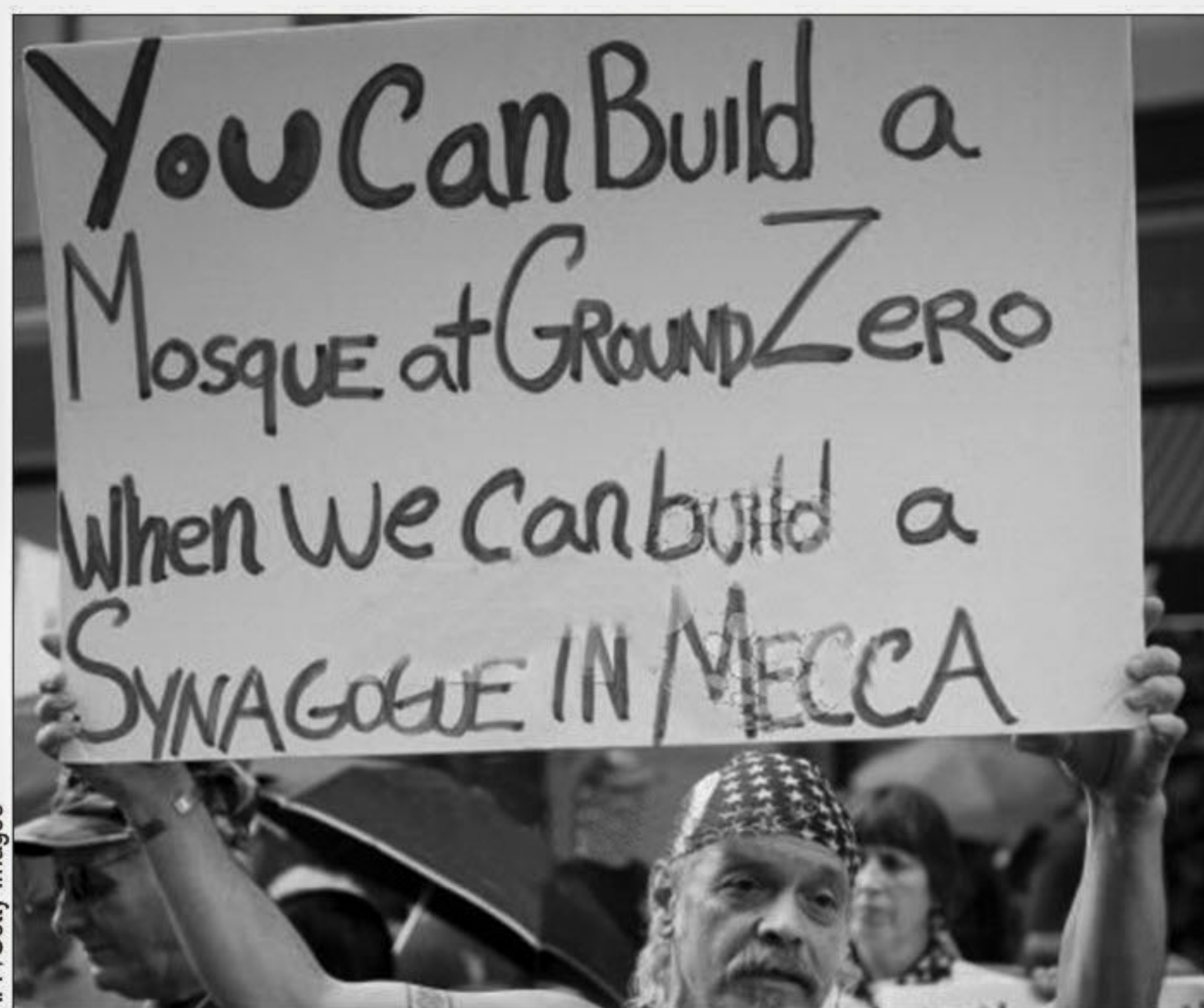


Mosque controversy and plight of Muslims in US



Ground Zero Mosque: Raising hope ...

... and anger.

Although the prayer hall or mosque is one of several community service facilities of the proposed centre, unfortunately, the whole project has been turned on its head and labeled as mosque by its opponents.

ZIAUDDIN M. CHOUDHURY

FOR the last several weeks both print and electronic media here in the US have been abuzz with only one topic -- the proposed Islamic Center near Ground Zero of New York (the place where the Twin Towers once stood). The clamour over the proposed centre (usually referred to as mosque by the media) has been so great that even the US president had to comment on it.

Opposition to the centre has been overwhelming -- about 60% according to a Time magazine opinion poll. Criticisms from people opposing the project have ranged from mild and polite to downright caustic and hostile. Politicians and opinion leaders including media pundits have all weighed in, mostly against the centre, albeit a few have supported it on the ground of religious freedom and the right of people to choose any place for worship.

What is this Islamic Center and why has it attracted so much ire from so many people in a country that prides itself in a constitution founded on the rights of people, irrespective of race, colour, and religious persuasion? The project called Park51 involves building a twelve-story structure two blocks away from Ground Zero. It will accommodate a library, fitness centre, children's centre, information centre, a five hundred seat auditorium, and a praying hall for Muslims.

Although the prayer hall or mosque is one of several community service facilities of the proposed centre, unfortunately, the whole project has been turned on its head and labeled as mosque by its opponents. The sponsors of the project have already bought an existing old structure that they plan to demolish, and build a new

structure at an estimated cost of about \$100 million.

Many arguments, from the mildest to the harshest, have been put forward by the opponents of the project. A polite argument recognises the right of every religious group to establish a centre of worship anywhere in the country, but wants the centre to be located elsewhere. The argument to move it elsewhere is made because the closeness of a mosque to Ground Zero might evoke wrong sentiments among people who had lost their loved ones at the hands of terrorists -- who unfortunately were also Muslims. The proponents of this argument, however, ignore the fact that close to 300 of those who died in the Twin Tower attack were Muslims.

The harshest has come from the section of people known as the right-wingers or hard core conservatives who not only find the location inappropriate, but also question the right of the Muslims to build a prayer hall. In their criticism, they have broad-brushed all Muslims with the terrorists of September 11, and have charged the religion itself of preaching violence rather than peace.

A supporter of this line of argument, the former House speaker Newt Gingrich, went so far as to say that to allow an Islamic Centre near Ground Zero would be tantamount to allowing Nazis to "put up a sign next to the Holocaust Museum in Washington."

The mosque controversy has seized the media in last few weeks so much that other more pressing domestic and foreign issues have taken a backseat. Fewer discussions centered on unemployment, declining stock prices, or the war in Iraq or Afghanistan. We saw news and pictures of

protesters in New York, political leaders commenting on the subject, and other pundits mulling the propriety of one or other side of the debate.

The most important fallout of this controversy, however, has been open venting of feelings by people about Islam and Muslims in general all over the country. The controversy seems to have opened a Pandora's Box. It has unleashed a wave of negative feelings about Islam and Muslims that may have been latent in the majority population in the US. More importantly, it has brought a feeling of discomfort among the Muslims in the US, and some uncertainty about their rightful place in the US society.

There could be several reasons for this seeming outrage against Muslims and Islam, albeit limited to a section of the US population. First, there is still a vast unawareness about Islam and Muslims among average US citizens. Despite the growth from immigration and natural increase, Muslims account for about 1% of the US population (compared with nearly 3% for Jewish population).

In addition, unlike the Jewish community, the Muslims are a highly fractured community. They represent many different nationalities and ethnicity. The perception of Islam and Muslim is often derived from a Middle Eastern stereotype. The national origins of the perpetrators of September 11 (all from Arab countries) have, unfortunately, strengthened the perception.

The venting of negative feelings about Muslims and Islam has been further caused by the events of the last few years. Several arrests were made in the last three years in many US cities where people of this faith were charged either with actual acts of terrorism or conspiracy to launch terrorist attacks in public places. Two of these that occurred in the recent past made indelible impressions among the public.

First was the wanton killing of people by a Muslim army major in an army cantonment. Second was the attempted bombing of Time Square by a disgruntled Muslim youth. To these one could add terrorist attacks that take place regularly in countries in which the US is engaged in wars.

This perception has been used by the extreme right in the US to negatively manipulate American opinion about Islam and its followers, and to raise suspicions about US Muslims. They have further attempted to fan the suspicion by spreading a false rumour about the president's religion (that he is a Muslim) and his foreign birth. The mosque controversy is being used as a weapon to advance political goals of certain sections in the country.

Where do US Muslims stand to counter these attacks? Actually nowhere. Most are silently watching these developments and hoping that the problem will go away. Being in the minority, they do not represent a monolithic community. They also have little political influence. They need to speak out either as individuals or in groups to their neighbouring communities about what their religion truly represents and how it spurs violence in the name of religion.

The purpose of the proposed centre in New York is to promote this message and acquaint the uninformed with true Islam. To represent true Islam and to benefit the Muslim community, New York Park51 (Islamic Center) may not necessarily be built close to Ground Zero. If the overwhelming sentiment in the city so directs, let the sponsors build the centre elsewhere in New York.

I have great faith in the American people and the American belief in the rights of people. I am sure that, ultimately, we will have a solution to this controversy that will be agreeable to all. In his letter to the Hebrew Congregation of Newport, Rhode Island, Gorge Washington had written: "It is now no more that toleration is spoken of as if it were the indulgence of one class of people that another enjoyed the exercise of their inherent natural rights, for, happily, the government of the United States, which gives to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance, requires only that they who live under its protection should demean themselves as good citizens in giving it on all occasions their effectual support." This statement should be true today as it was two hundred and twenty years ago.

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Reactivating Trading Corporation of Bangladesh

It will have to adjust the role of TCB in a free economy. In matters of both import and export the ministries of commerce and finance should work more closely.

A.B.M.S. ZAHUR

AS the successor of erstwhile Trading Corporation of Pakistan (TCP), TCB started its operation as the only governmental agency for import of essential food items like edible oil, sugar, onions, flour, salt etc. to keep the prices of these commodities at an acceptable level.

Due to pressure from the World Bank for freeing the economy from government intervention the TCB was made almost non-functional in 2003 by the then BNP-led government after serving the need for essential commodities for more than 30 years, covering around 12 million people directly or indirectly. During 2006-07 it imported goods worth only Tk.260 million.

Due to lack of direction from the government the organisation could not import anything since July 2007. In the area of export it played some active role. It started with export of goods worth Tk.4 core 73 lac, and it rose to Tk.240 core and 43 lac in 1998-99. It went down to only Tk.84 lac in 2009-10.

This organisation can again become a profit-making organisation if it can increase its export. It is said that it is incapable of satisfying the needs of the people due to lack of manpower, financial resource, irregularities and corruption. With some encouragement from the government, TCB can play a significant role in containing the prices of imported essential food items.

We are aware of the fact that the prices of essential food items are a very sensitive issue. Keeping the prices of food items at reasonable level was on the top in the election manifesto of AL. Thus it appears that the government has no other option except strengthening of TCB as quickly as possible. We are rather unhappy at the government's dilly-dallying in making TCB active for its own interest, i.e. retaining its popularity.

It is reported that the ministry of finance is still examining the justification of the proposal of the ministry of commerce for allotting Tk.1,000 core to TCB for import of essential food items. TCB is suffering from resource constraint apart from inadequate number of personnel. While it will need around Tk.12 hundred cores to fully activate TCB, it has so far been able to mobilise only Tk.290 core.

It is true that TCB could not earn a good name in the past. It was regarded as an inefficient and corrupt organisation. Where there is trading there remains the possibility for corruption. Buying, storing, pricing and distribution of goods need some expertise. TCB never had enough of it.

In strengthening TCB the government must try to engage as many professionals as possible because Bangladesh economy is free now. The government will have to face a challenge from the private sector, which is increasingly becoming more and more dynamic and efficient.

Whatever decision the government takes it must think about the welfare of the people. It must not be guided by advice from the multilateral donor agencies. It will have to adjust the role of TCB in a free economy. In matters of both import and export the ministries of commerce and finance should work more closely.

No doubt, the government is working hard to overcome the existing crisis brought about by high prices of essential food items. The speed of work, however, needs gearing up. With appointment of adequate number of competent, honest and hard working personnel the present crisis of the TCB may be eliminated. The government may consider appointing some retrained efficient personnel of TCB, within the age of 65 and free from politicization, on contract basis. The experience and efficiency of these personnel may be helpful for the government.

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Minimisation of rice yield gap

Farmers' knowledge base could possibly be developed through imparting training on the given technology packages. Likewise, differences in fitness of technology due to regional variations need to be well delineated to the end users so that they adopt the appropriate technology and obtain the desired output.

M. SHAHE ALAM

BANGLADESH is basically a land scarce country where agriculture is the mainstay of the economy, contributing over 20.87% of the gross domestic product (GDP). Presently, about 62% of the country's land, amounting to about 8.5 million hectares, is devoted to crop cultivation.

Rice is the dominant crop of Bangladesh, growing on over three-fourths of the total cultivable land, and largely determines the rate of progress in the agriculture sector. Cultivation of rice remains a dominant economic activity in rural Bangladesh and is key to sustaining food security. Food self-sufficiency mostly depends on rice production since rice alone contributes about 70% of agriculture GDP and 50% of the total agricultural valued added in Bangladesh.

It is, therefore, often argued that self-sufficiency in food may be attained through enhancing overall productivity of rice. Contribution of rice to self-sufficiency in food is large because at present rice is grown on around 10.80 million hectares covering about 78% of total cultivable land in Bangladesh. Besides, rice production continues to be one of the important sources of livelihood, accounting for an estimated 76% of

the people's average calorie intake and 66% of protein intake.

Technological change led by varietal improvement in Bangladesh has significantly contributed to the growth of rice production during the last three decades. In fact, due to the introduction of high-yielding seed and fertilizer irrigation technology and rapid expansion of the area under irrigated dry season rice, rice production has been doubled since independence in 1971 without further increase in growing area.

So, the gains in the food grain sector that Bangladesh has achieved since its independence are mostly due to technological progress in the rice cultivation. Though the country has achieved near self-sufficiency in rice production, it was at the expense of reduction of the area under non-rice crops, particularly pulses and oilseeds.

Therefore, in order to attain self-sufficiency in food, technological advancement in the rice sector will obviously play a major role. Increase in production through horizontal expansion of area under rice cultivation is almost impossible since the area under crop production is always shrinking.

Adoption of modern varieties under irrigated ecosystem has already reached a plateau. Further expansion of irrigation

will also be difficult. The available statistics suggest that about 82 thousand hectares of land (1% of the total cropped land) are going out of agriculture every year.

Therefore, given the existing land constraints, further growth in rice production will depend on (a) the development of modern varieties for the unfavourable production environments, i.e. flood prone and salinity affected areas which cover nearly 40% of the cultivated land, and (b) the reduction of the gap between potential yield and farmers' achieved yield, which is commonly called "yield gap."

The concept of yield gap originated from the constraint studies carried out by the International Rice Research Institute (IRRI) during the seventies. Theoretically, yield gap is defined as the quantitative difference between the research/experiment station yield and the farm level yield of any technology/variety.

The research station/experiment station yield refers to the maximum possible yield of a variety, which is sometimes defined as the highest yield a variety has attained during any season at any experiment/research station. With no environmental constraints the yield at the experiment station is usually higher than the actual farm level yield in the same region/ecology. This is because the researchers in experiment station can apply as much inputs as they want while the farmers cannot do so.

There could be two reasons for the farmers to apply lower level of inputs: i) less affordability in most cases, and ii) farmers limit their input investment to a level that maximises their profit, i.e., marginal return if equal to marginal cost. The researchers in the experiment stations continue to apply inputs until their

marginal return is zero so that the yield is maximised.

Rigorous studies further revealed that within a conceptual framework, yield gap could be better understood through a model which decomposes the total yield gap, i.e. the difference between the experiment station yield and the actual farm yield, into two distinct parts by introducing an intermediate yield level representing the potential farm yield or yield obtained in potential farmers' field with modern technology.

As depicted in the figure, yield Gap I is the difference between the experiment station yield and the potential farm yield. It exists mainly because of environmental differences between the experiment station and the farmers' field. In fact, the technology may not give nearly as high yields in less favourable environments.

Fig: Yield gaps between the research station yield and actual farm yield.

There may also be some components of the technology that are not transferable from the experiment station to the farmers' fields. Therefore, it is argued that yield gap I is caused by the prevalence of environmental difference and non-transferable technologies.

Yield gap II is the difference between the potential farm yield and the actual farm yield. This gap exists because farmers usually use inputs and crop management or cultural practices that result in lower yields than the possible or exploitable level of yield on their farms. The main focus of research is on yield gap II. It is possible to explain the reasons/factors responsible for yield gap II in two ways: (i) Identifying what biological or physical inputs or cultural practices account for the yield gap, and (ii) determining why farmers are not using the inputs or cultural practices that would result in higher yields on their farms.

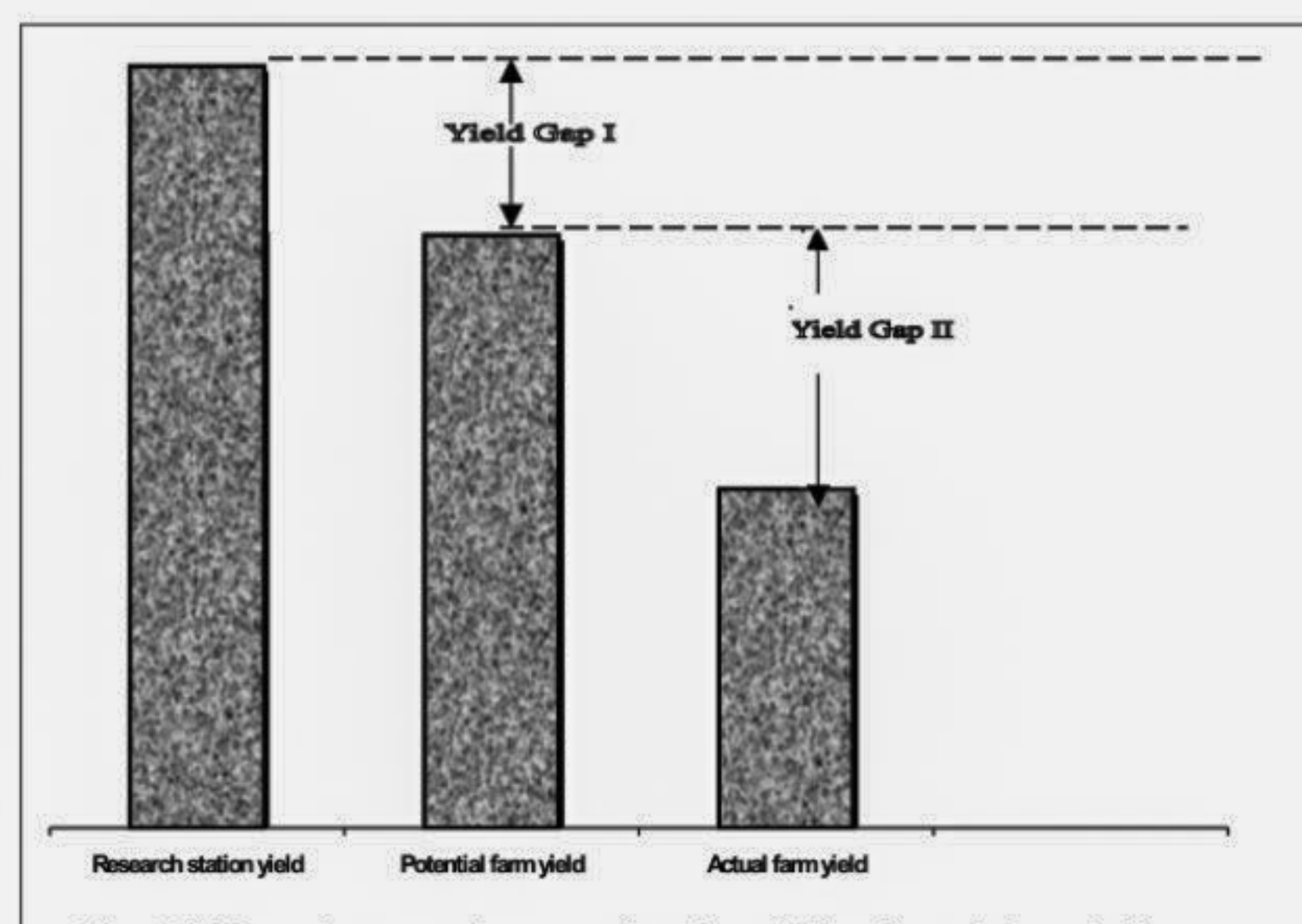


Fig: Yield gaps between the research station yield and actual farm yield.

Systematic research and in-depth analysis using relevant field level data would provide useful outcomes concerning the factors responsible for low yield in the farmers' fields. This analysis would eventually help to identify and overcome the reasons for low yield and also would pave the way of obtaining the potential yield using the available technology. The reasons for achieving low yield must be disseminated to the farmers since they are the end users of the technology.

Increasing farmers' understanding about proper use of the available technology could be the needed measure for minimising the gap between potential yield and actual achieved yield. In this respect, the extension services need to be strengthened so that both field demonstrations and adequate motivational works are carried out.

However, farmers' knowledge base could possibly be developed through

imparting training on the given technology packages. Likewise, differences in fitness of technology due to regional variations need to be well delineated to the end users so that they adopt the appropriate technology and obtain the desired output.

It is expected that rice yield at farm level can be enhanced at the exploitable level through applying both inputs and mainly following the crop management practices at recommended level; and once the ceiling of rice yield at farm level is enhanced it will minimise rice yield gap (yield gap II, what is discussed earlier) to some extent. With these steps overall productivity will be boosted, which will help in achieving self-sufficiency in food in near future.

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