

PEASANTS, PROGRAMMES AND POLITICS:
A STUDY OF RURAL INSTITUTIONS IN BANGLADESH,
WITH SPECIAL FOCUS ON THE COMILLA EXPERIMENT

BY

Muhammad Taher
(Bangladesh)

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PREFACE

This paper is a product of an exercise in research work at the end of a 15-month study programme in Agriculture and Rural Development at the Institute of Social Studies, The Hague, The Netherlands. I take this opportunity to thank all those who have contributed in making this an enlightening and memorable part of my life.

When I was groping for a suitable topic for this study, Prof. Henk van Roosmalen, my research supervisor, threw back a particular statement that I made in one of my Term II papers - and asked me to prepare a defence. I took up the challenge. That was how he stimulated my energy and keen interest in this research. I am deeply thankful to Prof. Roosmalen for the inspiration.

The microcosm that we formed in the ISS with friends from almost every corner of the globe needs a lot of space to describe. I prefer most of it to remain in pleasant anonymity. Among my very precious friends in ISS, I however, just wish to mention Elizabeth Gonzales, who helped editing an earlier draft of this paper. Likewise, I take note of some ISS staff who took special care in making our lives here easy and cheerful : Ben White, the ARD Programme Convenor; Hanneke Sprong, our Programme Secretary; Joost Kuitenbrower, a Professor with a difference; Anne Bordeaux - the ever helping 'diety' at the Student Office; and Gabriel van der Linden of Computer Section. My grateful appreciation is due these people, for all their care and support.

I also thank the Ford Foundation for providing me the fellowship. It is a truism to say that all my learning experience here would not have been possible, had it not funded my study. My sincere thanks and regards are due all the members of the Ford Foundation staff in both Dhaka and New York Offices for their support.

To conclude, I must also acknowledge with gratitude, the liberal cooperation I received from my employer organization, Friends in Village Development, Bangladesh (FIVDB).

INTRODUCTION

Throughout the Third World, several rural development approaches have been experimented on and adopted since the early 1950s. Continuous research and evaluation are being carried out to determine the best applicability of the programmes to the respective socio-economic set-ups. The Comilla rural development programme of Bangladesh, started in the early 1960s, is one such programme which has been able to draw wide attention from the circles of academics, planners and politicians at home and abroad, due mainly to its successful mobilisation of rural population toward a considerably 'dynamic' agricultural transformation. It became a sort of model for a viable rural development strategy. In one report, the Comilla programme, was noted to present features that favoured its duplication elsewhere in the world, to thereby make "the villagers of the world - the majority of mankind the beneficiaries"(Raper, A. F. 1970:275).

Despite such expectations and other open expressions of confidence, the greatest virtue of the Comilla programme is that it never tended to be overwhelmed by any euphoria of success, nor by a melancholy of despair. The academic patronage of the Michigan State University and the remarkable leadership of Akhter Hameed Khan, brought in an atmosphere of openness very congenial for a non-dogmatic academic milieu that existed in the academy of rural development(BARD) in Comilla. As a result, numerous empirical research and self-critical studies were continuously carried out by the Academy. Independent researchers from outside, have also substantially contributed to the academy's efforts.

The present study, being a short research exercise conducted outside Bangladesh where the Comilla programme operates, mainly uses secondary data and information. It intends to investigate a few general findings on the Comilla experiment, and to analyse the successes and failures of the experiment in its historical and contemporary political perspectives - particularly the period since its inception till the end of 1960s. Although, the programme enjoyed a certain amount of administrative autonomy, it was basically a government sponsored venture. The government plan to eventually replicate the model in other parts of the country, certainly bears some political implications, which the study will also examine. What elements of the programme actually prompted the then Pakistani government, which clearly had an industrial and urban bias, to undertake such a rural development programme? What are its outcomes? These are some of the specific questions that the study addresses, to determine how peasants, programmes and politics have constituted considerations relative to the Comilla experiment.

The Assumptions

The basic assumption of the thesis is that, as the contemporary Pakistani government was concerned primarily to get the agricultural sector produce a marketed surplus in a bid to maintain urban industrial growth, the bare outcomes of the Comilla approach demonstrated remarkable success towards that direction, but at a high cost of considerable pauperization of the lower peasantry - as some studies also indicate.

There is no denying the fact that the government of Pakistan at that time contemplated development through establishing a base of industrial capitalism in the country(1); and agriculture was required to maintain the needed supply of food crops and industrial raw materials. Production of jute and other cash crops was given

emphasis, to feed the local industries, and earn foreign exchange needed for the expansion of those urban industries. On the whole, it was essentially a 'growth strategy' that the Pakistani government undertook to solve the economic problems. As far as the per capita GNP growth rate was concerned, the government remained complacent about its performance and pursuit of growth goals in the so called 'Decade of Development'. Industrial sector was seen to be a favourite agent for such accelerated western model growth. On the other hand, agriculture continued to be the major sector of the economy - as an overwhelming majority of the population was dependent on it, and contributed over fifty percent to GDP. Thus, agriculture could not be neglected altogether. The government's stance in this regard was that the agriculture sector must also attain higher growth in order to meet the requirements of a more rapid industrial growth.

The Comilla programme was therefore seen as an ideal model which, through the introduction of modern technology via a new institutional set-up, was indeed able to attain unprecedented success in boosting food production. But the basic limitation of the Comilla experiment was that, it intended to bring about an ambitious change in the village economy by injecting capital through the new cooperative institutions without making any attempt to cause a dent on the existing structural imbalance of the rural society (2). This, they hoped, would be levelled once the poor begin to assert themselves economically. But as soon as the programme matured, it began to reveal the limitations of its own approach - which somewhat underestimated the rural power structure that would certainly not remain passive, specially in the wake of an encounter.

On another level the government contemplated in this programme a political vehicle to reach the rural power-base, where the majority lives. Moreover, the authority had no reason to be skeptical about its approaches so long as the PL-480 and other US

assistance were forthcoming to support programmes after Comilla fashion, and so long as the rural mass were kept engaged in ad-hoc activities, with a bonus of increased agricultural outputs. Although, at one stage the Governor of East Pakistan, Abdul Monem Khan, had his personal dislike of the programme for some "unknown reasons", the popular opposition Awami League party, which would soon to come in power were also said to have taken interest in it and included the major components of the programme in their election manifesto (Ibid, pp. 131 and 187 Vol- II). Apparently, all the governments of Bangladesh, beginning from the Pakistani era, to date, found in the Comilla approach a quite convenient path to simultaneously engage rural poors in occasional activities and maintain political hold on them - thereby avoiding politically risky and sensitive issues like land reform and land redistribution.

The Structure of the Paper

The study centers mainly around the above assumptions about the Comilla programme. To set the issues in context, Chapter I describes the process of social formations in the history of Bangladesh, and the genesis of institutional interventions in the rural society by the state. It also traces the immediate sequences that preceded the emergence of the 'Comilla'. Chapter II looks into the ideological underpinnings upon which the programme has been based. It also presents the programme's general working strategy which had brought about some positive results during its formative stage. Chapter III makes a critical analysis of these achievements - and their economic and political implications for the contemporary Pakistani government. It also reviews the actual impacts the model has created in the rural societies in accentuating the socio-economic differences. Chapter IV attempts to study the political motives of different governments in patronizing such rural development programmes. The main focus is on 'Comilla', but the

other rural development programmes undertaken by the recent governments, including the administrative re-organization of the present government, are also discussed. The study ends with a summary and conclusion in Chapter V.

Notes :

1. For empirical data and comments about the industrial and capital bias of the Pakistani government of the time see Stefan de Vylder, 1981 pp.74-77 and Elkinton, C.M. 1976.
2. In several occasions Dr. Akhter Hameed Khan, the leader of the programme till 1970, has spoken/written about the 'circumscribed' limitations of the programme's scope to put forward a radical policy for implementation. For details see "The Works of Akhter Hameed Khan" Vol - II and III, BARD, Comilla, 1983.

Chapter I

BEFORE 'COMILLA'

1.1 Rural Institutions in Bangladesh : Historical Perspective

The concept of rural development through institutions, in its modern sense, does not have a very long history in Bangladesh. In fact, rural linkages with the rulers had always been very insignificant in the past. Whatever rural linkages existed during the Mogul and the British colonial era, were established primarily through that of a surplus extraction mechanism. Although traditional rural society in Bengal was evidently a surplus producing agrarian society, differentiation among peasantry has been an ever present phenomenon. The ruling class never felt the necessity of implementing genuine policies to confront the problems of inequality and poverty in rural areas; since the kind of differentiated class that existed, always favoured the political as well as economic interests of the rulers. No earlier attempts of development programmes, or rural institutions would then be established, until before the end of nineteenth century when a Department of Agriculture was set up in response to a disastrous famine that hit the area in late 1850s. At about the same time a 'Chowkidary Panchayet' Act was passed, through which five member village level arbitration committees were organised. But these village institutions were primarily meant to safeguard the law and order situation of the British Raj, in the face of widespread peasant unrests of 1860s that alarmed the government about losing control of the masses (1).

The Department of Agriculture was set up with an objective of ensuring high agricultural production and distribution. But soon ceased to exist on claims of financial constraints. The Chowkidary Panchayet formed a precedence of building rural institution, and it succeeded in maintaining law and order in the country-side. But due to lack of appropriate economic objectives, these potential rural development organizations could not create any remarkable impact on the society.

1.2 Colonial and Pre-colonial Era :

A Comparative Picture

The conventional view about the Bengal rural economy is as follows : The Permanent Settlement Act of 1793, imposed by the British colonial rulers, is a landmark in the Bengal's most oppressive land tenure system that this caused to emerge. For centuries, particularly during the Mogul rule, land had been a communal property. Cultivators only had to pay a small part of their surplus produce to the king as land revenue. In each village, besides cultivators, there were various artisans, like spinners, weavers, carpenters, blacksmiths, potters, barbers and cobblers - who catered to all village needs. Charles Metcalf, a British Historian writes that "the village communities are little Republics, having nearly everything that they want within themselves,they seem to last where nothing else lasts"(2). A presumably harmonious rural community life prevailed in Bengal, where farmers and artisan producers lived in relative peace and well being. Such well balanced industrial and agricultural economy fostered a prosperous rural life.

But such soothing account of pre-colonial Bengal has been rejected by some researchers - on the ground that caste-based class antagonism prevalent for centuries could plausibly not have fostered

self-sufficient and all peaceful 'Little Republics'. Recent studies on history traced the existence of a differentiated peasantry and a landless proletariat class in the Gangetic delta as far back as in the 5th. century B.C., when a system where servile and semi-servile labourers worked under landowning masters was existent. Nilufar Matin, in a recent study, maintains that today's landlessness is actually a process of 'continuity since antiquity'. According to her, since after the middle of first millenium B.C., a rapid change in the agrestic life continued to occur, leading to universalised peasant production, and simultaneously creating a caste-divided peasantry. Brahmanical Hindu and Buddhist texts are said to provide effective rationalization to this effect stating 'economic necessity' (3). Added to this continuous process during the pre-colonial Mogul era, were those processes that involved the penetration of market forces for export, and import of commodities, monetisation, payment of revenue in cash and traditional money lending. Brisk sale of property rights in land had also been initiated during those early times (Ray, 1979, in Matin op.cit.).

Likewise, Zamindari system created by the Permanent Settlement is not totally a new phenomenon in this country. Calkins (4) in an essay showed some similarities between the Mogul and British land revenue systems. He particularly noted the period of Murshid Quli Khan's Governorship during the early part of eighteenth century, when the Mogul emperor Aurangzeb appointed him as Dewan of the Bengal province. Starting as 'Dewan' (revenue officer) and later as Nazim (governor), Murshid Quli Khan carried out some revenue reforms to raise an increased amount of funds that the emperor needed for his war against the Marathas in South India. Zamindars, who even at that period controlled most of the land of Bengal were quite skillfully played by Murshid Quli Khan. He "followed a carrot-and-stick policy with the Zamindars. He encouraged efficiency in collection by rewarding those Zamindars who were able to deliver the increased sums that he demanded and by

punishing those who were not one result of his policy was to create very large number of zamindars and generally to substitute .. an earlier system in which there had been a relatively large number of smaller landholders" (Calkins, op. cit. pp.12-13).

A summing up of the issue, however, reveals that the process of land alienation and other forms of expropriation from the peasantry by the state, through a non-cultivator elite class has a history several hundred years old. The colonial land and revenue policies only consolidated and reinforced it. What was new in the colonial period was the attempt to introduce a few formal rural institutions. The overt objective of these institutions was development. In practice however, those institutions have served more the political and surplus extraction objectives of government. Since then, institutional approaches to simultaneously exploit and develop the rural socio-economic milieu of this land have passed through different phases with different characters. The working strategy and the outcomes of these organizations' undertakings will be examined.

1.3 Early Rural institutions

The beginning of rural institution building efforts in this country was not a very happy one - primarily because, it was initiated by a colonial government which apparently had a distorted political and economic framework in mind. These institutions were partly successful in implementing certain covert designs , but not in changing the situations of the impoverished millions. The formation of the 'Department of Agriculture' and the 'village Panchayets' only posed a semblance of development efforts of the colonial government. While the former ceased to exist within a short period of its birth, the later survived for sometime primarily to check peasant unrests.

Meanwhile , one famine after another kept battering the already weakened rural society dominated by the new zamindars. A perennial neglect of the impoverished mass in Bengal characterises the whole colonial era. Instead of efforts to strengthening of formal institutions to cope with the situation, the government policies deliberately allowed them to weaken and decline. Tepper's (1976, p.30) comment in this regard is quite substantive : "As a hinterland, East Bengal underwent a prolonged period of what may be called institutional atomization. The formal institutions of government were kept to a minimum. The continued abdication to private landlords of revenue collection duties led to a truncated form of the usual British imperial control apparatus, the district collectorate"(Ibid :30).

The Act of Local Self-Government of 1885 was the first legislative action for the establishment of local self governing bodies in Bengal. This created a three tier local body, consisting of a District Board, a Local Board and an Union Committee at the District, Sub-Division and Union levels respectively. The District Board, headed by a District Magistrate with nine other members were assigned the job of building road, bridges, primary schools, dispensaries, etc. This was the most important of all the three bodies. The Local Board and the Union Committee were only the agents of District Board - supervising the activities planned and executed by the District Board. But since they were all dependent on local rates and government grants, which were always in short supply, not many remarkable development projects were actually undertaken by these local institutions.

The idea of establishing such local governments was put forward by the Governor General Lord Ripon in 1882. Of course, the Act of 1885 in this regard was much more modified than what was stated by Ripon. If the administrative reforms of the present Bangladesh Government, where Thanas (recently upgraded and renamed

Upazila) are the nucleus of local government activities, were to be compared with what Ripon proposed about a hundred years back, a lot of common elements in both may be identified. The following quotation from Tepper (op. cit. :38) substantiates the view :

"Ripon wanted a network of local councils, with the most important council to be at the subdivisional (sub-district) level, or even lower at the thana level; the district was considered too large for effective councils. Membership was to be at least three-fourths elected, and the Chairman was to be elected as well. The councils were to be training grounds in citizenship, rather than immediate improvements on the efficiency of rural administration. But even for Ripon, the long-range goal was to facilitate the functioning of the rural bureaucracy, by creating quasi-autonomous local organizations to absorb some duties of government"(5).

1.3.1 Village level Self Government

Much after the Local Self Government Act of 1885, a somewhat distorted version of Lord Ripon's plan, a new Act of Village Self-Government, was enacted in 1919 to reinvigorate the local councils and give deep roots in the countryside. The new Act was based on the recommendations of E.V. Levinge, who headed an investigation team in 1913 to find out the deficiencies in the administrative system of the districts. The remarkable feature of this Act was that election of all the members of local boards was to be held - none will be appointed; a position of Circle Officer was created to guide and supervise the activities of Union Boards. Also, the Union Committee was renamed as Union Board with one-third of the nominated members. The Chairman of the Union Board was renamed as President, who will have added duties of discharging petty disputes in the villages(6).

1.3.2 Institutions on Agricultural Development

Although Bangladesh has been a predominantly agricultural society since time immemorial, the history of agricultural and rural development institutions is not only very recent, but also marked by failures. Not only financial constraints of successive governments are responsible for it, but their lack of pragmatism and neglect of the sector are also to be blamed. Often, attempts in this regard to improve the situation were either inadequate or wrong.

The colonial rulers of Britain "gave momentum to commercialization and commodity production by increasing monetization and profit possibilities and by legalising the transferability of land [Thorner, 1955] (7). They were interested mainly in producing commercial crops. Indigo, jute and tea got priority over food crops. To supply cheap dyes to the textile mills in England, the British took ruthless measures to get even subsistence farmers to produce exotic indigo. Similarly, cultivation of Jute was encouraged to supply raw jute to the mills in Dundee. Tea plantations were started by indentured labourers brought in from outside of Bengal. The produce used to be processed here, but almost entirely for the market in England (Solaiman, op.cit. p.6).

The consequence was, a series of famines in Bengal that took a heavy toll on lives innumerable and un-enumerated. A number of famine commissions were set up each time there was a famine; ritual recommendations to emphasize agricultural development were made. The one Agricultural Department set up in 1885 limpingly moved under the administrative control of Land Records Department. The famine in 1900 led to the formation of another famine commission in 1901, which strongly recommended the strengthening of staff and research component of the Department. In 1908 an agricultural research laboratory was established (8) and in 1914 an extension team was deployed. Research was mainly concentrated on seed improvement; and jute received special attention. A Directorate of Agricultural

Marketing in 1930 and a Fisheries Department in 1942 were established. But financial constraints always affected the smooth functioning of these institutions.

1.4 The New Rural Development Programme of 1920s

In the history of India, the 20s of this century were marked by the mass non-cooperation movement of Gandhi and the Muslim Wahabi movement. These political movements, coupled with post war depression and agricultural slump, very severely affected the famine prone village life once again. While the agitation against British Raj started to spread even in the remote villages, a new Department titled, Rural Reconstruction Department was initiated in the 30s. F.L. Brayne of Indian Civil Service and the exponent of this programme, was inspired by an experiment of "gurgaon scheme" in the Punjab district and thought that by imbuing the villagers with the ideals of the dignity of labour and services, great impact on the development of rural economy was possible. The objective of the programme was to train some village leaders, teachers, voluntary workers and women in the elementary principles of sanitation, medical aid, cooperation, thrift, agricultural improvement etc, - in order that they may act as 'centres of infection' (9).

But Brayne's reformist approach failed, due perhaps to too high hopes attached to it of changing the attitudes, habits and even the age old values of the village people, in order to involve them in development works. Akhter Hameed Khan's evaluation of the programme is that, Brayne had a Victorian philanthropic attitude to remove rural problems with the nostrum of Gurgaon. "According to Brayne, if the Indian villages were in bad shape, it was on account of their own faults of ignorance, superstition and factionalism. If they could find a friendly guide and philosopher, they could through self-reform and self-help, at once improve their condition. As in

the 'golden age' of Queen Victoria, self-help was the true gospel of progress "[Khan, A.H. 1973] (10).

On the basis of an investigation committee report, which found it inadequate for a single department to tackle the rural reconstruction problem, the Rural Reconstruction Department was abolished in 1944.

Despite the failure of the programme to create singly, any substantial impact, the idea of self-help and changing attitudes towards rural development through mutual cooperation, thrift and maintaining health and sanitary atmosphere etc., for the general interest of all - were something which now constitute part of many rural development schemes of the third world. Despite the shortcomings in implementing the programme in a particular time and space, the philosophy of Brayne however, contained some very basic elements of successful rural change. It is interesting to note that on the plea of too massive a problem that could not be handled by a 'single department', the rural reconstruction project was in fact shelved and made rather vague. Besides, emphasis on changing habits, attitudes, health etc. were of minor importance to a shaky outgoing government. Here again, the final thesis of this study's argument may be cited : that the country's rulers are merely interested in getting agriculture to produce a marketed surplus and maintain political hold right at the mass base.

1.5 The Early Cooperatives

As earlier mentioned, the lack of effective rural institutions made the poorer peasants of Bangladesh suffer and get exploited by the richer landlords, money lenders and merchants for a very long time. The British had taken some measures prior to 1885, through various regulations to control money lending and settlement

of debts. But under the Agricultural Loans Act of 1885, the government, for the first time perhaps, provided cheap credit called Taccabi loans to the needy farmers. After famine and natural calamities, these served only as interim relief because the amounts were too small to improve output.

The Famine Commission report of 1901 suggested the formation in the country of agricultural banks, patterned after such institutions as those established by the European Mutual Credit Association. A special committee studied the prospect and came out with proposals to form cooperative societies. The result was the enactment of Cooperative Societies Act in March 1904. Village based primary cooperative societies for the first time were formed. There was a steady growth of these societies till 1925. But the economic depression of 1929 and the slump of overseas jute market severely affected the Bengali farmers and their cooperatives. As overdue loans were increasing, the expansion of cooperatives was curtailed in 1935. By 1940, the cooperative Department was nearly at a halt (Tepper, op. cit., pp.26-28). A Banking enquiry committee found several defects in the societies ; among them :

- a. Weak village organizations
- b. Societies monopolised by large landowners
- c. Lack of supervision o the societies and the
- d. Movement of Cooperatives turned into mere credit giving programme, and so on....

The number of 'E' grade (the worst performing ones) cooperatives increased while the best ('A' grade) declined. In 1939-40, 88.3 percent of the loans was overdue (11).

1.5.1 Cooperatives After Partition

The colonial village based societies were abolished in 1947 and replaced by a net-work of Union based multi-purpose societies, each comprising about 20 villages. By 1961, all the unions of the country were covered.

A credit enquiry committee formed in 1959 found that those stagnant cooperatives were providing only 0.6 percent of the existing institutional credit. The committee noted that the Union Co-operative multi-purpose Societies did not enjoy public confidence as they relied only on 'book entry' share capital and had overdues constituting two-thirds of total outstanding loans (12).

Thus the beginning of the cooperative movement in an independent state structure failed to leave positive impression. It carried almost the same faulty features that characterised earlier colonial institutions, namely; the domination by Union Board members of the societies; the absence of follow-up supervision of the cooperatives; the failures of members to hold regular meetings, thereby making cooperatives as failure even in terms of its educational purpose. The societies were pre-occupied solely with 'credit business'. They did not develop any programme of production, marketing or other services. Their management by the traditional leaders did not exhibit the dynamism needed for an effective programme (13).

1.6 The V-AID Programme

With the objective of stimulating self-help and cooperative efforts among the villagers, the Village Agricultural and Industrial Development (V-AID) programme was initiated in 1953. It was founded on the principles of Community organization and development, a concept popularized by the US Agency for International Development in the late 40s. The Government of Pakistan gave adequate emphasis

on it. In its First Five Year Plan :1955-60, it was stated, "because of the overriding importance of rural development programme and the crucial role of V-AID in stimulating it, we have given the highest priority into this programme" (Govt. of Pakistan, 1957, p.200).

Considered to be the first organized development effort to acknowledge the village as a crucial focal point, it embarked on efforts to foster effective participation in the field of agriculture, primary and adult education, health and sanitation, cottage industry, cooperatives, women and youth's programme.

The programme was to take place first in the few selected areas of the country, each area consisting of some 150 to 200 villages. A team of extension agents led by the development officer should work out priorities and set targets of the rural plan with the help of the advisory committee composed of local people. Dr. Akhter Hameed Khan, the first Director of the V-AID programme, in explaining its objectives, said : "the ... principle was the formation of all-purpose village councils. A council was supposed to do everything : modernize agriculture, improve health, spread education, build roads, give credit, and arrange marketing. ..Most things were to be done by voluntary labour, but in special cases a contribution could be obtained from V-AID funds" (Khan, A.H., op. cit. p.10).

Unfortunately, participation of the rural people in plan formulation and implementation remained insignificant. The heavy dependence on the government for men and material resources was such that the villagers could not learn to take decisions themselves, mobilize internal resources to finance their development projects and attain self confidence. Moreover, the Village-AID did not take into account structural inequality in the villages. It did not consider the role of wealthy farmers, nor did it dwell on the tenant

farmers, landless, artisans, blacksmiths, carpenters, potters and weavers. It was not clear for whom among the villagers the programme was exactly designed (14).

Besides lessons from the failures of the Village-AID programme which eventually was abolished by the military government in 1961, the only other gain for Bangladesh was the establishment of the Academy for rural development in Comilla in 1959. It was primarily set up as a training institute for the V-AID officials. The very institution under the able leadership of Dr. Akhter Hameed Khan, later developed into a social research laboratory, now widely known as Bangladesh Academy of Rural Development (BARD).

Notes

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Chapter II

'COMILLA' EMERGES

This Chapter discusses the birth of the present Bangladesh Academy of Rural Development (BARD), its primary objectives and its four component programme of (a)Co-operatives, (b)Thana training center, (c)Thana irrigation programme, and (d)rural works programme. It also presents an example of the programme's so called success in raising food output.

2.1 Founding of Comilla Academy

When the Village-AID programme was on the verge of utter failure, the government attempted to revitalise it through the creation of an institution where civil officers were oriented to the government's rural development efforts. The present Academy at Comilla underwent successive changes in its title, from "Academies of Administration and Community Development" to "Village AID Academies", then "Pakistan Academy for Village Development", and finally "Bangladesh Academy of Rural Development" or BARD.

The primary objective of the Academy was to make more productive use of the "administrative and technical skills they (govt. officials) already had, and of aiding them in the acquisition of new skills needed in rural development programmes. Especially needed was increased understanding of village life and competence in the techniques of guiding constructive change. The overall plan for the Academy was developed around the needs of Pakistan public administration as identified by government officials, with major advisory assistance from a team of social scientists from Michigan

state University [Raper, 1970, pp.11-12] (1). MSU provided academic guidance; the Ford Foundation, financial support. This is said to have "coincided with the political necessity of the government in power" (Ahmed, M. 1981, p.16).

The dominant role of a devout development worker, Dr. Akhter Hameed Khan, in providing a strong leadership to such a programme was a significant factor. Arthur Raper, an MSU scholar, who has worked in the comilla programme and closely observed its development, describing the personality of Dr. Khan says : "The Comilla approach is largely the product of this man who has worked insightfully and hard and long at one place. He encourages, stimulates, and to a large extent dominates his staff" [op. cit (1)p.29]. Dr. Khan's long and close association with rural development activities and his personal ideologies greatly moulded the matured shape of the programme. Unlike the colonial approaches that imposed ambitious changes in the habits and attitudes of the rural people, he believed that the answers to the development problems lied with the people themselves. He apparently did not have much faith on the 'Community Development' approach of fifties either - which demanded rather too much of voluntary participation from the rural poor. This might have prompted Dr. Khan to leave his administrative position of Village AID programme, just after one year of service in 1955, and return to his teaching profession. The abolition of Village-AID in 1961 apparently did not come as a shock to him, notwithstanding that in 1959, he prepared two reports suggesting "Reorganization of Local Government" and Integrating Basic Democracies (2) and Village AID".

Besides its training component, the Academy's center of focus spans the 107 square miles Comilla Kotwali Thana, which began to be used as a laboratory area for the Academy, with "full responsibility for policy determination". The so called Comilla Model is thus the child of extensive experimentations with the soil and the people of

this area. It took an integrated approach toward rural development, the most ostensible of which is the two-tier cooperatives system, known as 'Comilla Cooperatives'. This is one of the four components of the Comilla Programme.

2.2 Comilla Programme Components :

Comilla programme's four components are as follows :

(1) The two tier cooperative structure: This consists of :

(a) The first tier is comprised by the primary cooperatives at the village level, known as KSSes(3), with a membership of around 50 farmers each. To facilitate the function of these societies, each has an elected Chairman, and registered itself under Cooperative Society's Act. The members are to hold regular weekly meetings and education sessions, where attendance of all is compulsory. When it was started in Comilla, each Society was to have selected a 'Change Agent', who attended meetings at the Rural Development Academy for training, kept records, helped adoption of new technology, prepared joint production plan, made regular cash deposits, and joined the central cooperative federation meetings.

(b) The second tier of the cooperatives is the TCCAs (4), or Thana Central Cooperatives Association. This is the federation of the primary village level cooperatives at the Thana center. The Central Association, as Akhter Hameed Khan visualised it, would primarily be a center for training and education; secondly, a service center of agricultural machinery and other implements; thirdly a bank for promoting increased production through supervised planning and credit, capital accumulation through savings, and commercial marketing and finally to sponsor a 'special plan of supervised agricultural extension to demonstrate and teach scientific methods to the cooperative member farmers' (5).

(2) Thana Training and Development Center (TTDC) : The center was assigned the responsibility to train primary cooperative managers and model farmers who would act as 'change agents'. TTDC was regarded as an improved and expanded system of rural administration, as it promoted effective coordination of government departments and their interaction with leaders of local government (ibid., p.206).

(3) The Thana Irrigation Programme (TIP) : This programme was responsible for the support of cheap credit and subsidised equipment for the installation of irrigation facilities - mainly tube wells and low-lift pumps.

(4) The Rural Works Programme (RWP) : The main objective of the programme was to mobilize idle man-power for infrastructural investment. Planned and implemented through local councils, this programme successfully involved landless and other unemployed people in building drainage, embankment and roads.

2.3 Objectives of the Comilla Programme

Several major objectives that were set out during the initial phase of the programme need closer examination. Just how far these objectives have been realized, based on programme results, is determined in Section 2.4.

The design of the comilla experimental programme was based largely on long experience of past efforts in the field of rural development works in the Indian sub-continent and elsewhere in the world. Besides the work of assisting foreign scholars and the members of the Academy's faculty, the ideas and experience of one man, Dr. Khan, the Director, were largely responsible for shaping the programme. It was he, who brought to the Academy its central concept, which had grown out of his personal involvement in the

field. Besides being a rural development practitioner, Dr. Khan was a philosopher and a poet. His studies in English and Persian literature, Islamic theology and Sufism (Persian mystic cult) turned him into a man of high ideals. Although he was fond of calling himself a 'recluse', he was in fact an activist. He took Development Economics as 'modern theology'; learning through 'trial and error' was his motto.

It appears therefore, that the approaches to rural development of the Comilla programme rested mainly on a combination of some ideals and experience of its Director, and the scientific education of its consultants and the faculty. Naturally, the programme objectives revealed certain philosophical as well as realistic perspectives. However, there was yet one more over-riding factor in the formulation of the programme objectives : the influence of the Government. The then government of President Ayub Khan (1958-69), and his 'Basic Democracies' system (6) had also greatly influenced the Academy programmes.

For a fuller understanding of the broader and specific objectives of the programme, it is necessary to provide some historical and empirical references showing the basis of formulating these objectives.

2.3.1 The Broader Objectives

To show the inherent defects of past development moves in the Indian sub-continent, Dr. Khan, in his writings and speeches often tried to subject these past efforts to analysis. He had studied the precolonial Indian economy, seen the recurrence of famines in Bengal, the colonial 'Rural Reconstruction' programmes and finally the failure of the Village AID which he himself directed for a year. In his capacity as British Indian Civil Officer and as a

teacher, he also had long and intensive exposure to the dynamics of village society and its economy. Dr. Khan observed that neither the colonial administrative structure on one end, nor the high saintly idealism of Gandhi at the other end, could provide a viable solution to chronic rural development maladies. The Victorian Philanthropist myth of self-help and self-reform, or of philosopher-guide was proved to be futile sermons only - having little base with reality.

Dr. Khan viewed, even Gandhian idealism did not present a practicable solution to the problems of rural society. His ascetic renouncement of modernization or so called urban industrial civilization, was but an unrealizable utopia.

In addition, the aesthetic approach to rural upliftment by the Nobel Lauriat Bengali poet, Rabindra Nath Tagore, who idealized the pre-industrial village, where man can live close to nature in a life enriched by culture, music and serenity - was even a greater utopia than that of Gandhi. In this respect, Comilla wanted to take a down-to-earth approach to the problem. It believed, what the poor villagers needed was concrete help - of material or financial support to really be on their own. But, because of the continued exploitative practices of landlord and moneylenders, there was hardly any chance for small and marginal peasants to break away from the vicious cycle of poverty.

The Community Development (CD) approach popularised by the American Sociologists and development agencies in the 50s was also criticised by Dr. Khan. Although CD professed to be more modern in approach and more comprehensive, as it promised economic prosperity and the building of communal harmony; inculcated the desire for development and attempted to secure common participation among people etc., it actually failed to meet its objectives sufficiently. CD's failure in many other developing countries as well, prompted the US-AID to abolish its community Development Division in 1964

(Khan, 1978 :8). Dr. Khan classified CD approach with those of colonial British and the Gandhian approaches. He said, "Brayne wanted to uplift the villagers by sending an official guide-philosopher-friend. Gandhi wanted to do that by sending a constructive worker. Following the foot steps of Brayne and Gandhi, CD relied mainly on a government Village Level worker (VLW) as the agent of change (ibid, p. 170).

Similarly, Pakistan government's Village AID programme in the 1950s, jointly financed by the Ford Foundation and the US International Cooperation Administration (ICA), after the same CD model, was bound to flounder. But ironically enough, although the Comilla Academy was founded in order to revive the Village AID, the working experience of its national and expatriate staff drifted it towards a new direction of more comprehensive non-traditional approach. Although, in 1959 upon request from the East Pakistan Chief Secretary, Akhter Hameed Khan prepared statements on "Reorganization of Local Government and Integrating Basic Democracies and Village AID", he already had a declining faith on the CD approaches of these programmes. The government finally abolished Village-AID programme in 1961.

Meanwhile, the Academy was granted the Comilla Thana area for the purpose of using it as a research laboratory, where the alternative took shape.

Thus, learning from the past, the Comilla programme formed the following basic assumptions to guide its activities :

a) The villagers themselves have the best understanding of the rural situation and the problems of rural development. Rural concerns should then be approached from the villagers' point of view.

b) It is within the means of the villagers to bring about changes in their conditions. Such change should then be pursued through individual and cooperative village action.

c) Once the means for development are provided for through the guarantee of a sustained flow of income at a higher level, the villagers themselves would be in a position to initiate the process of change and would readily do so (7)

2.3.2 The Specific Objectives

There is no denying the fact that the Comilla experiment initially began with the specific objective of improving the economic situation of the small and medium farmers. And it was certainly not concerned, at least in the beginning, with just improving overall output performance. On the basis of extensive surveys using various methods around the Comilla laboratory area, it was found that the economic condition of the area was 'precarious', with a large portion of the population living below subsistence level, and landholding pattern being highly skewed. Lack of savings and capital made these people vulnerable to the exploitation of landlord/moneylenders. The Comilla model thus undertook to organise these peoples into cooperatives so that they could mobilize savings, accumulate capital, and save themselves from the oppression of moneylenders. As Khan noted, "By promoting habits of thrift and savings and investment, they can start the process of capital accumulation. They can widely diffuse new technical and managerial skills. Above all, rural cooperatives can create a healthy social consciousness and desire for harmony and order" (Khan, A.H. op. cit. p.11).

The other components, Thana Irrigation Programme (TIP), and Rural Works Programme (RWP) also served to reinforce the collective,

integrated character of the model. Moreover, increased Agricultural production required the net-work of roads, drains, embankments etc., to facilitate irrigation and control of Monsoon floods. Improvement of the physical infrastructure was, again, dependent upon the improvement of the institutional infrastructure. Hence, the need for organizing a central coordinating and Training institution of the Thana was emphasised and subsequently a Thana Training and Development Center (TTDC) was formed. The TTDC was primarily meant to involve the local government administration in development activities in a more concerted and effective manner.

2.3.3 The 'Circumscribed Limits'

Over and above all these need oriented objectives there was an invisible, but profound influence of the ruling government in determining the Academy's work strategy. Despite its freedom in academic sphere, it had somehow to fit in with the broader national development plans, which had, inter alia, political motivations. During 1960s, urban industrialization was the forte of President Ayub Khan's Muslim League government, which 'rural' academy in Comilla could hardly influence. With a tone of frustration, Dr. Khan said:

"We were the servants of a conservative government whose political, economic or administrative orientation we could scarcely change. In spite of pious professions, rural development was a very minor concern of our government. It was obsessed with industrial, urban and military development. It desired greater agricultural production chiefly because it wanted cheap food for the cities and raw material for industries and exports" (Khan, A.H., 1974, pp.8-9).

Notably, this study's assumption draws much credibility from this statement, that despite having pious objectives of improving situation of the poor peasants, the Comilla programme turned out to be a model agricultural surplus producing machinery. But how far

was the programme able to attain success in raising agricultural output ?

2.4 Output Improvement Results

The difference that was created by the Comilla programme in its laboratory area was indeed very remarkable. It was, perhaps, one of the successful development programmes in the whole sub-continent. "For a time in the early 1960s it did promote a substantial increase in agricultural production while at the same time insuring that the smaller farmers participated fully" (8). Why the academy received wide acclamation was due particularly to its having been able to transfer a stagnant agriculture to a flourishing one, through credit-cooperatives, training and field demonstration to encourage adoption of the new Green Revolution technology, and creation of institutions involving small farmers in successful rural development activities. Food, which is always a crucial element in the political economy of developing countries, was produced in Comilla area at much higher rate than elsewhere in Bangladesh.

Aman, the Monsoon dependent rice crop, which accounts for almost two third of Bangladesh's food crops, yielded in the Comilla experimental area in early 1960s at a rate twice as high as that in the outskirts of the project area. On the other hand, Boro rice crop, which is grown in the dry season, had even more impressive results in the Comilla area, where high yielding rice seeds, chemical fertilisers and irrigation technology were used. Figure 1 below gives a comparative picture of Comilla Kotwali Boro yield increase rates with those of the rest of the country. Since 1966, when the new agricultural technology was in full use, production began to shoot up from 1,250 pounds per acre to about 3,750 pounds in 1969-70 in the programme area - about 250 percent more than elsewhere in the country :

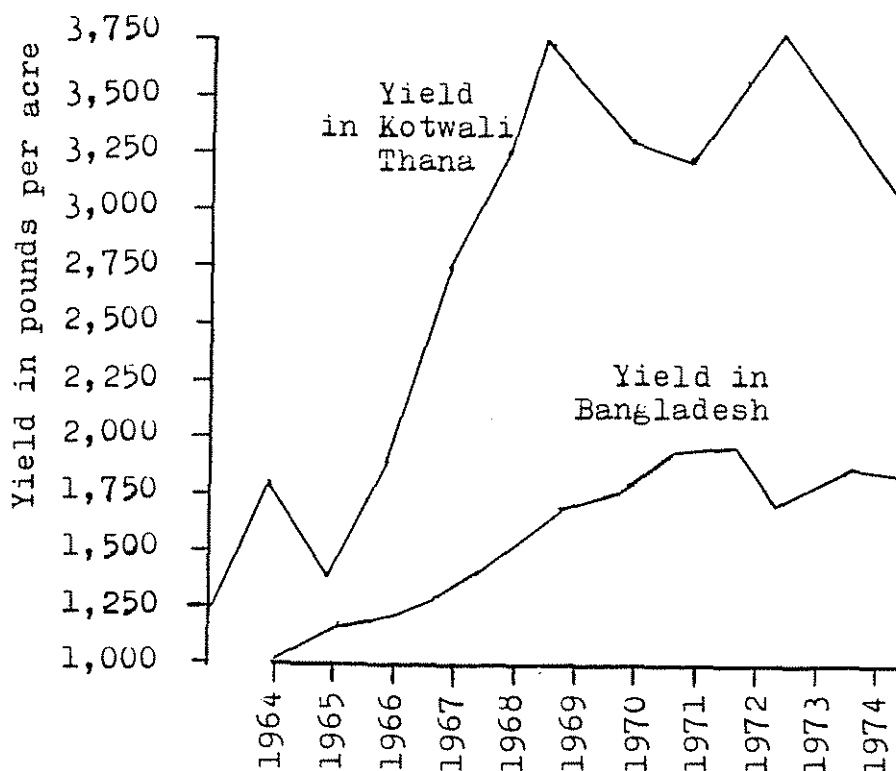


Figure 1 : Yield of Boro rice per acre in Comilla Kotwali Thana and the rest of Bangladesh, 1964-74. Source : Blair, op. cit., p. 66.

Even more remarkable was the fact that in the early years of Comilla experiment, it was the small and medium farmers, who joined the cooperatives, were the most enthusiastic adopters of HYV technology, and indeed they were the ones who benefited most from it. This was because, initially the large farmers "looked upon the experiment with much suspicion, adopting a cautious wait-and-see attitude....., once the benefits of the credit and impact of the programmes were demonstrated, however, the big farmers also began to engage in the cooperative movement"(9). The following table gives a rough indication of the fact :

Table 1 : Increases in Rice Yields of Comilla Co-operatives by size
1963 - 1970

	Rice Yield		% Increase
	(maunds per acre)		
	1963 - 64	1969 - 70	
Under 2 acres	28.5	50.6	78
2 - 3.5 acres	22.1	49.8	125
Over 3.5 acres	17.3	38.8	124

Source : S.A. Rahim, 'Rural Cooperatives and Economic Development of Subsistence agriculture', 1972, p.36, in Vylder, 1982, op. cit., p.143.

In one study by Rahim, it was revealed that by 1969, a control group of farmers outside Comilla Thana had increased yields by only 10 percent as compared with 98 percent for Comilla Cooperative farmers. An estimate of net family assets showed for a control group 19 percent increase in that year, while for the Comilla Cooperative members, it was 61 percent (10).

2.4.1 Thana Center and Works Programme

The changed concept of local government organization implemented through the Thana Training and Development Center brought about a new institutional arrangement that gave a fresh impetus to a coordinated development effort. Much of the authority of the Deputy Commissioner (The District Head) was now relegated to Thana and Union Council administration - which effectively utilised the public works programme funds. In 1966-67, 71 percent of the works programme allocations went to these levels of government.

"The Works Programme demonstrated that certain kinds of activities, such as road building and water control earth-works could be effectively carried out by these new lower levels of governments" (11). The TTDC concept was approved by the Government in 1964, and by 1970 most Thanas of Bangladesh was using similar development centers.

For the first time, all the other departmental officers located at the Thana level were brought under the administrative umbrella of TTDC - which facilitated better inter-departmental coordination. The following accounts of achievements of the Works Programme in Bangladesh, for the period 1962-68, given by John Thomas (in Stevens, op. cit. p.114) is undoubtedly impressive :

Table 2 : Accomplishment of Rural Public Works Programme 1962-68

W O R K S	Length/number completed
New Roads (hard surfaced and dirt)	21,895 miles
Repaired -	118,371 miles
New Embankments	3,743 miles
Repaired -	7,595 miles
New drainage and Irrigation canals	9,031 miles
Repaired	9,966 miles
Community buildings and Schools	9,584 (numbers)

Source : Tabulated from Thomas (1971b), in Stevens, op. cit. p. 114.

These activities were said to have created 173 million man-days of employment in all, or 40 million in a year. Total allocation for the works during the period stood at 196 million US Dollars, which came mainly under PL 480 food aid programme of USA.

On the basis of another survey, Thomas calculated that on an average, one mile of drainage canal drained 48 acres of land, which resulted in increased agricultural production of 3.5% in 1967-68. Production in the drained land jumped by 200%, and the value of drained land per acre shot up by 326% compared to the general climb of the value of land by 44%. The following table presents net annual benefits of the Works Programme :

Table 3 : Calculation of net annual benefits from the
Works Programme (in million Rupee/Taka)

B n e f i t s

1. Road user savings (for carrying agricultural produce only)	157.5	
Less production loss, land used for roads - 44155 tons	26.8	130.7
2. Increased production from land drained		221.2
3. Flood protection : 1.7 million acres		<u>100.4</u>
		452.3
<u>Less Maintenance</u>		
Roads @ Tk. 560 per mile		56.6
Drainage, re-excavation every five years		4.4
Embankments 7168 miles maintained @ Tk. 560 per mile		3.8

Net Annual benefits from Works Programme

Tk. 387.5<

=====

Source : Thomas, J.W. 1968

Regarding the benefits of these rural public works activities several assumptions were made (12), chief of which involved building rural infrastructure of drainage, irrigation and communication, relieving distress caused by unemployment and increasing agricultural output. However, above all other objectives, agricultural output improvement appears to have somehow received the main emphasis of the programme. Relieving distress caused by unemployment through works programme activities was merely a means to achieve high productivity. The temporary employments created by such activities did not give a long term solution to the unemployment problem. The 'output improvement bias', as it might be termed, is quite explicit in some of the Academy's research approaches also. For instance, J.W. Thomas, the Harvard Advisor/Scholar to the Academy, who was associated with designing and planning the works programme, seems to have been focusing all his study efforts on finding just how much agricultural 'growth' this programme activity generated, and how much 'marketed surplus' travelled the works programme built roads. The importance of agricultural growth in Bangladesh economy, can of course, not be exaggerated. But this study's contention is, the consequent social reality should also have received adequate emphasis. This issue is discussed in greater detail in the next chapter.

2.4.2 Irrigation Programme

The Thana Irrigation Programme (TIP) in Comilla Kotwali Thana area had rapidly covered a vast area mainly through pump/tubewell technology, which is a pre-requisite for winter HYV cultivation. From 1966-67 to 1969-70, the area under winter crops expanded from 7,053 acres to 12,975 acres. To a large extent, this made the farmers shift from local varieties to new high-yielding varieties. A study by S.A. Rahim and Shamsul Islam, on the basis of interviews of cooperative members in 1963 and in 1969, found that :

a. The average production of paddy per family increased from 49 maunds(13)in 1963 to 95 maunds in 1969

b. The amount of paddy sold per year per family expressed as percentage of total paddy produced, increased from 11 percent to 25 percent.

c. The average annual cash farm-expenditure per acre increased from Tk.111 to Tk. 393 during the period.

d. The average amount of liquid assets per family increased from Tk.281 to Tk.1412 (14).

The foregoing discussion on the impacts of the Comilla Programme's different components gives a fairly general impression about a few specific fields of its success - most remarkable of which is the the improvement of output performance (mainly in rice).

It may indeed appear from an objective analysis, that all the component activities were directed towards one main target - increase of food output. And food output it did increase, so much so that the Comilla area became a food surplus zone within a few years of programme operation. But, beneath this booming success also lies a dismal picture, the story of which will be unfolded as may be seen in the following Chapter.

Notes :

1. Arthur F. Raper, 1970, Rural Development in Action, Cornell University Press, pp.11-12.
2. 'Basic Democracy' was a system of local government at the Union level (the lowest administrative unit), which was taken up by the government of Ayub Khan, since 1959 by a special order. The two papers were written on a request from the Chief Secretary of East Pakistan.
3. KSS - 'Krishak Shamabaya Samity', the peasants cooperatives.
4. With the upgradation of the Thana administrative units, and subsequently renamed as 'Upazila', the TCCAs are now known as UCCAs. Henceforth, all the Thanas since 1984 shall be considered as Upazilas.
5. Khan, A.H., 1963, from 'A New Rural Cooperative System For Comilla Thana : Third Annual Report, July 1963, PARD, Comilla, (Appendix - D), in The Works of Akhter Hameed Khan, Vol-III.
6. This was a local government system, intended to bring local political leadership, higher level technical expertise and administrative personnel together to promote development. It was however criticised afterwards for having evolved into a local level institution for political manipulation by the ruling government.
7. This paragraph is largely based on the Essay of Manzur-I-Mowla, 1983, in Managing Rural Development in Bangladesh, (ed) Hafiz G.A. Siddiqui, p.46.
8. Harry W. Blair, "Rural Development, Class Structure and Bureaucracy in Bangladesh", in World Development, 1978 Vol.6, No.1, p.77.

9. Vylder, Stefan de, 1982, Agriculture in Chains, Zed Press, London, p.142.
10. Jhon W. Thomas, 1971a, "Agricultural Production, Equity and Rural Organization in East Pakistan", in Stevens, op. cit., p.104.
11. Robert D. Stevens, 1976, "Comilla Rural Development Programmes to 1971", in Rural Development in Bangladesh and Pakistan, Stevens et. al. (ed), East West Center, Honolulu.
12. For details see, Khan, A.H., 1963, "Report on a Rural Public Works Programme in Comilla Kotwali Thana", PARD, Comilla.
13. 1 Maund = 82 pounds (app.)
14. Abdullah, Hossain and Nations "agrarian Structure and the IRDP - Preliminary Considerations", The Bangladesh Development Studies, Vol-IV, No.2, April 1976, p.224.

Chapter III

BEHIND THE SUCCESS STORY

The preceding chapter discussed some key elements of success of the Comilla experiment. It can be summed up as a relatively successful venture in effectively mobilizing rural population through cooperative institutions, public works programme of rural infrastructure building, diffusion of new technology and the formation of a new administrative coordinating body (TTDC). Unquestionably, all these individual initiatives contributed substantially in raising food output of the Comilla area, raising value of land, providing employment to the unemployed etc. Behind this anthology of success however, subtle but profound social realities loomed large.

This chapter attempts to expose some of the realities of the Comilla programme in terms, particularly of : (a) cooperatives, (b) introduction of technology, and (c) infrastructure building programmes. The investigation is thus limited to the consideration of these aspects. The study finds that the cooperatives somehow failed to effectively include the small farmers and landless labourers as direct beneficiaries. Works programme promoted inequality as it could not ensure meaningful employment for the landpoors, neither could it reduce economic disparity, because the benefits of the works programme activities only helped the landowners. Although it is said that the small farmers were, at one stage, more receptive to new technology than the larger ones (1), the very fact that they had less or no land, and the scale of technology adoption by them was minimum, eventually turned the programme into influential land-owners' magic wand. Food output of

the area more than doubled within ten years - and the government remained complacent and contented. But the cruel magic was at the expense of declining social condition of the poor; such is the grim irony of the experiment !

3.1 Cooperatives for growth

The birth of cooperatives in Comilla programme emanated from the need of an effective institution through which much needed capital could be channelled and knowledge of modern farming could be disseminated among the smaller farmers in order to achieve higher agricultural growth. Hence, with a group of farmers, a society is formed, where government assistance is disbursed and the allocation to, as well as realization from, the individual farmers are left in the hands of others. It is said to reduce the marginal cost of delivering such assistance to the smaller farmers - a claim which is variously subjected to question and doubt. But the issue that needs to be confronted first is how much credit support actually reaches the smaller farmers. Then comes the question of social cost. Like the government planners, the Comilla programme's planners also had 'growth' as the patent answer in this respect. Choldin summarised the rationale of the Comilla cooperatives :

"The solution which the staff members at Comilla chose to attain the goals of higher agricultural productivity was a new system of cooperatives education. Early in the contact between the change agents and villagers, the change agents encouraged the adoption of new farming practices with new inputs. The farmers responded that their economic situation was such that they considered their heavy indebtedness to be their primary problem and that they could not purchase new inputs without loans" (2).

From the above, at least three primary objectives of the Comilla cooperatives are apparent. First, to get agriculture attain

higher growth; second, to introduce new technology in order to achieve that objective ; and finally, to provide the small farmers and tenants with 'capital' for production purposes. But these priorities are clearly linked together in the concern for 'growth'. It might be naive to conclude that the Comilla cooperatives were formed only to create an effective institution through which the above objectives could be fulfilled. As noted earlier, the initiators of the programme had their sincere desires to bring about equity along with growth by emphasising participation of smaller farmers.

But this small 'farmers' was a bit vaguely termed as 'peasant producers', a segment whose percentage size was estimated on the basis of illustrative order of magnitude rather than on exact figures. For instance, Akhter Hameed Khan states : "We had found that the peasants formed a 70 percent majority. They also owned 70 percent of the land and leased a good portion of the remaining 30 percent from the large proprietors. The peasant producers, therefore, were the real agriculturists" (3). A lumping together of all the rural classes, except most conspicuously the landless and the most needed ones has taken place eventually, despite words of caution proclaimed about it during the formative stage. By calling 70 percent as peasant producers, the reality of increasing proletarianization and landlessness existing at the bottom of social ladder is effectively concealed. Right from the beginning, it seems a compromising attitude towards the large landholders had been adopted, to work "quietly around them, suggesting not that they should be excluded from the new cooperatives, but that they should not be allowed to dominate" (ibid).

An under-estimation of their power and the extent of influence, represented a serious short-coming of the programme. As a result :

"By the early 1970s, the Comilla co-operatives had ceased to represent the small farmers' interests - if they ever had. Their management was increasingly taken over by farmers who were large by Comilla standards. Some of the traditional village leaders, who initially had stayed out of the co-operatives also began to join the movement, but the most successful group appears to have been the category of modern, profit-oriented farmers-cum-businessmen" (4).

Thus, to further squeeze the small farmers out of the cooperatives, a 'farmers-cum-businessmen' class was also attracted by these cooperatives. This has tended to seriously retard even the capitalist development in Agriculture, through the use of agricultural surplus for merchant capital. Although the Comilla programme set out to develop 'cooperative capitalism' that cherished the qualities of Japanese family farms in contrast to the 'dispossessed' Chinese Communes, in final analysis it turned out to be a mechanism through which increasing number of cultivators were effectively dispossessed and alienated from the lands. Against this, as a study of the Managing Committee of the federation of cooperatives in Kotwali Thana (AFC) reveals, a new occupational group of contractors and rich persons having membership of other local councils began to join the federation in increased number(5). Since they also had some lands and started taking benefits from the cooperatives, they were likewise classified as 'farmers'. And indeed they were the ones who reaped maximum benefits from the cooperatives. Most depressing yet was these very same large borrowers were the most notorious defaulters on repayments. The following table of Ali Akhter Khan will demonstrate the disquieting fact :

Table 4 : Cooperative members and overdue loans by size in Kotwali Thana for 30 defaulting societies.

<u>Size of loan</u>	<u>Percent of loanees</u>	<u>Percent of overdue money</u>
Tk.0 - 500	53.5	15.1
501 - 1000	23.4	22.4
1001 - 1500	11.2	17.7
1501 - 2000	4.0	8.7
2001 - 2500	3.2	8.6
over 2500	5.8	27.5
<hr/> Total -	<hr/> 100.1	<hr/> 100.0

Source : Ali Akhter Khan, 1971, p.25, in Blair, op. cit., p.58.

The consequence of such defaults by the handful of dominating large farmers (6) are easily imaginable. In such defaulting KSSes, members' presence in supposedly mandatory weekly meetings is often negligible, if not zero, due primarily to anticipated pressure that would be exerted for repayment in such meetings. Thus, figures of overdue loans keep soaring up, and many societies go inactive.

Although, this study did not have access to recent data on the landholding situation in Comilla area, the 1969 data of Muyeed alone, recorded after almost 8 years of operation of the Comilla programme, already gives a quite dismal picture :

Table 5 : Landholdings of Agricultural Families
(in Comilla Thana 1969)

<u>Land holdings</u>	<u>% of families</u>
no cultivable land	15
0.01 - 0.8 acres	26
0.81 - 2.0 acres	28
2.01 - 4.0 acres	18
4.01 - 6.0 acres	8
over 6.0 acres	5

Source : Muyeed (1969)
in Faidley, L. and Esmay, M. L. 1974.

From this table it is easily identifiable as functionally landless are the first two categories with a total 41 percent of families (having land from 0 to 0.8 acres). In a corresponding data 44 percent of families considered themselves living below subsistence level. Implicit then is the precarious condition of these land-poor rural families, whose members must go looking for jobs in other lands, because the average family size of six persons per family can not be fed from such small sizes of land, if one at all has any. And the rural labour market is as uncertain in Bangladesh. The programme of Comilla cooperatives, unfortunately, did not reflect adequate concern about these down-trodden rural folks whose numbers have increasingly multiplied. From the table below the first two categories again (0 to 1 acre farm size) who are constituted by the landless, comprising the largest single group of population (over 45%) in the same region and time, occupy only 14 percent of cooperative membership :

Table 6 : Distribution of total Population and cooperative Membership by Farm size

Farm size in Acres	% of Total Rural Population	% of Cooperative Members	% of Rural Population Who are coop. Members
nil	15.3	2	5
.01 - 1	30.5	12	15
1.01 - 2	24.2	43	68
2.01 - 3	14.4	18	47
3.01 - 5	10.6	16	56
over 5	5.0	8	60

Source : Akhter, 1969, p.132.

This configuration did not arise because of lack of interest of the landless and near landless population in the cooperatives. Rather, the structure of the cooperatives and the existing power structure deliberately kept them away. The loan policy of the cooperatives excluded persons with less than one acre from borrowing its loans. In addition, the landless and near landless could not deposit regular savings on equal footing with the large landholders. Thus, while the data do not reflect the quality of participation and the extent of benefit each section of the population draws out of these cooperatives, the picture of domination of these societies by the so called 'Kulaks' is nevertheless quite easy to perceive.

3.2 Technology :

Introduction not improvement

To attain the objective of 'accelerated growth', the Comilla programme launched the expensive 'new rice technology' introduction programme, instead of putting efforts on developing indigenous technology. Avoiding the long rigorous process of development, the programme wanted to take up the easy and quicker way to attain high level of growth and 'skip stages' (8) of growth. The result was, an exotic and costly technology that quickly attracted the rich land owners and they indeed were able to use them profitably. It therefore, seemed to reinforce existing social differentiation in the rural Bangladesh society.

Diffusion of this new technology in Comilla Thana area was quite rapid, and since mid-sixties, through a Thana Irrigation Programme, it was gradually extended throughout the country. Like, many Asian countries, Bangladesh also experienced the adverse effects of this 'Green Revolution' technology - so far as the small and marginal peasants were concerned. The new technological package of high yielding seed varieties, fertilizer, pesticide, tractor, tubewell etc., brought in agriculture, a high capital cost involvement, which the small farmers never could acquire. The subsidized inputs provided by the cooperatives, or Thana Irrigation Programme (TIP) unmistakably ended up in the hands of rich farmers. This study will however limit its discussion only to the TIP programme and the effect of introducing new irrigation technology of tubewells and pumps.

3.3 The Thana Irrigation Programme : The programme encourages farmers in a village to form a group in order to take advantage of government's subsidized irrigation inputs. Once they are grouped together, they are required to form a managing committee - with a manager as its head, a model farmer and a pump operator. The group then makes an application to the Thana irrigation authority for pumps. If it is granted, the selected pump operator and the model farmer gets training, and the pump is supplied. Besides the pump,

other inputs of the new technology package are also supplied to the group members. The government bears about 78 percent of the (pump) operating cost. Fertilizer subsidy was 55 percent in the beginning, but reduced later to 25 percent. The subsidy for chemical insecticides was generous 100 percent, despite a PARD evaluation in 1968-69 (pp.155-57) that farmers could somehow do without these subsidies.

The statistics showing the number of pumps installed, number of acres irrigated, number of farmers benefited and the amount of yield increased are often very impressive in strict economic terms. But the high social costs of such attainment almost always remain unreflected. Distributional effects of these programmes are also not seriously noted. A study about TIP in Comilla Academy revealed that the process of electing managers or managing committee members was never as democratic as hoped for. Eighty nine percent of the managing committee members and 87 percent of the managers themselves were said to be chosen by so called "consensus". Forty seven percent of the sampled groups held no meetings at all, and only 10 percent met on weekly meetings. The average landholding size of the members was a little over 2.5 acres -- quite close to the current (1968-69) national average of 2.6 acres. In contrast, the average holding of the managers was found considerably large - 7.35 acres. In terms of acreage irrigated, members averaged only 0.9 acres, while the mean for managers was 2.5 acres. About 12 percent of the managers irrigated over 5 acres, as against a mere 2 percent of the members (9). Blair concludes on the above findings :

"The inference seems rather clear : a large number of groups would appear to have been organized by a few men of substance, who padded out the membership rolls with non-participating or even non-existent members, all for the purpose of securing the largess of this new government program for themselves." (Blair, H.W., 1974, p.72).

The politically sensitive subsidy issue was seldom manipulated for economic gains of the small farmers by the successive Pakistani or Bengalee regimes. Although, in the beginning of this irrigation programme, it was intended that over a five year period, most of the operating cost of pumps would be assumed by the farmers themselves; in effect, it was never effectively executed. Some reduction of subsidies in recent years from fertilize and pesticides has been effected under pressure from the World Bank and other donors, but the basic subsidized technology introduction policy of the government remained almost unchanged. Dependence on government support seems to remain a perpetual phenomenon in this respect, while the benefit is scarcely reaching the bottom. Akhter Hameed Khan remarks in this regard :

"Perhaps, under the stress of political agitations and the old paternal attitude of government, these two fundamental aims, viz., self-support and self-management, are being discarded. The distribution of pumps is in danger of becoming a distribution of favours, a boon from a benign government, requiring little reciprocal effort on the part of the beneficiaries" (Khan, A.H., 1971, p.8).

On the whole, the TIP has directly contributed in increasing winter rice cultivation in Comilla as well as elsewhere in Bangladesh. To reduce food deficit of the country, modern irrigation technology is not unwelcome in Bangladesh. But the way it is introduced by largely imported machinery, heavily subsidized and through an organizational structure easily liable to domination of the handful large farmers has undermined the overall development objective. In the words of Blair again, "..... like all other programs in Bangladesh, its efficiency is hampered by subsidies and its equity by the ability of larger farmers to turn opportunity to their own account" (ibid, p.74).

3.4 The Dramatic Works Programme

Among all the other components of Comilla programme, the Rural Works Programme (RWP) created the most spectacular and sensational scene in the rural development field in Bangladesh. An unprecedentedly huge sum of money (mostly through PL 480 food aid) allocated for the project, mobilized a large number of rural labourers and constructed hundreds of miles of rural roads and embankments. The government, the bureaucracy and the rural elites - all were filled with enthusiasm and at times boastful about the programme's accomplishments. This tendency was noted implicitly in the works of some scholars evaluating the programme. But given the simple fact that almost half the rural population are de facto landless, the irrigation and road infrastructure built by the programme benefited only the large land owners and surplus farmers, while the poor landless labourer were satisfied by a temporary job. Ironically enough, when some concrete efforts capable of bringing about long lasting solution to the poverty situation were urgently needed, the works programme only endeavoured to strengthen the power of rich farmers in the name of converting idle labour into capital, raising nutrition level of village poors and providing basic rural facilities to promote agricultural growth.

The great haste with which the programme was expanded all over the country is partly responsible for its short comings. Just after the first year of its pilot phase in Comilla, the programme was spread in several Thanas of Bangladesh. Subsequently, the budget of quarter of a million Taka for Comilla Thana (1961), was abruptly increased by the next one year to Tk. 100 million to cover several other Thanas. It appears that the government, suddenly getting the liberal offer of surplus US wheat under PL 480 programme, just wanted to spend the money and give some responsibility to the newly formed leadership under the 'Basic Democracies' system and earn confidence of the people by creating

tangible developmental fits. The RWP certainly provided significant employment and some very visible and useful rural infrastructure. But it is also true that once the true nature of the programme -the involved corruption of the elites, landlord bias of the infrastructure, and uncertainty of the jobs etc. were clear to the poor peasants, it could hardly contribute to the containment of rural disaffection and unrest that erupted in 1969 and overthrow the Ayub regime, and in the outbreak in 1971 of a war of liberation. Tipu Sultan (1969, in Blair, op. cit. p. 93), in his study on the Works Programme, cautioned that if the situation persisted, it might burst forth again, nullifying once more the very condition the programme hopes to build : elimination of rural frustrations.

The 'deplorable quality of official statistics relating to the Works Programme' was dispelled by a study of Rehman Sobhan (10). Among other findings, a survey conducted in 1964-65 showed that 64 percent of the respondents considered the Basic Democrats corrupt, while 68 percent supposed nepotism to be the criterion for selecting the project committees or supervising each RWP undertaking (in Blair, op. cit. p.94). On J.W. Thomas's (1968 or 1971b) data, of which some have been cited in Chapter II, Abdullah (11) expressed serious doubts. He argued that Thomas' assumption that 20 percent of rice output, 100 percent of Jute output, and 90 percent of sugar cane are marketed, and that 75 percent of rice, 80 percent of Jute and 90 percent of the cane marketed travelled in Works Programme road, are either based on unreliable sources, or substantially different from the available government data. The percentages of

marketed surplus that travelled on Works Programme roads were said to be inflated. And the existence of roads in the villages prior to the programme was not taken into account. Abdullah also discarded the calculations of Thomas that one mile of canal drains 48 acres of land. He held that it was a very naive assumption to make, considering the varied nature of canals and lands. Moreover, the location of such drainage canals was often influenced by political rather than economic considerations.

The Works Programme also very conspicuously neglected the popular demand of a long term flood control programme. Only 10 percent of the total expenditure of the RWP was allotted to drainage and flood control, while this would have been more productive than road building. Giving a political inkling to the fact, Abdullah wonders, "Could it be that road-building was so inordinately favoured because the benefits accrue only to the 'surplus' farmers - i.e., relatively affluent farmers who regularly market a fair proportion of their crops?" (ibid, p.315)

This perhaps, substantiates the most plausible answer to the general goal of the programme. As a matter of fact, the whole Comilla Programme is shaped by such motivations - that is to get agriculture produce a marketed surplus by accelerating output increase and thereby contributing to the overall national growth. Indeed, 'growth' was more dominating a theme of the Comilla Programme than equity.

Notes :

1. Faidley, LeVern and Esmay, Merle L., 1976, "Introduction and Use of Improved Rice Varieties : who Benefits?", in Rural

Development in Bangladesh and Pakistan, (ed) Robert D. Stevens et. al., pp. 140-42.

2. Choldin, Harvey M., "An Organizational Analysis of Rural Development Projects in Comilla, East Pakistan", in Economic Development and Cultural Change, Vol. 20, No. 4, July 1972, p. 682.

3. Khan, Akhter Hameed, "The Comilla Projects - A Personal Account", a paper presented in the Workshop on 'Development from below' in Addis Ababa, October 1973.

4. Vylder, Stefan de, Agriculture in Chains : Bangladesh, a Case Study in Contradictions and Constraints, 1982, p.145. (see notes in pp.153-54).

5. Ahmed, B., "Who decides? Role of Managing Committee in AFC", BARD, Comilla, 1972

6. Size of loan and land has a direct relationship because loans in Comilla cooperatives are issued against land collaterals.

7. Akhter, Farkunda, "characteristics of the Members of Comilla Cooperatives", Survey and Research Bulletin No. 10, Pakistan Academy of Rural Development, Comilla, 1969, in Faidley and Esmay, op. cit., p.132.

8. On technology, Greschenkran advanced his concept of 'process of substitution', stating that a country may take advantage of other countries' technology and thereby 'skip stages' (see Bjorn Hettne, 1982, p.32).

9. This paragraph is largely based on Blair, op. cit., pp.70-72, reference for data given by him is Evaluation Report 1969-70, pp.70-79, BARD, Comilla.

Chapter IV

THE POLITICAL IMPLICATIONS OF 'COMILLA'

With the selected key elements of success and failures of the Comilla programme, having been analytically presented, this chapter moves on to a brief political interpretation of the model. It looks into the political motives of contemporary governments in supporting and continuing the expansion of the model throughout the country despite its short-comings in reducing social inequality and economic disparity. The chapter also discusses the new government undertakings in the field of rural development, and points out their socio-political effects, to finally establish how all those link together and relate to Comilla experiment.

4.1 Comilla and politics

The emergence of Comilla programme surprisingly coincided with the appearance of a military government in Pakistan during the late fifties. The politically ambitious junta of general (later, Field Marshal) Ayub Khan, immediately after assuming power, planned to control the rural power base through a modified institutional frame-work, in order to legitimize his position through elections. Thus, in a 1959 reform measure, the Basic Democracies system was introduced to replace the old Union Board as the lowest level local government. Union Council was now the basic local government of the four tiered BD system - the other three being, (2) the Thana Council, (3) the District Council, and (4) the Divisional Council.

The Comilla academy had partially contributed to the formulation of the Basic Democracies system. As Raper notes:

"In May 1959 when the Basic Democracies proposal was being developed, the Chief Secretary of East Pakistan had secured from the Director of the Academy, Akhter Hameed Khan, Statements on how the re-organized bodies might be constituted and how they might function. The V-AID and National Development Authority were abolished. From then on the Department of Basic Democracies and Local Government was given responsibility for the Basic democracies program and for collaboration with the Academy in experimental work in the thana council" (Raper, AS. 1970, pp. 99-100).

It clearly shows that the rural development academy in Comilla was not just an independent research and development institution. Since its beginning, it rather became a policy making laboratory for the government. For obvious reasons, the military government of Ayub Khan had to be more concerned with the formation of political power base, first and foremost. Hence, the academy of Comilla was called for. According to A. H. Khan, the first programme they had to 'dabble in' was local government. "It was then supremely important because it happened to be our President's favourite concubine." (Khan, A. H. 1976). This way the governments of this country always used this institution to meet their political ends.

Local Governments under the Basic Democracies system at the Union level were elected by the votes of all adult population of the locality. The members selected a Chairman from among themselves. All the members of the Union councils were later to select a President for the country as well as the members of the Provincial and National Assemblies. "Through this electoral system, limited representative government could be restored, and the Ayub Government could be legitimized..." (Thomas, J.W. 1969 p. 12)

Initially, resource allocation to these local government bodies was meagre. In 1961, a miniscule total of only Rs. six million was commanded by the Basic Democrats (ibid. pp.13-14). But from 1962 onwards, the allocations increased very dramatically, when

Rural Works Programme and Thana Irrigation Programmes, after being experimented on in Comilla, were implemented throughout the country. The highest ever allocation of Rs. 200.0 million was made for RWP alone in 1963-64 period (see table XVI, in Blair, 1974, p.96). An interesting concurrence was to be found during this period, favouring the Ayub regime. Shortly before Ayub Khan prepared for the Presidential election in 1965, the US government came forward with its surplus wheat under PL-480. Sales from the wheat were largely invested in RWP projects that rapidly duplicated throughout the country. It was, if anything, a very well rewarded political investment for Ayub indeed. "The Basic Democrats (i.e. the sole holders of the suffrage in East Pakistan) gave a majority of their votes to Ayub in the election, and it became clear to the regime that the patronage possibilities of the RWP constituted an excellent method for holding their allegiance" (Ibid, p.97).

Some relationship between RWP expenditures in 1964-65 and percentage of votes given by the BDs to Ayub was established by some researchers - e.g. Blue (1) and Rashiduzzaman (2). Rashiduzzaman, in a sample study of the BD members elected in 1964, found that these relatively wealthy people of the villages were clearly attracted by the possibilities of profiteering from the Comilla type Rural Works Programmes. Data on income distribution (Ibid, p. 41) of these BDs, before and after the 1964 election, supports the view. While a 1961 BARD (then PARD) survey showed that about 75% of the Chairmen had annual incomes per head below Rs.1,000/- and 2.2 percent had more than Rs.4,000/-; after 1964 the situation took a dramatic reversal. Now, 2.2 had per annum income below Rs. 1,000/-, and 61.1 percent had over Rs. 4,000/-. Within only three years' time with Comilla model during which a 'glorious' BD political system was installed - there was a remarkable shift in the control of the local governments from poorer peasants to a rising elite class.

However, it can not be denied that the Comilla programme had a benign ideology (as many talks and writings of Dr. Khan have elaborated on) of getting local people and government bureaucracy closer, in order to execute effective developmental policies. In this study, the 'successes' of the programme mean that a comprehensive rural development in Comilla had ushered in economic growth. At the same time, 'successes' here refer to Comilla's having substantially contributed in creating effective political institutions in the villages. These institutions established by the collaboration with Comilla Academy, still continue to survive as the only viable rural political institution so far. An attempt by the late President Ziaur Rahman's Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) to form an alternative 'Gram Sarker' or village government, was appeared to be more politically biased in favour more of the ruling government than that of the former BD system. It however was not allowed to last longer enough to experience real impact, since it was abolished by the later military government of General Ershad, immediately after taking over. How the present government's upgradation of the Thana administrative status into Upazila (sub-district) would fare in making this the 'hub of all developmental activities', is yet to be seen .

This study's argument regarding the 'political implications' of the Comilla model is that certain inherent flaws characterises the programme activities which were undertaken to mobilize village people and their political institutions. Generally, these activities have only sharpened the inegalitarian class structure in the country. The previous chapter has in fact shown how the Cooperatives have been actually dominated by the rich land owners, how the Works Programme activities have benefitted only this rich groups, and how the new rice technology introduction scheme has been pushed at the high social cost of depriving the landless proletariates. But, despite all the attention called to the programme's shortcomings, the successive governments in Bangladesh

hardly made any change in the strategy. Instead, they have all been absorbed in expanding the model to cover more and more areas of the country, as though expansion could remedy the flaws. It was precisely this apparent 'blindness' to the fundamental strategy of the programme that prompted this study to also look into its political implications. It seems almost obvious that the model endeavoured to fit itself into the new local government structure created under Basic Democracies' set up. Just as it did not attempt to inspire the governments to bring about a major change in the prevailing socio-economic structure, the Comilla Programme did not also attempt to formulate an alternative political institution in the villages that would ensure effective democracy and equality in the village life.

In explaining the programme's limitations, Akhter Hameed Khan states :

"We were the servants of a conservative government whose political, economic or administrative orientation we could scarcely change. In spite of pious professions, rural development was a very minor concern of our government. It was obsessed with industrial, urban and military development" (Khan, A.H. 1974, pp. 8-9).

It seems not a very convincing explanation or apology though, it certainly reflects a part of the reality. But the question remains that if one can 'scarcely change', or at best exert influence to change the development ideology of a government, which is based on fundamental contradictions, then one can equally scarcely expect to create a difference in a society that has deep rooted disparity and economic stagnation at the bottom. Although, rural development was a minor concern to the government, rural political support was not. Comilla could perhaps develop this awareness among the people. And the people themselves would then have demanded more attention to themselves. Instead, Comilla seems to have taken an attitude of resignation in this respect, even while it was quite (but indirectly) active in strengthening the hands of

the rural elites who were the staunch supporters of Ayub Khan's Basic Democracies system.

As a result, "the program, which was designed to mobilize the entire countryside, has acquired the character of a government-sponsored program coming from above and left in the hands of a favoured class of villagers who seems to be largely using it for their personal advancement (Sobhan, 1968, p.142, in Blair, op. cit.).

4.2 After Ayub and the Pakistani Era

Interestingly enough, apart from observing the malpractices in the Comilla type programmes and being critical about the way these projects were used to meet the political ends of the Ayub regime, the successive governments in Bangladesh did not try a major modification of the programme. Similarly, the Western donors being fully aware of all these, never ceased to provide funds and did not insist upon reforming the strategies, except of course, ask that agricultural input subsidies be reduced. The left-wing political groups in the country always looked at such programmes with suspicion, and were therefore, critical of how these have allegedly deluded the poor and prevented a strong proletariat group to evolve and rise. However, like the government and foreign donors, the left wing critics themselves were not able to offer an alternative model for rural development, other than advance a radical move for the complete re-structuring of the society.

Very clearly, the non-left political parties have always been attracted by the model's prospect of controlling the rural power base. This is understandable, if difficult to condone, since control of the mass base is the most essential major source of political power in Bangladesh. Even the most popular Awami League

party which played a major role in the 1969 mass uprising against Ayub regime, and in the war of liberation in 1971, demonstrated active interest in this pursuit. After all, the source of Awami League's political strength also rested on rival rural elites and urban professionals and youths. Thus, Comilla type Works Programme, cooperatives and irrigation programme were considered critical in maintaining contacts with and building support for the party.

In fact Awami League's interest in Comilla programme grew soon after they had contemplated themselves in power during the late 60s. Dr. Khan, speaking about reactions of the political parties about 'Comilla' said that the 'ultra left' parties always denounced their activities,

"But some Awami League stalwarts, who saw clearly that they were coming into power, were interested in our experiments. They came to look at our programmes and discussed our approach. In fact they incorporated local government, the works programme and Cooperatives in their manifesto." (Khan, A.H., 1976, talk in Cornell University, NY)

Although, the Basic Democracies set-up was formally abolished after independence, there was hardly any visible change in the modified local government system. Universal adult franchise in electing members of the parliament was introduced, and later, through an amendment, the President, somewhat curbed the patronage possibilities of Union Parishad (UP) members and chairmen. But on the other hand supervisory power over the bureaucratic structure at each level including the TCCA's and KSSes of IRDP (3) was included (GOB 1973). This was apparently a benign democratic approach; but in effect, it was just another way to maintain status quo of the traditional rural elites. In fact the increased patronage possibility inherent in the present local government system, encouraged growing number of people competing for the UP membership/chairmanship. Thus, the combination of UP system and Comilla model programmes served the best interest of the Awami League, as well as the other succeeding governments in Bangladesh.

Other major changes in the local government organizations include : (a) Swanirvar Gram Sarker (village government) system during the late President Ziaur Rahman's BNP government and (b) the Upazila (sub-district) system currently under implementation by the government of President Ershad.

4.2.1 Swanirvar Gram Sarker (4)

The Swanirvar (self-reliant) Bangladesh programme introduced in late 1975 recognized the village as the lowest tier of the society from which to begin all development activities through the motto of 'self-reliance' . It began with the excavation and re-excavation of 'Betna river' of Ulshi Jadunathpur, followed by wide introduction of canal diggin'g programmes throughout the country. Initially, one village in each rural thana was taken as target. Accordingly, Swanirvar villages were gradually formed and Gram Sarkers established. Doubling food production within a few years was one of the major objectives. According to this programme 4,000 Gram Sarkers were established till 1977. But within the next three years time, the number shot up to 68,000, supposedly covering all the villages of the country by 1980 (5).

A Gram Sarker was formed with a Gram Pradhan (village head) and eleven other members with not less than two female members in it. Selection of the Pradhan and members was done on the basis of consensus of the persons present in a scheduled meeting. Nevertheless, it was still expected that it would ensure representation in the Swanirvar Gram Sarker of people of all works of life and of different functional or interest groups (6).

This local government system, over politicized as it was, could reasonably not succeed with a parallel elected UP set-up still in existence in the villages. Moreover, there was no professed link

with the mainstream Comilla model development projects being carried out through the IRDP net work. A few instances of pampered success could not adequately justify duplication of it throughout the country. It was a bureaucracy led alternative development model, extensively used to meet political ends by the ruling government. Hence, it met its premature natural death; the military government of General Ershad, soon after coming to power, abolished the Gram Sarker system. True, it did not have any formal link with the Comilla model of rural development. Nevertheless, it could be looked upon as an unfinished, if initially unsuccessful experiment of an alternative programme to 'Comilla'.

4.2.2 The Upazila Programme

This recent experiment of strengthening the Thana administrative units has, perhaps, deeper political implications than the outmoded Basic Democracies system had. The present government of President Ershad has recently performed an spectacular change in upgrading the administrative status of all the rural Thanas, and renaming them as Upazilas, or sub-districts. Each Upazilla now has an elected Chairman as its head and a Civil Servant called Nirbahi (Executive) Officer as the government counterpart of him/her. The judicial courts and other important public service facilities are now being made available at the Upazila headquarters. As stated in the Second Five Year Plan : 1980-85, the Nirbahi Officer :

"will have the coordinating role for public programmes such as supplies of agricultural inputs and minor irrigation equipment, development of infrastructures and promotion of employment through Rural Works Programme and Food for Works Programme. The government has already integrated local government at Union level with the Thana Parishad in a large number of Thanas. Thana Nirbahi Officer will act as Staff Officer to the elected Chairman of Thana Parishad" (GOB, 1983, p.406).

Amidst controversies between the government and opposition political parties, Upazila elections have been held in 1985 on a non party basis, just as the Union Parishad elections. But the same patronage possibilities in an upper level local government (compared to UP) attracted a large number of contestants for the Upazila Chairmanship, including some members of the election boycoting political parties. Even one or two former cabinet ministers and a number of former parliament members were reported to have run for the position. On the other hand, without any scope of pretensions, this election had certainly paved ways for the ruling government to stage a democratic come-back through National Assembly elections that has recently taken place in Bangladesh. Not very surprisingly though, the Jatiyo Party of President Ershad has returned with majority seats in the parliament. The subsequent Presidential election, although boycotted by the major opposition groups, gave Ershad an easy victory.

Reason for attraction to Upazilas is not difficult to trace. The patronage possibilities, through an unprecedented authority gained here, is considered even higher than a Sangshad (National Assembly) member would enjoy, since "officials of most of the development departments have been deputed to the Upazila Parishads. The functions of these departments at the Upazila level have now been transferred to the Upazila Parishads and these officials are now working under the elected Chairmen who are the Chief Executives of their respective Upazila Parishads. The Upazila Parishads have thus become the focal point of all development activities at the local level and also the implementing authority for execution of the divisible components of national level projects and programmes" (GOB, 1985, p. 138).

Moreover, Tk.2,250 crore (7), out of Tk.25,000 crore total public sector budget for the third five year plan period, has been allocated for the Upazilas. While Tk.1,250 crore has been earmarked

as development grants for the Upazila Parishads, Tk.1,000 crore is allocated only for office and residential buildings, roads, and utilities etc. (ibid., pp. 41 and 141). The possibility of such a huge sum of money to be at the disposal of these Chairmen, made the position more covetious to the power-monger elites.

By conferring such administrative and financial authority upon these 'upper-class BDs', the government seems to have been able to harness political support of all 'classes' of people. This is because an Upazila Chairman can now act as a 'link-man' between the local UPs and the District level political and administrative leadership. With the decentralisation of administration, it might create concentration of local leadership, as the UZ Chairmanship would tend to reduce importance of UP local governments. This has been looked at, by many, as an attempt to create a new cadre of rural political leadership, which is supposed to expedite development activities by mobilising material as well as human resources of the area, in collaboration with the re-organised Thana administration. However, this again poses the possibility of domination by a class of leadership preoccupied more with urban than rural concerns. How much rural development can be attained by them is a question, which only time and succeeding events can indicate.

A thorough investigation of the general political developments of Bangladesh is however outside the purview of this study. The intention in this regard is limited to the determination of how Comilla programme, and the model it has set, has been used by the different governments to mobilize political support in their own favour. This study has established earlier how the Comilla programme and the academy were engaged since its beginning by the Ayub government to train the bureaucrats and experiment models that would help strengthen the Basic Democracies political set-up. The Awami League government after independence, with very minor modifications to the BD's local government system, created Union

Pasrishads and began to expand the Comilla model through IRDP, in different parts of the country. The BNP government of Ziaur Rahman, keeping 'Comilla' and the UP as it were, tried an alternative 'self-reliant' programme, called Swanirvar, which did not last long enough to establish any conclusive results. But their efforts to set up an alternative local government (Gram Sarker) at the village level was viewed more as an instrument of political leverage for the government than anything else. Abolishing Gram Sarkers, came General Ershad's government with Upazila programme. Upazilas all over the country have already started functioning. Although it is too early to make elaborate comments on its viability, one can however see through it a strong political motive in work. All this while, 'Comilla' continued to expand and dominate rural development strategies. Despite limitations, like Ayub in the beginning, all other governments that succeeded since the creation of Bangladesh never attempted a major change in the Comilla approach. Besides meeting political ends, it was able also to attain their economic objectives. Higher agricultural growth could indeed be attained through Comilla model cooperatives, irrigation programme and works programmes. On the other hand., the governments had a distinct urban and industrial bias, which worked as a mechanism to expropriate rural and agricultural surplus. The ultimate victim of the process is a huge and growing mass of landless poor peasants.

4.3 Present Status of 'Comilla'

Although, limitations of the Comilla type programmes in ameliorating poverty and inequality are recognized, its expansion to newer areas every year grew unchecked. By the end of 1985, the whole country is said to have come under KSS programmes, with 62 thousand societies and 2.3 million members (TFYP, GOB 1985, p.213). The government's current five year plan (1985-90), however, makes no attempt to conceal the short comings of such programmes. It states:

"The UCCA/KSS system relied mostly on government finance and support instead of trying to become self-reliant by undertaking gainfull enterprizes. The UCCA/KSS contributed to increasing agricultural production and the income of the member of cooperators, but the system by-passed many small and marginal farmers, let alone the landless and the disadvantaged women folk. These societies were largely dominated by relatively well-to-do farmers who used these organizations to their advantage" (ibid).

In the light of such observations, only recently the government has initiated two programmes focusing around socio-economically most vulnerable groups of the society - landless and women. Bityaheen Samabaya Samity (BSS) is the landless' cooperatives while Mohila Samabaya Samity (MSS) is the women's cooperative organization. BRDB is responsible for implementing these programmes, and currently they are federated with the UCCAs of KSSes. But the government's emphasis on such programmes does not seem to be very strong yet, and clearly much less than on Upazilas. The political implications of it, is quite obvious from the preceeding discussion.

Notes :

1. Blue, Richard N., n.d., "East Pakistan Basic Democrats plus Rural Works : Ayub Regime's Political Strategy in East Pakistan?".
2. Rashiduzzaman, M., 1968, Politics and Administration in the Local councils : a Study of Union and District Councils in East Pakistan, Dhaka, Oxford University Press (in Blair, 1974.).
3. Integrated Rural Development Programme (IRDP) has now become a Board (since 1982), acquiring a more permanent status as a government agency with the Accronym : BRDB (Bangladesh Rural Development Board).

4. For an elaborate discussion on the origin of the 'Gram Sarker' concept initially conceived by Dr. Md. Yunus, its working strategy and its prospect as an alternative rural development programme, see Shakoor, A.B.M., 1979, Master thesis, I.S.S., the Hague.

5. For more detail see : Bangladesh Economic Survey 1982-83, Ministry of Finance and Planning, Finance Division, Economic Adviser's Wing, Government of Bangladesh.

6. Abdullah, M.M., 1981, Rural Development in Bangladesh, Jahan Publications, Dhaka, pp. 101-102.

7. 1 Crore = 10 Million.

Chapter V

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The process of rural proletarianization, and the creation of an ostracised menial landless labouring class in the present day Bangladeash area, has a history of at least two and a half thousand years. The pre-colonial Mogul era in Bengal also saw the continuity of this phenomenon. All-prosperous, self-sufficient and harmonious village life during this time, is but a myth adequately dispelled. Commoditization of land and commercialization of agriculture in general, had already begun. The British colonial power, by fostering increased integration of rural economy, with those of urban and international ones, and by its new land revenue policy, only re-inforced the process of alienation of a rapidly growing impoverished rural class.

Meanwhile, politcal as well as economic interest of the colonial rulers in this sector motivated them to take-up a number of attempts to tackle rural problems only because one famine after another kept battering the rural economy to the drains. As a result, peasant uprisals and political violence were becoming endemic. When maintaining law and order became a grave concern, the colonialists deviced ingenuous methods to contain them. Formation of local governments of village Panchayet and the Department of Agriculture were but a means to assert their authority - right at the base of society. This is evident from the fact that every time there was a famine and the ensuing unrest, an enquiry commission would be set up, and according to its recommendations some initiatives in the form of new institutions were to be undertaken. But interestingly enough, their thrust of activities would be

limited only for a short period, after which they were usually abolished under some vague pretexts.

Organising and reorganising local government institutions and agricultural department, apparently constituted mere attempts to put up a facade of development efforts to appease the peasants. By keeping the structural disparity alive, agricultural or rural development as a whole, could not be attained. As a matter of fact, besides maintaining law and order, the government efforts in developing rural organisations worked as a mechanism to expropriate agricultural surplus (through revenue collection) and also to maintain supply of raw materials (such as Indigo, Jute etc.) for the metropolitan industries in England.

Therefore, a comprehensive 'rural development' programme, as the term means today, was not undertaken until 1930s, when a Rural Reconstruction Department was initiated under the leadership of F. L. Brayne, the eminent British Civil Servant. Besides economic depression in Europe, and agricultural slump in Bengal during the time, growing economic concern as well the ensuing political agitation against the colonial rule were among the main reasons for the government's focus on an effective rural development programme.

But the reformist approach of Brayne likewise failed as it also did not adequately address the basic structural problems of the rural society. It was abolished in 1944 under the pretext of certain organizational and financial problems.

Cooperatives as formal institutions did not exist before adopting a Cooperative Societies Act in 1904. Although, under an Agricultural Loans Act of 1885, the government used to provide cheap credits, called Taccabi, at the time of natural calamities, the amounts of which were so meagre that they could not sufficiently meet actual credit needs of the poor farmers. The new village based

cooperative societies, formed after the model of European Mutual Credit Associations, were federated with the Cooperative Department, and a Central Cooperative Bank acted as the agent to the Department. Unfortunately, these cooperatives' organization also could not see the face of much success due to high overdue loans, loose village organizations, and dominance of large land-owners. After the partition in 1947, the Pakistani government abolished these societies and replaced them with "Cooperative Multipurpose Societies" at the Union level. This cooperative's programme also failed to sufficiently realise the main objectives of the Coop. Movement - due again to the same old reasons that prevented earlier cooperatives to effectively operate.

Observing the limitations of the cooperatives, the government of Pakistan envisaged improvement of agricultural output and rural income through a programme of self-help and cooperation among villagers themselves. With that objective, the village Agricultural and Industrial Development (V-AID) programme was launched in 1953. Although, there was a land reform carried out in 1952 abolishing the colonial Zamindari system created by the Permanent Settlement Act of 1793, it did not adequately reduce the structural inequality in the village society. And under such situation, the Village Level Workers (VLWs) as change agents could hardly bring about much change. Moreover, the ambitious self-help programme also did not materialize while basic problems of credit and input supply, irrigation, drainage and flood control remained unattempted. Like the earlier Rural Reconstruction Department, this also proved a superfluous institution within the structure of different separate government departments. Nevertheless, the programme kept expanding - and thus managed only to magnify its shortcomings.

At this stage (1959) came into being the Academy in Comilla to train government officials responsible to formulate and implement rural development policies. At about the same time, the new

military government of Ayub Khan announced the Basic Democracies system for local governments. V-AID and 'Basic Democracy' related officials were the first batch trained at the Comilla Academy. Later, the 107 square mile Comilla Thana area was given to the Academy to use it as a laboratory area with "full responsibility for policy determination". Over the next few years, while the V-AID programme was abolished in 1961, this became the venue for evolving the new model of rural development through intensive experiment and research. This 'Comilla model' was later replicated throughout Bangladesh by IRDP.

The rural development programme of Comilla, given its limited scope relative to change in the existing socio-political structure, may be called the first successful programme of this nature in the history of Bangladesh. Whatever attempts previously undertaken in this field could not do much of 'rural reconstruction' or 'village agricultural and industrial development', simply because the former governments lacked the appropriate political commitment and dedication to achieve them. Village areas were always taken merely as agricultural hinterland. Suppression of peasant uprisings and appropriation of surplus were the main concerns of those programmes. Moreover, the highly skewed land and other faulty resource distribution system effectively obstructed progressive change. Besides, lack of clear vision of the bureaucracy based on experiment of effective development approaches in this land, contributed to failures. The lessons of earlier failures, however, have contributed in avoiding repeatation of some of the mistakes in the later programmes.

The Comilla experiment, particularly owes much of its own brand of 'success' to the experience of the former programmes. The rural development models of Brayne, Gandhi and of Community Development approach propagated by the American sociologists - all relied on motivated village level workers coming from outside. But

Comilla realized that the use of outsider 'change agents' in village development was an erroneous concept since it only undermined the potentials of the villagers themselves in effecting meaningful change. To specify the area where outside help would be most useful, the programmers in Comilla identified 'financial help' for small farmers as the most realistic and primary need. This was premised on the idea that because of the small subsistence farmers' dependence on oppressive land lords and money lenders for borrowing money to buy capital inputs and food, these farmers were hopelessly caught in a vicious cycle of exploitation. To free them from such bind, Comilla organized cooperatives for savings and credit on easy terms. To promote intensive crop cultivation through "Green Revolution" technology, irrigation groups were organized, channels constructed and pumps supplied. In order to build rural infrastructure to facilitate drainage, irrigation and marketing, and also to create employment for unemployed rural labourer, rural works programme were undertaken. To coordinate the village based primary societies (KSSes) and other development activities; to provide training in improved agricultural practices, and to bring different government departmental officials together for an organized service delivery, the Thana training and development center (TTDC) was set up.

On the whole, it was a relatively successful programme, at least in so far as organization was concerned. Not only that the Comilla experiment succeeded in mobilizing agrarian population and setting up new institutions; it also established direct linkages with the government service delivery system. This new institution of Thana development center, in a way, ensured continuity of the village institutions, and the bureaucracy made more aware of its obligations. The mechanism of this well-knit programme also contributed in building awareness among hitherto neglected rural people. They had far better opportunities now than ever, to learn about their rights and responsibilities.

The physical outcomes of the programme were also impressive. Food output in Comilla area more than doubled in ten years. With the development of infrastructure, average production per family increased from 49 to 95 maunds (1963-69), marketed surplus per family/year went up from 11 to 25 percent; and cash farm expenditure also rose from Tk.111 to Tk.393 during the period. The contemporary government of President Ayub was much impressed by its 'successes' - and planned expansion of the programme elsewhere in the country. The main reason of the government's enthusiasm on this programme was, that it satisfied its 'growth' oriented development strategy. Although, its main emphasis was on urban industrial development which during that period was growing at accelerated rates, the government needed the agricultural sector to complement it with increased marketed surplus of its products.

On another level, Comilla type programmes were viewed as an effective instrument to gain political control over the majority voters living in the villages. The new local governments created under the Basic democracies system had to be empowered with some tangible authority to exercise. Hence, the additional patronage possibilities and the possibilities of other personal gains through the Comilla type rural works programmes, gave added attraction to the BD's Union and Thana council positions. This study tried to establish these facts with authentic references. It also dealt with such political implications of succeeding governments' rural development initiatives. Swanirvar and Upazila programmes were also briefly analysed from the same perspectives - and the political motives of the recent Bangladesh governments behind these programmes are found to be no less emphatic.

There may be a difference in degrees of political biases of contemporary ruling governments in supporting respective programmes, but the support for the Comilla model programmes, and its expansion never stopped short over all these years. The possible primary

reasons are : (a) it is an effective programme in mobilising rural population and resources, and also in involving local government officials in development activities; (b) its functioning promotes growth of the economy; (c) it is a means of acquiring political support; (d) the international finance agencies continue funding and supporting the model's expansion; and (e) no viable and comprehensive alternative to the model has yet been developed.

But the central argument of this study has been to re-emphasise the fact that over time, what the Comilla experiment has deliberately and consistently evaded is the 'nagging' issue of equity and distribution. Right from its beginning, studies proved that the benefits of the programme are only going to a small minority of richer and bigger farmers - while the peasants at the bottom are turning landless and destitutes. We have seen how the cooperatives are being dominated by the larger farmers, who are incidentally also the major defaulters. Irrigation and Works Programme benefits are also, without a shade of doubt, going to the same small group of big land owners.

The irony is - 'comilla' still continues to go unabated in much the same way as it begun. Only very recently, the rural development board (BRDB) in its RD-II programme has included a component for landless and women (BSSes and MSSes). But the overall government initiative for an increasingly distressed group which comprises more than half of the population today, has remained painfully inadequate. Some non-government rural development agencies (NGOs) working in small isolated areas with this group, have gained considerable experience, which can be used with benefit by the government agencies for a wider application.

Efforts for economic emancipation and the quest for Democracy in Bangladesh, will necessitate a continuous search for appropriate development programmes and political institutions. But the

programmes and politics must put, above all, the poor landless peasants first. What the history of peasants, programmes and politics in this land essentially points out is an unfortunate absence of a determined will of the governments in this respect, and the need for a genuine, bias free development and change.

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