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ZIA AND YOUTH DEVELOPMENT IN BANGLADESH

The second half of the seventies was a time of youth resurgence in the Third World countries. That also was the period when a youthful Ziaur Rahman presided over the destiny of a predominantly youthful Bangladesh. In late 1970s no less than sixty-five per cent of the eighty million people of Bangladesh were composed of persons below twenty-five years in age. Even today more than one-fifth of Bangladeshi population happen to be men and women in the 15-25 age bracket. According to latest available statistics, in 1978 persons in the 15 to 25 years age range numbered 18,825,000. This represented over 22 percent of the population of Bangladesh in 1978.¹ In 1981 the picture has changed only marginally.

More than nine-tenths of the youth in Bangladesh dwell in the rural areas and constitute a substantial portion of the 30 million strong work force engaged in agriculture or farm-related activities. They also represent a predominant segment of the 7 to 10 million strong unemployed or underemployed rural work force. Many of them belong to the rural landless (land being the chief source of sustenance for the majority of Bangla-

1. Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (Ministry of Planning) *Statistical Pocket-book of Bangladesh*, 1979, pp. 120-23.

desh's predominantly agrarian population) who constitute today no less than thirty percent of the rural population of Bangladesh.

The eight percent or so of the total youth population of Bangladesh who reside in urban areas are illiterate, half-literate, unemployed or underemployed. According to studies undertaken in the mid-seventies, nearly forty-four percent of the urban educated youth of Bangladesh were without gainful employment. The total number of educated or trained unemployed and misplaced persons in Bangladesh can safely be estimated to stand near the one million mark. A substantial portion among these are youth in the age range of fifteen to twenty-five years.

The economic and technological backwardness of Bangladesh—one of the poorest among the recently freed Third World countries—is well-known. Figures tell their own tales. "Over half of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) comes from agriculture and only about 6 percent of it arises in modern industries. About 90 percent of its (of about 90 million) population lives in village and 80 percent of it is dependent on agriculture."

"Average per capita income is .U.S. \$ 100 only and over four-fifths of the population are considered to be below the poverty line in terms of minimum caloric requirement.² The total population of the country stood at 85.6 million in 1979 (44.2 m. males and 41.4 m. females)³ and rose to nearly 90 m. during the close of

2. Govt. of the People's Republic of Bangladesh, Planning Commission, *The Second Five Year Plan, 1980-85 (Draft)*, May 1980, p.1.

3. *Pocketbook of Bangladesh, 1979*, p. 83.

the 1980. The population growth rate between 1961-1978 was 2.5% per year.⁴

The percentage of literacy was 20.2 in 1974.⁵ It improved to 22.2% by 1978.

In 1976 the per capita gross national product (GNP) of Bangladesh was a paltry US \$ 90 compared to oil-boom-beneficiary Kuwait's 13,960 and resource-rich, technologically advanced, superpower U.S.A.'s 7880, a socialist and resourceful People's Republic of China's 370, Pakistan's 180 and neighbouring and populous India's 140, war-torn Laos's 90 and landlocked and resource-starved Bhutan's 80.⁶

All told this represented a rather grim and depressing scenario. But then this was the picture that unfolded before the eyes of the late President Ziaur Rahman as the course of historical events caused him inexorably to climb to the pinnacle of power and authority in Bangladesh during 1975-77.

It was a scene that could have daunted many. But it may not be an overstatement to observe that the late President Zia bravely surveyed the situation and agreed with the inevitable solution: that to achieve an improvement in the quality of life in impoverished and overpopulated Bangladesh, two principal and unavoidable measures had to be initiated and implemented:—

- (a) increment of all production, especially food and agricultural production with all available

4. *Ibid.*

5. *Ibid.*

6. World Bank *Altals*, 1974 cited in *Statistical Pocketbook of Bangladesh*, 1979 pp.826-830.

- resources, local, national and international, government and private, directed and voluntary.
- (b) simultaneous reduction of the alarmingly high and disproportionate rate of annual growth of population, through an organized, nationwide movement that depends more on persuasion than on coercion.

The late President Zia, it appears, clearly realized that in order to achieve these objectives the nation needed to consolidate the society by means of well-ordered, strong and well-knit organizations. He was conscious that Bangladeshis needed to organize their communities into well-knit groups, locally, area-wise, regionally as well as in terms of age and sex to transform these into focal points, reservoirs and power-houses of organized human resources—manpower—which could be well-utilised in a disciplined manner for bringing about total and comprehensive development of the national society.

He was aware that resource and personnel constraints in Bangladesh (as in many other economically underdeveloped countries of the Third and Fourth Worlds) were such that government efforts alone could not deliver the goods. These needed to be constantly and consistently supplemented, supported—even overtaken—by spontaneous, organized and powerful people's movements which were at once the cause and product of change in popular attitudes.

Zia's attempts—to my mind—represented an endeavour at quick and practicable reforms that would contain the essence of a revolution but avoid the blood-

shed that is usually regarded as the inevitable price of a revolution.

Thus, in order to gear the Bangladeshi society to a new order with increased production and self-reliance and reduced rate of population growth as its canons, he stressed the growth of two government sponsored but independent popular movements: Women's liberation and development and Youth development.

His objective seemed to have been to use the meagre but immensely influential government initiative to initially propel the movements for development and significant and socially useful change in both the sectors with the eventual objective of improving the quality of life in Bangladesh.

The late President Zia seemed to be fully aware of the substance of the truth that the former Prime Minister of Jamaica, Michael Manley had articulated in 1977:

The poor of the world (must) unite effectively behind demands for change....we have to find ways of getting young people motivated to involve themselves in national, community, institutional activities. The achievement of this task will involve a difficult but potentially rewarding struggle, *for youth must be regarded as the vanguard in the quest for orderly and stable change.*

Yet, in many parts of the world, young people are becoming increasingly cynical and apathetic. They have to a considerable extent become disillusioned with the gaps between

promise and action. They are no longer certain whether reform is a viable method for change. And in this context of uncertainty, many have chosen voluntarily to relinquish their rights as citizens in the democratic process, while others have accepted the challenge to struggle for revolutionary change from outside the system. These developments have therefore made it a matter of most urgent necessity that we devise strategies and programmes that involve youth in both the conception and formulation of all public policies and programmes.⁷

It was clear from the various gradual but rapid steps initiated in the field of youth development and youth integration in national development by President Ziaur Rahman that he was fully conscious of the urgency of the situation. In course of innumerable meetings, discussions, dialogues with relevant agencies, various youth groups and their leaders and government personnel during the year 1976 and part of 1977, Zia continued to look for practical and viable answers to various questions and problems relating to the youth of Bangladesh. These questions concerned the structuring of youth participation in the public affairs and decision making processes, youth participation in national governmental processes, in decision-making and management of the

7. "Popular Participation", Address by the Honourable Michael Manley, Prime Minister of Jamaica on 4 May 1977 at the Ocho Rios (Jamaica) Meeting of Young Commonwealth Leader (49. May 1977) in Commonwealth Secretariat, London, "Report of the Meeting," Vol. 1 (u.d.) pp.21-22.

education system, and last but not the least, youth participation in community development and national socio-economic development processes.

Zia took early steps to encourage youth participation in the country's development endeavours as a part of the national policy of popular participation in progress. He correctly assessed that the youth contained an immense reservoir of energy which when properly organized, mobilized and utilized, could make great contributions to national development.

Accordingly even at a time when he was not the formal Head of the State and Government in late 1976 and early 1977 he initiated steps that led the government to launch visible efforts to ensure organized and structured participation of the youth in development activities. He used whatever formal authority he had as the Deputy Chief Martial Law Administrator (one among three, the two others being the Chief of Staff of the Air Force and the Navy) and virtual Minister-in-charge of Finance and his considerable personal influence and image honed to a fine cutting edge by his indomitable initiative and untiring zeal for work to achieve this objective.

He chose the Department of Social Welfare, an operational arm, field agency (at the relevant time) of the Ministry of Health, Labour, Manpower Development and Social Welfare, as the initial medium of youth activities for national and community development. The choice seemed natural in the context of Zia's concept of youth as a community. In viewing the youth population of Bangladesh as a powerhouse of human

resources, a vanguard of progressive socio-economic change, he considered the Bangladeshi youth in its entirety. He was not concerned conceptually, substantively and even initially, with only the relatively privileged youth who resided in the urban centres or belonged to the schools, colleges and universities. He was aware that nearly nine-tenths of the twenty million strong youth population not only resided in the rural areas but also were basically out-of-school.

It was, thus, that he chose not the Ministry of Education or the Ministry of Sports and Culture but the Department of Social Welfare with its traditional role as a linking mechanism between the government and the unprivileged and the underprivileged, as the medium for making the first significant thrust in the field of comprehensive youth development and youth participation in national development.

On Zia's personal initiative and under his general guidance the First National Youth Convention was organized by the Department of Social Welfare on 18 and 19 February 1977 at Sher-e-Bangla Nagar, Dacca.⁸

Participants in the convention included the urban youth, organized youth bodies such as the National Cadet Corps, the Boy Scouts and the Girl's Guides and the nationwide voluntary Youth agencies. That was to be expected. But what was new and epitomised future directions was that the participants in the four thousand strong assembly of youth included a large and fairly

8. Based on the personal knowledge of the author who worked as Director of the Department of Social Welfare between April 1976 to May 1980.

representative contingent of rural youth—men and women. Hundreds of youth, boys and girls, many of them clad in the lowest-priced clothes and without shoes or sandals, from the four hundred rural *Thanas* (administrative sub-districts of Bangladesh containing approximately 150,000 people on average) attended the Convention.

Ziaur Rahman, at that time Chief of Army Staff and Chief Martial Law Administrator, inaugurated this first ever youth convention with a difference. In his inaugural address he sounded a clarion call to the youth of Bangladesh to participate in national development activities and to set up a broad-based National Youth Organization. He also declared a government grant of Tk. 20 million (approximately one and a quarter million U.S. dollars in 1978) for development of cottage industries in the rural areas for the youth to provide for them income-generating activities with self-employment orientation.⁹

A few months later, principally as a result of President Ziaur Rahman's encouragement, a pilot project entitled "National Youth Services Project" was approved by the government as a development programme to be implemented and operated by the Department of Social Welfare.

Initially estimated to cost an amount of Tk. 136.19 lacs (approximately U.S. \$ 812.500 in 1978) from March 1978 to June 1980, this project envisaged

9. Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh, Department of Social Welfare, "Youth Power", M.R. Shelley (ed), Dacca 1978, 79, p.91

operation in 38 rural *Thanas* where youth could be organized for self and community development activities.

This project aimed at inculcating and reinforcing the spirit of nationalism and patriotism as well as a sense of responsibility and dignity of labour among youth. It also aimed at providing opportunities to youth to develop and improve their employability and income-capabilities leading to maximisation of their productivity and attainment of their own and national self-reliance.

Its purpose was also to promote youth leadership through a process of disciplined, organized and structured programmes and activities. It further endeavoured to integrate the youth with the mainstream of the society through their involvement and participation in community activities where the youth would work *with* the people rather than *for* them.

To achieve these varied objectives the project had programmes in the areas of education, recreation and culture, skill-training in vocational crafts, income generating projects including poultry, duck-farming, bee-keeping, health and hygiene, leadership training for group members, and literary activities".¹⁰

The "National Youth Services Project" of the Department of Social Welfare was soon supplemented by the Department's "Socio-Economic Programme for the Youth" which was developed on the basis of the

10. Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh: Department of Social Welfare, "Social Welfare Services in Bangladesh", Nurul Islam Khan (ed), Dacca, July, 1978, pp.66-68.

grant of Tk. 20 million declared by President Zia in the first National Youth Convention in February 1977. The implementation of this project began in May 1978.

It was designed to provide funds (Tk. 10-40 thousand—roughly .U.S.\$ 660 to \$ 2640 in 1978) to six hundred youth groups for undertaking commercially viable cottage industries projects with both training and production components. It also aimed at providing funds for other income-generating activities and for assisting youth groups in design, quality control and marketing of their products.¹¹

All told, the existing programmes for the youth and the new pilot-projects (i.e. the National Youth Services and Socio-Economic Programme for the Youth) could hardly touch the fringe of the problem even if these were fully and successfully implemented. The coverage even at its maximum could be counted in terms of a few hundred thousand. Considering that the youth population (even if restricted to the 15-25 age-bracket) totalled no less than twenty million this was pitifully inadequate. Nevertheless, it was a beginning and a good and business-like beginning.

It was a beginning that was philosophically sound and yet rooted in reality. It took into full account the fact that the youth in developing countries needed organization to meet the challenges that confronted them everyday; it also showed a basic awareness of the goals to be achieved. It also manifested the sad gap between the demands of the achievement-process and

11. *Ibid.* p.69.

scanty material resources available for meeting those demands.

It displayed the desperate and sincere concern and attempts of a leadership in haste to achieve objectives that needed to be attained quickly with a minimum of resources in terms of material, personnel and time. The distortions and discrepancies that may strike as glaring, were actually created by this chasm between the objective and the means, between sincere and honest desire and an indifferent and cynical reality.

By 1978, Ziaur Rahman had become an elected President having gone first, through the process of popular referendum to obtain reiteration of the nation's confidence in him, and then through the process of national Presidential elections contested, unsuccessfully, among others, by General Osmany, the Commander-in-chief of the Bangladesh Liberation Forces during the 1971 War of Liberation.

President Ziaur Rahman, in full tune with the demands of the time, wanted to contribute his quota to the process of youth development in Bangladesh. And he wanted to do it fast. Hence he took the decision to establish a Ministry of Youth Development. Until early 1979 the Ministry had a part-time Minister and as yet no full-fledged organizational set up of its own.

Nevertheless, it did epitomise the President's concern that a well-ordered and adequately organized government mechanism be there to mainstream youth energy, enthusiasm and productivity into the process of national development.

He was very much in tune with the pace of the relevant times. The Commonwealth Youth Declaration at Ocho Rios, Jamaica in May 1977 had stated that national governments

should not only support the principle of youth participation but should ensure that adequate financial, human and technical resources are made available for this purpose, *including the creation where necessary of a Ministry of Youth and a national policy in each commonwealth country.*¹²

Among the Commonwealth countries which heeded to this international call within less than two years were Zambia, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh.

President Zia's decision to set up a Ministry of Youth Development might have seemed to many of his colleagues as an abrupt step. But the truth was otherwise. Zia had not attended the Commonwealth or other relevant international youth conferences. He might not even have had information of the proposals made and resolutions passed in these meetings. Nevertheless, he had a sense of reality, a way of moving in tune with the longing of the times. That was the elegant reason why he opted to set up a Ministry of Youth Development at a time when many of his close colleagues and advisors must have differed with him, giving in only grudgingly to what they might have regarded as a "drain" on the meagre resources available for develop-

12. "Youth Power", p.67.

ment of populous and economically backward Bangladesh.

In initiating youth development projects during 1976-78, in setting up and then helping build up, step by step, the edifice of the Ministry of Youth Development and the *Jatiyo Jubo Sangstha* (National Youth Organization) during the major part of 1979 and 1980 President Zia, in many respects, forestalled the international awareness in the field of youth development.

As already observed, the thrust of the initial youth development projects launched under Zia's guidance and inspiration by the Department of Social Welfare was to integrate organized and mobilized youth efforts into the grand process of national development.

In fact, what the Bangladesh Government started doing in the sphere of youth development under Zia's guidance and initiative was reiterated as a necessity in the Commonwealth Youth Programme sponsored meeting on Government Policy on Youth Affairs at Chandigarh in India during March 1979. That meeting in which 26 Commonwealth countries participated recommended :—

1. A youth policy or fully co-ordinated set of policies for young people is necessary.
2. It should be consistent with and *supportive of the national development strategy*.
3. It must recognise the diversity of the youth population and the great variety of needs. The policy must therefore be comprehensive

and flexible.⁽¹³⁾

President Ziaur Rahman, as the records show, did try to encourage the evolution of youth policies and programmes that would be "consistent with and supportive of the national development strategy". This is the reason why he endeavoured to structure nation-wide youth activities to promote the causes of voluntary mass-participation in canal digging and re-excavation of rivers for irrigation, in agricultural development and augmentation of food production, in the development of self-employment oriented and income-generating cottage industries.

To him, in however inarticulate and apparently incoherent a sense, it was clear that youth development was part and parcel of a greater and far more massive process: total national development.

His concern that national youth policies and development programmes "must reorganise the diversity of the youth population and the great variety of needs— (and) must therefore be comprehensive and flexible" is clear from the fact that he encouraged various diverse and different organizations and agencies, government and non-government, to go ahead with their own youth development programmes.

Thus even as the pilot projects for youth development under the Department of Social Welfare were well underway he set up a new Ministry of Youth Develop-

13. Commonwealth Secretariat, Marlborough House, London S.W.1., September 1979, "Government Policy on Youth Affairs, Report of a Commonwealth Meeting," Chandigarh, 9-13 March, 1979, p.59.

ment. At the same time—even as the new Ministry through the early months of 1979 continued as a fledgling entity—he had no hesitation in fully backing the Ministry of Cooperatives, Local Government and Rural Development to go ahead with its Taka 1310.50 lakhs (roughly more than 8 million U.S. dollars in 1978) programme of Rural Youth Development through an unconventional scheme of Youth Cooperatives buttressed by a network of youth complexes drawing revenue from rural market places, ferries and other income-earning public facilities.

There need be no illusion that all this did not tend to lead to a certain confusion in the youth development sector. Each concerned agency got full backing and encouragement from the President. Each inclined to overlap and overstep the other's jurisdiction. There occurred inter-agency frictions and conflicts. There were contradictory demands on the same limited pool of government resources and personnel.

There were conflicts among various government agencies all avowedly and according to rules of business dedicated to one or other aspect of youth development. There were also frictions between government and non-government organizations. In many cases the late President Zia had to himself arbitrate among all the conflicting claims. He took it all with dignified grace and matchless composure. He seemed to know the truth. The source of his calm and composure was in the knowledge that these conflicts and frictions over jurisdiction arose from a genuine concern

for development, youth development, which was at any rate the final objective.

There is a lot to criticize in the style and manner of President Zia's dealing with the youth development issue (as also with many other issues of past, present and continuing concern). But what can scarcely be doubted is the fact that the late President sincerely desired that each problem be tackled by as many agencies and persons as were ready to be concerned with and dedicated to the relevant cause.

His was an attempt—so it seems—to encourage, organize, mobilize and energise as broad a spectrum of active agents as possible to meet the onerous challenges that each problem implied in a technologically backward, economically underdeveloped and resource-hungry, overpopulated country. There is certainly an undeniable element of *ad hocism* in this style. But then, when one presides over the destiny of a nearly 90 million strong nation of which one-fifth is restless youth, which in the bargain, is also one of the least developed and poorest of the nations of the world, what else can one do excepting live from day to day while hoping and helping others to hope, that a better tomorrow awaits all if only all work with whole-hearted sincerity and dedication to make the elusive dream of “good, and prosperous life” a reality securely resting within their firm and unwavering grasp?