some of the sites.

Recommendations

The gathering of so many committed experts and field workers inevitably gave rise to a large number of suggestions and recommendations. The key ones are as follows.

Experts in the drum-seeder technology felt that the problems identified in relation to its operation could be resolved through some adjustments in the machine. This would be looked into by them.

They recommended that the negative experience of the farmers

must be removed first before undertaking further promotion of the technology. They believed that the weed problem could be resolved by concerned scientists. This, too, would be looked into. The use of some weedicides was suggested. Most felt that the weed problem alone would not deter the farmers from undertaking the cultivation of BRRI Dhan-33.

As an alternative to the requirement of puddling of the land before using the drum-seeder, the use of Power Tiller Operated Drum-Seeder (PTODS) was suggested by some. However, the high cost of the device may be a deterrent. It would be better, therefore, to focus on ways of overcoming the problems, identified by the farmers, of the drum-seeder.

There was general agreement that motivational meetings and proper training of the farmers well ahead of the sowing time for BRRI Dhan-33 would help avoid problems and allay fears. A senior scientist of BRRI emphasized upon the need for maintaining the proper timing for the sowing of BRRI Dhan-33, which is between the last week of June and the first week of July. This he felt was very critical for successful cultivation of the variety.

Some suggested integrating the cultivation of the BRRI Dhan-33 with some other income generating activities. Mention was made, in this regard, of cultivation of lacquer in one of the experimental sites.

Lacquer, the cultivation of which costs very little, was harvested right in the middle of the monga period, and provided an income beyond the expectation of the people. The people involved in the exercise are part of a gongobeshona project, which is said to have contributed to the success of lacquer cultivation.

The same group had also participated in a very innovative paddy bank project under which some 1500 metric tons of rice were lent



out to the people by a professor of Jahangirnagar University as an experiment.

After harvesting of the amon crop, the borrowers paid back 16500 metric tons of rice, i.e. more than they had borrowed. Many found it difficult to believe that the experiment turned out to be such a success.

According to the researcher concerned, this could not have

happened without gongobeshona. The villagers have now decided to continue with the paddy bank. Among other things, they have also decided to undertake homestead gardening in a concerted manner.

It may be said that when RIB decided to support the research project a year ago, it was not sure that the results would turn out to be so promising. It is now evident that if the necessary conditions are fulfilled, the cultivation of BRRI Dhan-33 can play an important role in mitigating monga in a sustainable manner, or even eliminating it altogether.

It has the potential for creating employment for a large number of people during a period when farm employment is most lacking. Even though the area covered by the research was not very large, the experience gained has been considered by experts to be sufficient enough to draw this optimistic conclusion.

The interest of the farmers, demonstrated through the exercise, may be considered a good basis to expect the acceptance of the variety throughout the monga region if, of course, the necessary conditions described above are met.

Some experts were of the opinion that the cultivation of BRRI Dhan-33 in the Rangpur-Dinajpur region alone, where some 26.4 lakh acres of high and medium-high land are available, could provide employment to some 11 lakh (1.1 million) farm-labourers during the two monga months.

Even if, as a beginning, only a part of that land could be brought under cultivation of this variety, the employment generated should begin to drive the word monga from circulation from the region. If other elements, like the cultivation of lacquer, paddy bank, homestead gardening and, above all, the

In the absence of agro-based and other industries, the most feasible and durable solution to monga appears to be the dissemination of early maturing BRRI Dhan 33, or similar varieties, using direct seeding method, followed by potato/mungbean/relay maize.

It should be remembered that similar monga-like situations that had prevailed in many parts of the country have now completely disappeared, mainly through the adoption of multiple cropping and crop diversification.

For RIB, the outcome of the research has once again demonstrated that the key to success in any poverty alleviation approach is to include the people concerned in the process of research, as equal partners and not simply as objects of an exercise. The fact that the agricultural scientists and extension workers worked hand in hand with the farmers played an important role in this regard.

Another reason why the outcome of the process was so positive is the fact that all the actors in the process had coalesced under one umbrella, the Focal Area Forum, which is a very novel concept and must be spread to other areas.

It would have been better, though, if the media, which was present at the gathering in large numbers, had taken more interest in the matter and spread the message far and wide. The fact that there was no reporting on the outcome of this very important workshop in the media (at least to my knowledge) is difficult to comprehend.

There is a need for all concerned to work as a team, as was done in the research under consideration, to consign monga to the museum. It is eminently do-able, and can be achieved sooner than we can think, only if all the actors could put their

What's Iran thinking?



Three US national-security and intelligence officials told NEWSWEEK emphatically that US intelligence agencies have no plans to shorten their oft-stated estimate that Iran will not be capable of creating a nuclear weapon until 2010-2015, at the earliest. But Washington-based nuclear expert David Albright now estimates that at the current pace Tehran will have enough material for a bomb two years from now, by 2009.

MICHAEL HIRSH AND MARK HOSENBALL

THEY were two very different crises. One lasted 444 days, humiliated an American president, and became a national obsession as 52 hostages lived in terror of being beaten and executed. The other ended with

smiles and handshakes after only 13 days, and the British captives were rewarded, like well-behaved parolees, with shiny new suits.

But given that some of the same Iranian players were involved, the Bush administration was only too eager to draw comparisons between the November 1979 US Embassy takeover -- for which Iran

spokesman, Sean McCormack, said after Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad sent the Brits home with a grin. "Beyond that, I don't know what other lessons I would draw from the incident."

There may be one other lesson: Washington remains almost as mystified by Iran's behavior today as it was back then. After the latest crisis was resolved, US and British Intel officials admitted they were uncertain whether Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei ordered the British service personnel seized, or who exactly inside Tehran decided to end the standoff.

US officials vehemently denied any tit-for-tat deal involving the

release of Jalal Sharifi, an Iranian diplomat seized in Iraq in February, the day before the Brits were freed. Iraqi Foreign Minister Hoshyar Zebari endorsed that in an interview with NEWSWEEK. "There was no deal, to be honest with you," he said. But Zebari added that his government decided to help by making "presentations to the Iranians ... We did facilitate it [the British captives' release]."

US officials acknowledge that intelligence regarding what goes on at the highest level of the Iranian government is sketchy at best and generally poor. "It's opaque to us. We admit that," said a senior US official who declined to speak on the record about intelligence mat-

ters.

Within the U.S. intelligence community, which is still pathologically unsure of itself after Iraq, the lack of insight into Iran is a big cause for worry. US officials tended to play down a report from the International Atomic Energy Agency that Iran was installing centrifuges for uranium enrichment at its secret Natanz plant faster than previously thought.

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But Washington-based nuclear expert David Albright now estimates that at the current pace Tehran will have enough material for a bomb two years from now, by 2009. "I'm worried about that," says Albright.

Still, some Iran observers noted Tehran's seeming eagerness to resolve the latest hostage crisis -- a contrast to 27 years ago. Indeed, just hours after the captives were released, Iran's chief nuclear negotiator, Ali Larijani, phoned his European counterpart, Javier Solana. "The Iranians are in a mood to talk," Solana's spokeswoman, Cristina Gallach, told NEWSWEEK.

An Iranian official with intimate knowledge of the affair, who didn't want to be named talking about sensitive matters, agrees. "Ahmadinejad's toned-down rhetoric at his news conference last week means he is sending a signal to the Americans and their British allies that he's willing to talk about other issues, including nuclear," the official said. Given what US officials admit they don't know, they might do well to listen.

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