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ZIA AND INSTITUTION BUILDING FOR RURAL DEVELOPMENT IN BANGLADESH*

It is claimed that Bangladesh is essentially a rural economy and therefore, rural development should be the foremost aim of Bangladesh planners. The Second Five Year Plan of Bangladesh points out that 90 percent of the population of about 90 million in Bangladesh live in villages and about 80 percent of it are dependent on on agriculture.¹ During the Second and the Perspective Plan periods, rural development would be a productive as well as socially desirable welfare process.²

It is, therefore, not surprising that Bangladesh has a significantly long history of institution building and institutional reform relating to rural and agricultural development. And the trend was reinforced after independence, more so following the change over of November 1975. The purpose of the paper is to review the steps taken by late President Ziaur Rahman toward institution building for rural development. However, it would be pertinent to highlight the past experiences in this direction so that the measures of the late President can be seen in the light of their innovativeness and repli-

1. Planning Commission, *The Second Five Year Plan (1980-85)*, Government of Bangladesh, Chapter I, p. 1.

2. *Ibid*, Chapter XII p. 95.

* The article expresses the personal views of the author.

cability on a comparative ground. Briefly these experiences may be chronologically stated as follows :

1. Introduction of local government institution in British India by Lord Dalhousie as early as 1850;
2. Introduction of a Provincial Department of Agriculture as early as 1885;
3. Introduction of Cooperative Movement in Bengal in 1904;
4. Introduction of a national community development programme known as Village Agricultural and Industrial Development (V-AID) programme in 1952;
5. Introduction of Basic Democracy institutes in 1959;
6. Introduction of the Comilla Approach for Community Development through the Academy for Rural Development at Comilla in 1959;
7. Intensification of the Swanirvar (Self-reliance) Movement for rural development in 1975; and,
8. The introduction of the Gram Sarkar format for rural development by the Government in May 1980.

In 1850, Lord Dalhousie introduced town committees with powers to levy indirect taxes. Lord Mayo enlarged these powers over education, sanitation and local public works. Lord Rippon established a network of district and Tehsill Union Boards with some powers

on education, sanitation, public works and health and some financial authority to levy octroi and other duties. From half to two-thirds of the members were elected and they were given powers to elect a non-official Chairman. In Bengal, this experiment started from 1885.⁴ Here the election to these local government institutes were well contested; the competition between the Hindu and the Muslim communities helped increase the political importance of these institutions. These local government institutions also proved to be important training grounds for a number of Bengali politicians of repute.

This participation of the people in the affairs of the local government was accompanied by some devolution of administrative functions in this province in British India. A Provincial Department of Agriculture was also instituted in 1885 and gradually the present pattern of extension organisation got initiated in the forties, when district level agricultural officers, demonstration farms and union level agricultural workers were first introduced.⁵

The cooperative movement in Bengal started from 1904 as a Government sponsored programme mainly for providing credits to the poor on easy terms through cooperative banks and cooperative village societies.⁶ Eventually, it was realised that the poor required not only credit but also a number of other inputs for their survival and, therefore, the emphasis shifted from credit to multi-purpose cooperatives.

4. Planning Commission, *The First Five Year Plan (1973-78)* Government of Bangladesh, p. 154.

5. *Ibid* ;

6. *Ibid* ;

A more comprehensive programme for rural development was launched in 1952 under the Village Agricultural and Industrial Development (V-AID) Programme. It was claimed that the basic concept of V-AID Programme was to provide a means by which technical and financial assistance from the Government could be used to draw forth the resources of skill, energy and money which existed in the village, to channel them into productive uses, and to create means by which they could be progressively enlarged.⁷

The basic unit of the V-AID programme was to be a development area of about 150 to 200 villages with about 100,000 people. The staff in the development area consisted of village workers, supervisors, a development officer and subject matter specialists of various development departments.

The specialists were to work under the operation control of the Development Officer. They were expected to help the Development Officer in (a) making plans for the development of the area in their respective fields; (b) procuring required development materials and services from their respective departments and from other available sources; (c) teaching village workers how to carry out effective demonstrations and (d) helping the village workers personally as and when special knowledge and skill were required.

For training these officers, three training institutes were set up in former East Pakistan by mid-1955. It was also expected that the development areas to be opened

7. *Ibid*, Chapter 13, p. 1.

up in this region would increase from 4 to about 20 during the First Five Year Plan (1955-60) of Pakistan. However, the programme fell under disrepute by the late 1950s.

No comprehensive evaluation was made to find out the shortcomings of the V-AID Programme in former Pakistan. In India this programme was also launched in 1952 under the name of community development. Under this programme each district in the country was divided into a number of community development blocks. Each block had about 10 multipurpose village level workers and 6 to 8 departmental specialists under the overall supervision of a Block Development Officer.⁸ In January 1957, the government of India appointed a Study Team under the chairmanship of Mr. Balwantray Mehta to study and report on Community Development Projects and National Extension Service. The Mehta committee offered two broad directional thrusts.⁹ (1) it argued that there should be administrative decentralisation for effective implementation of development programmes, and (2) the decentralized administrative system should be under the control of elected bodies. It was emphasized in the report that community development can be real only when the community understands its problems, realises its responsibility, exercises the necessary powers through its chosen representatives and

8. Chaturvedi T. N. "Administrative Reforms for Management of Integrated Rural Development" India P-2 (unpublished paper) submitted at EROPA Conference on Management of Integrated Rural Development, June 12-19, 1981.

9. *Ibid.*

maintains a constant vigilance over local administration. Based on these recommendations, a three-tier Panchayet Raj institution were set up in the district, block and village levels in India with the block Panchayet Samiti as the basic unit for development planning and with an advisory role for the district tier (Zila Parishad). As has been pointed out, in Bangladesh local government institution and cooperatives existed for quite long time but they had their obvious limitations. The colonial government that set up the local government institutions was primarily interested in the maintenance of law and order and in the collection of revenue. So an officer-in-charge and a revenue officer was placed at the thana level but there was virtually no development officer at that level. It was necessary for the officer-in-charge at the thana to get information about the suspicious characters at the village level through the village chowkidars and so, the chowkidars were required to report to the thana officers every fortnight. It was the responsibility of the Union Boards to maintain these chowkidars. These local government institutions were, therefore, not oriented to take up development responsibilities that emerged in this country after the departure of the British rulers.

Again, because local government institutions were weak, cooperative management remained mainly a governmental responsibility.

In the late 1950's two developments followed in the process of further building up of local government institutions in this region. First, Ayub Khan introduced his Basic Democracies Ordinance in 1959 that stipulated

a four-(initially five) tier structure of local government: the Union Council, the Thana Council, the District Council and the Divisional Council. In developing this structure, Ayub Khan tried to build up support among the rural elites and used these institutions as his electoral college but in the process, thana became an important institution for local government in former East Pakistan.

The importance of thana, as the focal point for rural development, increased further after the evolution of 'Comilla Approach' in the early 1960 at the initiative of Akhtar Hamid Khan, a retired officer of Indian Civil Service. As an ICS Officer, Khan initially believed in the ICS philosophy that development of rural India should be done mainly at the initiative of the administrators. Gradually, he became disenchanted with this philosophy. After his resignation from service he became the first Director of the Academy for Rural Development at Comilla and started his experiment on understanding the problems of the rural poor using the Comilla Kotwali thana as his social laboratory. His findings were revealing. He pointed out that both administrative and economic infrastructures were required for rural development. Before the abolition of Zamindari system in 1951, the Zamindars used to maintain law and order in rural areas (with the help of the local Police Officers) and provide the needed infra-structure (roads, irrigation, drainage channel, etc.) for agricultural development. After the abolition of the Zamindari system in 1951, a vacuum was created in rural areas as

the government did not take up these added responsibilities. As a result, even the existing roads, ponds, irrigation and drainage channels, etc. could not be maintained and there was no viable administrative structure at the local level to which people could look for help.

To fill up these gaps, Akhtar Hamid Khan suggested the organization of a two-tier cooperatives consisting of multi-purpose cooperatives of the farmers at the village level which were to be federated at the thana level and be known as the Thana Central Cooperative Association (TCCA). In addition there would be a Thana Training and Development Centre (TTDC) at each Thana where the concerned thana officers of the various development departments and the cooperative members coming from the village would learn the techniques of increasing income and employment through a process of participatory training.

This effort of bringing the thana officers and the villagers together at the TTDC has made a significant impact in this region. By now, over 250 TTDCs have been set up in different thanas, and training has become an important input for rural development. Further, in the 1960s, the local government institutes were given some funds for building infra-structures through the Works Programme. Akhtar Hamid Khan insisted that the main problem of agricultural development was irrigation and, therefore, the bulk of the fund under the Rural Works Programme should be spent in constructing irrigation and drainage channels. But the basic demo-

cracies chairmen appeared to be more interested in building roads and bridges that would directly benefit them. However, the idea of using funds under Works Programme for building rural infra-structure through local government institutions gradually became a permanent feature in this country.

Bangladesh Period

After independence, the Government of Bangladesh started a more comprehensive rural development scheme known as the Integrated Rural Development Programme (IRDP) largely based on the Comilla approach. Under this programme, all people in the areas under IRDP were to be organized in IRDP cooperatives and be trained and motivated for their comprehensive development. However, the main weakness of the Comilla IRDP Cooperatives, as pointed out by the Planning Commission Evaluation Report on IRDP in December 1979, appeared to be:¹⁰

the cooperative societies have turned into closed clubs of the kulaks. In particular, a village cooperative covers about one-fifth to to one-fourth of the total farmers in the village. Membership is dominated by large and medium farmers and the small farmers are grossly under-represented. Leadership in the societies is also dominated by large farmers; medium farmers have some representation, but the small farmers are entirely unrepresent-

10. The Second Five Year Plan (1980-85) *op. cit.*, Chapter V, p. 4.

ted in the leadership. These leaders enjoy a greater share of benefits but their participation, as measured by contribution of share capital and savings, is relatively low. The leaders mostly fail to uphold the basic disciplines of cooperative action.

In the early 1970, therefore, two questions became important for rural development:(a) how to ensure that the management of the cooperatives and related organization would not be captured by rural elites and be used for their own selfish aims, and (b) how to ensure that the local people would increasingly rely on mobilization of local resources for local development rather than continuously looking at the government for increased assistance.

Rephrasing these questions, the main problems of institution building in Bangladesh in the 1970's might be said to be the following:—

- 1) how to ensure that the IRDP and other cooperatives were not captured and misused by undesirable local elites.
- 2) how to ensure that the existing local government institutions would function more effectively.
- 3) how to ensure that the various cooperatives and the local government institutions would be integrated in such a way that local resources could be used to the maximum extent.
- 4) how the thana administration could be integrated with the local government institutions.

President Zia and Rural Institutions

In retrospect, it appears that late President Zia had taken the following steps in this direction during 1975-81. As the Chief Martial Law Administrator, he stressed on December 1, 1976 that:¹¹ —

- a) in the past, various problems of the people living in the rural areas had been suppressed in the name of industrial development which centered around the big towns and cities;
- b) time has come to adopt realistic policies for development of the country;
- c) the officers at the division, district and sub-division level would have to work towards upliftment of the conditions of the poor villagers living in 65,000 villages of the country;
- d) for this purpose, masses should be organised into living forces for utilisation in the development activities of the country;
- e) the officers at the division, district and sub-division level would now have tremendous responsibilities in guiding, organizing and leading the people in the rural areas for voluntary work in various development work and schemes.

To realize this rural orientation, he made a determined effort to:(1) revise and expand local government institutions at the union level and integrate these with

11. Cabinet Division. "New Orientation in Government Policy for Development Rural Areas," of CD/DA 30/76-78 (85) 29 March, 1977 Government of Bangladesh.

his basic need planning; (2) induce civil servants of all levels specially at the higher and middle level to go and work in the villages; (3) encourage mass mobilisation and local level planning by extending local government institution from the union to the village level; and (4) intervene in the national macro-plan to give it a basic need orientation and to integrate it with local level planning.

These measures may be described briefly as follows:—

(1) Revival of Union Parishad and its orientation for basic need planning.

As has been pointed out earlier, Ayub Khan used the Union Council as his Electoral College. So these Basic Democracies Institutes remained discredited even after independence of Bangladesh. In the early 1970s, there was also some confusion as to how these institutes would be used. However, in 1977, (i) elections were held in these institutions, now renamed as Union Parishads.

ii) after the election the elected representatives were brought to Dacca, divisionwise, to orient them with the 19-point programme of the late President that emphasised five basic needs: food, clothing, shelter, health, and education. The achievement of these five basic needs became a major objective of the newly elected representatives.

iii) within these five basic needs, stress was given in the initial phase on;

a) canal digging (for building irrigation and

drainage network) for agricultural development;

- b) mass literacy drive for social development; and
- c) population control and family planning measures for keeping population increase to reasonable limit.

Simultaneously, such other steps as tree plantation, pisciculture, poultry farming etc. were also emphasized.

(2) Civil Servants' visits to rural areas.

From late 1977 the government launched a series of programmes such as Village Food Production Scheme, Senior Officer's visit to Rural Areas, Own Village Development Programme, etc. under which senior and mid-level officers were required to go to and stay in the rural areas. The Senior Officers (above the level of Joint Secretary) were required to visit two thanas for three days every month, so that the problems at that level could be brought to the notice of the government and internal cooperation among the various Thana level officers could increase.

Under the Own Village Development Programme (OVD), mid-level officers could volunteer to go to their own villages for one month for developmental work. The Implementation Cell of the Cabinet Division issued the following guidelines for the programme :¹²

- i) under this programme the government servants in close association with their kith and kin may be able to motivate the villagers in

12. Ahsan, S.M. Guidelines for the Officials Participating in the Rural Development Works, Implementation Cell, Cabinet Divisions, January, 1977.

- participating in various rural development programmes;
- ii) because of lack of education, the villagers are in general ignorant of the various government programmes in their villages. The OVD officers may find out through discrete local enquiries what financial provisions (if any) the Government or the local bodies have made in the field of development;
 - iii) the OVD officers may particularly emphasize such development areas as adult education, attainment of self-sufficiency in food, family planning and population control and cottage industries;
 - iv) the strategy in achieving the above objectives should be based primarily on establishing rapport between the officers and co-villagers through formal and informal meetings and by seeking active cooperation of the local leaders.

The OVD officers were trained in rural orientation at the National Institute of Public Administration (NIPA) Dacca. Between February 1977 to date about 1,000 officers participated in this programme. On March 23, 1978, late President Zia interviewed about 500 such officers at Bangabhaban. It was surprising to find these officers giving concrete suggestions and demanding further actions on the part of the government for increasing the effectiveness of this programme.¹³ Thus

13. Shaikh Maqsood Ali, *Public Servants as Change Agents*, an experiment

(a) they demanded that they should be allowed to go to their villages not once but for three times a year. (b) they recommended the establishment of a Reporting Cell in the Cabinet Division so that the various cases of irregularities and corruptions that are often found in field administration may be reported straight to the government by the OVD officers. (c) they claimed that the various suggestions/recommendations made in their reports to the Implementation Cell were based on their actual field experience and, as such, should be processed involving the district administration wherever possible. (d) further, they demanded that some development fund should be made available to them preferably from the Divisional Board as matching grant, i.e., if they were able to mobilise an amount of say one million taka through mobilization of local resources, then the Government should be ready to contribute an equivalent amount to this development effort. (e) simultaneously, they wanted the Government to give preferences to their villages for input supply if they were able to organize these villages. (f) the Government was also requested to issue clear instructions to the district authorities concerned to render necessary help to them in rural development activities in their villages. (g) the officers admitted that under the existing socio-economic framework, it would be very difficult for them to do such for the disadvantageous groups such as the landless farmers and the poor women. Therefore, they

insisted that there should be special directives from the Government to the Social Welfare, Cooperative and Local Government Departments to assist the officers in their villages in the formation of organization for these disadvantageous groups and for the supply of necessary inputs for these organizations to be effective. (h) finally, the officers suggested the formation of District Development Support Team with the OVD participants in each district as its nucleus.

The President assured the OVD participants of his acceptance of these suggestions/recommendations and advised the officers to keep up their citizen roles in the performance of their duties.¹⁴

(3) Extension of Local Government Institutions at the village level.

As has been pointed out in our earlier analysis that rural development require simultaneous agricultural and industrial developments. This, in its turn, require huge investible funds, which is normally not available for poor countries. The Indian response was to go for industrial development first and handle the food crisis later through special agricultural development programme. In the process they achieved some breakthrough in both industrial and agricultural development but rural institutions and participatory planning at the grass root remained weak.

In Bangladesh, the resource constraint was even greater. So, the government had to emphasize self-

14. The Bangladesh Observer, March 24, 1978.



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reliance and mass mobilizations programme for rural development.

For effective mass mobilization, it was realized that there was no organization of the people at the village level and, therefore, it was not possible for the existing Union Parishads to perform this task effectively. Hence, a number of alternative formats for setting up organization at the village level were discussed such as: (a) stretching the arm of the Union Parishad upto the village level; (b) forming some sort of Cooperative Association in each village.

Ultimately, the Gram Sarkar format was accepted by President Zia. On April 30, 1980, he declared at Jirabu, a village in Savar that all 68,000 villages in Bangladesh would organize Gram Sarkar by December 1980.

On June 7, 1981, the heads of the Gram Sarkars were brought to Dacca for orientation to his mass mobilization and self-reliance type development programmes.

A number of questions are now being raised about the effectiveness of Gram Sarkar:—

- a) if the Union Parishad, with all its past tradition could not ensure good leadership and management of local affairs, how could the Gram Sarkar ensure better performance?
- b) how could it be ensured that the Gram Sarkar and the Union Parishad would work in an integrated way and would not fall apart?
- c) how could it be ensured that there would be better integration of thana administration with Gram Sarkar Programmes?

It may, however, be claimed that the Gram Sarkar format has the following advantages over the Union Parishad format:—

- a) the Gram Sarkar envisages the organization of the people in the village on the basis of interest and functional groups such as the farmers, the youth, the women, the agricultural labour, etc. It is also expected that the 12 members of the Gram Sarkars would be representatives of these groups;
- b) the Gram Sarkar provides for fortnightly meeting of the Gram Shava (consisting of all adult members of the village) where the office bearers of the Gram Sarkar can be asked questions on their performance by the villagers.
- c) the 12 members of the Gram Sarkar are responsible for different portfolios of development such as agriculture, pisciculture, tree plantation, family planning, etc. If the Union Parishad can also reorganize its activities on this line, there would be a greater chance of integration of development works at the village and the union levels and with the Thana administration.

Whether the Gram Sarkar, the Union Parishad and the Thana Administration ultimately would lead to greater integration or to greater confusion remains to be seen. However, several developments complementary to integrative rural development also took place during 1979-80. These are:—

- a) emergence and expansion of the concept of Gramin (rural) Banking System under which small loans can be advanced to small organized groups (of about 5 persons) of disadvantaged people without security of land or property. Where the Gram Sarkar and the Union Parishads have supported this scheme, it has expanded very fast, with almost 100% recovery of loans. Recently, both the commercial banks and the Bureau of Manpower and Employment have moved in to support and expand this programme in wider areas.
- b) the Ministry of Family Planning and Population Control has realized that if it operates through organized villages, the effectiveness of its programmes increases considerably. Therefore, the Ministry is now training many of its officers in integrated rural development;
- c) the Ministry of Home Affairs has been training thousands of workers of the Village Defence Party not only in village defence techniques but also in village development strategies with emphasis on the latter, on the assumption that a developed village displays greater capability of defence against outside aggression.

4) **Intervention in the National Planning Process.**

It may, however, be remembered that building institutions for rural development may be a necessary but cannot, by itself, be a sufficient condition. In this

respect the role of national planning is of crucial importance. Historically, it has been found in a number of countries that whatever may be the emphasis on rural development in the national plan, the actual planning process frequently works against the rural poor and patronises the urban and rural elites.

It is interesting to note that late President Zia had actively intervened in the planning process itself to try to integrate it with his rural development thrust. With the help of the Rural Infra-Structure Division in the Planning Commission, he prepared a small booklet for Self-reliance Village Development Plan (Swanirvar Gram Parikalpana) which is now supposed to be a training module of local planning for local government institutions. But this is only a preliminary step. If the Planning Commission has to go forward with it, they would require an extra-ordinary insight into the process of participatory planning and participatory administration. In the past, both the planners and the bureaucrats have dismally failed in this respect in most developing countries. At best, they have landed at some kind of decentralized planning as against participatory planning, as has been shown to be the case in India. Can we face the challenge of promoting participatory planning in Bangladesh?

Concluding Remarks

It is evident from above that the history of institution building for rural development in Bangladesh is a history of experiments with a number of models or

variants thereof. One may argue that some of these models appear similar in approaches and contents but in spite of this similarity, it may also be observed that these experiments, particularly, the recent ones, have taken the movement for self-government down to the grass root level. In the 1960s, the demand for increased devolution of power from the centre to the periphery came mainly from the rural elites and, therefore, could be postponed on the pretext of lack of citizen competence. Today this is no longer possible. The demand is now increasingly coming from the ordinary villagers. It is being reinforced by increased ineffectiveness of the traditional bureaucratic machinery to cope with the increased demand of the people for better and quicker services. The pace that has been set for self-government down to the villages in recent years, therefore, seems to be irreversible.