IN late November 2007, I made a return visit to two villages in the Manikganj area of Bangladesh that I had worked in during the late 1970s. My hope was to meet with some of the village women I had come to know at that time. I wanted to see what had happened to them -- to their lives, their livelihoods -- over the past three decades.

In mid-1975, at the request of Fazle Hasan Abed, I joined Brac to start its women's program. Abed and I had worked together with others in relief efforts after the November 1970 cyclone, and political lobbying for recognition of Bangladesh during the 1971 Liberation War.

Started in 1972, to rehabilitate refugees who had fled to India during the civil war, Brac was a relatively small NGO in 1975: I was its 23rd. employee. In addition to the Sulla area of Sylhet district, its original area of operations, Brac had started activities in and around Jamalpur town in Mymensingh district and Manikganj town in Manikganj district.

In November 1975, on a field trip to the Manikganj area, Brac colleagues and I met a group of women sitting in the shade of tree near a food-for-work site. The women had just been refused work at that site. Local officials turned them back, saying: "Women in Bangladesh should not work outside their homes. We have never hired women at food-for-work sites."

The leader of this group of women was Saleha, the wife of a marginal farmer and mother of a young son and daughter. Over the next several months, Brac colleagues and I met other women who needed food-for-work in order to make ends meet: two of them were widowed mothers with young children, Boshiron and Shunabon. We also met a young deserted woman named Sufia who, presumably because she had studied to class 4, did not want to do manual food-for-work.

From the end of June to early September 1974, Bangladesh had suffered severe floods. Reports of starvation began immediately after the floods, and grew in severity. The government of Bangladesh officially declared famine in late September. From early October to late November, the government operated langarkhanas (gruel kitchens) to provide free cooked-food to destitute people. Landless labourers (and their families) comprised the major share of those who were fed at the langarkhanas, or died of starvation. Estimates of how many people died in the famine vary greatly. What is clear is that, without the massive relief effort, the mortality would have been higher.

By late November 1974, the government declared that the famine was over and closed the

