

**GRAM SHEBIKAS IN OUTREACH PROGRAMME:  
A STUDY OF MIRJAPUR CAMP**

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**I. Introduction**

Thirteen years elapsed since Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC) has been experimenting with trial and error techniques to evolve a multisectoral development approach for the landless and other underprivileged rural people. The Outreach Programme, Rural Credit and Training Programme (RCTP) and the Integrated Development Projects constitute BRAC's various development programmes. These programmes were initially launched and developed independently, but since 1984 BRAC policy makers have begun to recast their idea toward reorienting the projects into a more comprehensive integrated rural development strategy. Within this new thinking the Outreach Programme is viewed as the first stage designed to establish a solid foundation for an integrated rural development approach. Under the new policy BRAC begins its development programmes in any new Upazila as outreach and ultimately move onto an integrated development programme. In stage two the Outreach Programme will be gradually taken over by RCTP; in other words, Outreach activities must serve as the foundation for RCTP, no RCTP will be initiated in an area where the Outreach foundation work has not been done<sup>1</sup>. Similarly, after certain stage of its development in an area the RCTP will transform its activities and emerge as an integrated development programme. Integrated development represents the final phase of BRAC's multisectoral rural development model targeted to the landless and other rural poor.

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## Outreach Programme

BRAC's Self Starter Youth Development Programme which was introduced in 1975 served as the background experience for launching the Outreach Programme in 1978. The Self Starter Programme provided training and material support to local youth groups to help them in their private voluntary action to ameliorate the conditions of the landless poor. But later because of certain limitations and failures in the programme BRAC felt the need for revising it and posted its own staff in some selected places. "In 1980 it was decided that the BRAC staff would work intensively with the landless groups in selected areas and accordingly the Outreach Programme was initiated, with the understanding that landless people in other areas be mobilised by cadres"<sup>2</sup>. These cadres were prominent workers chosen from among the Outreach groups.

The Outreach Programme is a process of mobilizing and organizing the rural poor for achieving a liberation of consciousness and giving them appropriate instruments for gaining power. The programme has both long term and short term objectives. The long term objectives are: 1) building viable people's institutions capable of bringing desired changes in the plight of the poor; 2) increasing the management ability of poor to manage their own lives; 3) inculcating the ability to spot and develop issues; 4) ensuring participation in the local power structure; 5) gradual politicization of the landless; 6) greater economic support; 7) developing capable and challenging leadership from among the poor; and 8) establishing linkages with the neighbouring progressive elements. The immediate objectives of the Outreach Programmes are: 1) mobilizing people and help them to organize groups; 2) developing a process of

mobilization to make people understand the issues they are confronted with, mechanisms of exploitation and dependency existing around them; 3) freeing people from superstition, conservatism and fatalistic views and help them more rapidly adopt changes and accept challenge in life; 4) making people aware of their own strength; and 5) creating an atmosphere where people can raise questions, formulate their own ideas and develop progressive thinking<sup>3</sup>.

According to its Six Monthly Report,<sup>4</sup> the Outreach Programme in its approach to development adopts five major steps. First, target individuals are identified after the individuals have expressed their interest in development activities; second, these individuals are motivated to form village level institutions for their own welfare; third, the group members are encouraged to take training in human resource development to initiate the process of self awareness so that every member will think, speak, and help themselves - Outreach POs work as facilitators or guides for village organisation (VO)/group development; fourth, VOs/groups are urged from the outset to generate a cooperative saving fund; and finally, after sizeable savings are generated the VOs/groups are encouraged to begin their own economic activities.

In Phase 'I, the Outreach Programme worked through an extensive cadre-based approach relying heavily on the cadres to get most of the work accomplished. Cadres were those who demonstrated spontaneous response to collective works, activism in mobilizing others, regularity in meetings and contributions<sup>5</sup>. As of February 1983 there were 1400 Outreach Cadres most of whom were trained at the BRAC's Training and Resource Centre<sup>6</sup>. Organizing weekly meetings, inter village

meetings, cadres meetings, mobilising people for collective activities and social action, preparing the agenda and regulating the course of discussion, making new contacts and forming organisations were the activities of the cadres; the Outreach Programme Organizers worked with them just as facilitators<sup>7</sup>. Although a research produced some optimistic views regarding the efficacy of the cadres' activities,<sup>8</sup> later in Phase II (January 1984 through December 1985) the Outreach planners decided on a shift in emphasis away from the cadres to more direct work by BRAC staff with the groups/VOs. The Outreach planners felt that the cadre-based approach was useful primarily for programme expansion rather than to improve programme quality<sup>9</sup>.

The Outreach Programme has adopted the Functional Education Course (FEC) as one of the most effective means of conscientising its group/VO members. FEC raises not only the literacy and numeracy of the poor group members but also sharpens their knowledge and awareness how and to what extent they are being exploited in a society dominated by traditional power groups. While FEC turns out to be very effective for the Outreach Programme, sometimes the courses get interrupted because of some practical impediments. For example, the non-availability of group members with a minimum of formal education who might serve as sheboks/shebikas<sup>10</sup> for teaching FEC has been limited and in some cases voluntary sheboks/shebikas from among the non-target groups are not committed to the cause of the landless. The Outreach report maintains that the course will improve if the gram sheboks/shebikas are experimentally employed in Outreach Programme<sup>11</sup>.

Up to June 1984 Outreach activities were organized by 72 Programme Organizers (POs) in 18 Camps<sup>12</sup>. While the programme has not yet given a serious thought to engaging gram sheboks, it has employed gram shebikas in two Tangail Region Camps : Mirzapur and Worshi. This study is an attempt to focus on the activities of Gram Shebikas (GSs) of the Outreach Programme.

## II. The Study

Two Outreach Camps in Tangail Region appointed GSs on an experimental basis in anticipation that the experiment if it turned out to be successful could be replicated in other programme areas. The present study is only a brief assessment of the experiment in one of the two camps. Generalization from this small study should be made with great caution for at least two methodological reasons. First, since out of two Camps the study is limited to only one the sample remains very small; and secondly, it is too early to conduct an assessment study as the GSs' engagement with the programme has barely exceeded six months. Nevertheless, this preliminary but brief assessment focuses, though in a limited way, on some potential merits of the experiment, the recognition of which might lead to its confirmation and subsequent replication.

The study was confined only to the Outreach Mirzapur Camp. During the time of its field work in January 1985, while ten GSs were working in the Camp villages, eight of them were actually contacted for interviews. The study was chiefly based on in-depth interviews of the GSs; the POs, Camp- and Area-in-Charge were also consulted. The open-ended unstructured questions were essentially directed to three aspects of the GSs: backgrounds, activities and motivation.

### III. Discussion of the Findings

No formal advertisement seemed to have been circulated for selection of the Gram Shebikas. As the possibility for their engagement was apparently discussed the concerned field staff began exploration within their operational villages to choose them from among the most suitable ones. Through frequent visits to the villages the POs were familiar with some village women who received formal education and were found enthusiastic about village development activities and social services. They also informally discussed with the group members and recorded their opinion, observation and comments regarding the acceptability of a particular female worker to them.

The POs arranged in May 1984 a six-day pre-service orientation course for the tentatively selected GSs at their Camp premises. After successful completion of the course about ten of them were formally engaged. Most of them began their work in June 1984. Contextually it should be mentioned that some group members or members of the village organisations expressed their interest to work as GSs; but they were deliberately avoided at least for two reasons. First, they did not have formal schooling sufficient to be able to carry out the job; and secondly, if they were being engaged it might give rise to unhealthy competition for getting an economically gainful activity which in the long run might fuel misunderstanding and confusion within the groups.

#### Background of the Gram Shebikas

In addition to other social and economic variables the

study focuses on the GSs' religion, age, education, marital status and their previous work experience. The data on these variables is shown in Chart A.

As the chart shows, five GSs of the eight are Muslim the remaining three come from Hindu families. Age ranges between 18 and 32, the mean age being worked out is 23. On academic qualifications four of the GSs have passed the Secondary School Certificate (SSC) examinations, while the rest have either failed the SSC examinations or have received only secondary school education. In regard to marital status five of them are married while the other three remain unmarried. Of the eight GSs only two of them had some previous work experience before joining BRAC.

**Chart A:** Gram Shebikas by their Religion, Age, Education, Marital Status and Work Experience.

<u>Name</u>	<u>Religion</u>	<u>Age</u>	<u>Education</u>	<u>Marital Status</u>	<u>Work Experience</u>
SMR	Hindu	25	SSC	M	No
AA	Muslim	20	SSC fail	UM	No
HK	Muslim	21	SSC	M	No
JA	Muslim	23	SSC	M	Yes
RP	Muslim	27	Secondary school education	M	Yes
DRS	Hindu	32	SSC	M	No
RR	Hindu	18	Secondary school education	UM	No
MA	Muslim	19	SSC fail	UM	No



Compared with the married GSs the unmarried ones are younger and have relatively lower academic performance. All the married GSs are housewives and live with their husbands, while the unmarried ones are dependents of their parents' families. The religion of the GSs and their academic achievement do not show any positive association. Their work experience prior to joining BRAC is almost non-existent; only two of them report to have worked elsewhere but their experiences do not seem to be very relevant.

As already stated, the POs deliberately avoided the selection of GSs from among the members of the Outreach groups/VOs. This does not, however, mean that they selected the GSs only from the richer sections. In fact, most of the GSs were chosen from the lower middle class families whose parents and/or husbands did not necessarily belong to the existing rural power structures and were generally sympathetic to the cause of the poor and to their organisations. The study shows that none of the GSs' engagement with BRAC was discouraged or resisted by their respective family members. Instead in several cases, their association with the BRAC organised poor brought some social and political power resources to the families particularly to those who have just marginally survived from not being considered as members of the Outreach beneficiary groups.

Normally each Outreach village has two groups/VOs: one male and the other female. The GSs exclusively work for the female group/VO preferably within their own village and/or an adjacent one. Some of them, however, work only within one village, but in any case their operational jurisdictions are restricted to not more than two villages.

### Activities of the Gram Shebikas

"Mobilisation of the dispossessed people on the basis of certain common goals with a view to achieve deliverance from the bondages of misery, ignorance, servitude and dependency, was one of the avowed goals of BRAC's outreach approach"<sup>13</sup>. Mobilisation of the underprivileged people is achieved through a diverse range of conscious activities, namely formation of the groups/VOs, intensive personal contacts and interaction, personal and group motivation, functional education and savings generation.

During Phase I most of the Outreach mobilisation activities were performed by the so-called grassroots cadres. But the shift in emphasis away from the cadre-based approach in Phase II puts direct responsibilities on the POs. In view of this emphasis, the GSs were engaged with the broad presumption that they would assist the POs in their day-to-day activities with the groups/VOs. This presumption seems justified on at least two grounds: one, there are some types of activities which need not be performed by the POs, leaving them to devote more time to other important assignments; and two, since hitherto there has been no provision for female Outreach POs the GSs' engagement with the female groups/VOs seems indispensable. While Bangladesh's village communities are passing through a great transition due to several external interventions, the women in particular still have to struggle for some more time to transcend traditionally imposed restrictions on them by their immediate environments. This syndrome does not always permit males to do female organizing at the grassroots very effectively.

As mentioned elsewhere some of the GSs work with only one female group/VO in their own villages while others look after one more group/VO, preferably one from an adjacent village. Those who work with one group/VO receive a monthly remuneration of Tk.100 (i.e., a little more than US\$ 3) and those who work with two groups/VOs draw Tk.150 per month. Of the eight GSs, six work with two female groups/VOs each while the remaining two deal with only one group/VO each.

The Outreach GSs perform a variety of activities, namely teaching Functional Education Courses, holding weekly meetings of the group/VO members, collecting their weekly savings, making personal contacts and doing motivational work with them, and also attending to individual and group queries by the members. Attendance at monthly meeting at the Camp office besides several occasional meetings are compulsory. In addition to their normal duties the GSs are also assigned such other activities as arise out of urgent necessities and require immediate execution. For example, the Outreach GSs at Mirzapur Camp played significant roles in implementing the Emergency Relief Programme organised by BRAC in 1984.

Since the joining of the GSs, the female membership in almost all the groups/VOs shows an upward trend. For instance, after Rehena Parvin joined as GS in June 1984 the female group membership of the village Dulla Begum East increased from 69 to 114. There are reasons to believe that the poor women feel confident in interacting with the GSs as the latter are already known to them.

In view of the nature of their appointment as project

staff, their educational backgrounds and the remuneration they receive one might develop some impression that the GSs devote only a small portion of their time to Outreach activities. But the present study shows something different. The GSs are found working with the Outreach groups/VOs on full-time basis. They lead four Functional Education Courses in a week each running for at least three hours, organize and conduct two weekly group/VO meetings each of which takes not less than three hours. They spend the remaining time in motivational work, home visits, conflict management and giving time to listening to the members' personal problems and queries. They also manage time to attend meetings and individual conferences with the POs. Jahanara Arju, a mother of three children, said, "After joining BRAC I don't get enough time to attend my children; even when I am in the kitchen the group members are around me seeking solutions to their personal problems and group issues".

#### Work Motivation

Though this study has not adopted any scientific technique to measure the degree of GSs' motivation, an attempt is made to reflect upon certain issues which in a way indicate their motivation to Outreach activities. Motivation of a grassroots worker depends, *inter alia*, on three factors: job satisfaction, relations with the immediate supervisors and overall work environment. Several open-ended questions were directed to elicit GSs' responses on these issues and most of them however seemed sincere in responding to them.

The GSs are generally found satisfied with their present job responsibilities. Work opportunity in and around their own

villages, psychological gratification of work with their own village women, and a feeling of social and political importance within the village sub-system are some of the most salient factors which positively contribute to their job satisfaction. Their education is commensurate with their job performance is also a factor that brings them dignity and determination in community work. GS Halima Khatun, a wife of a school teacher, said, "However little the education I received, I feel proud that this education is a facility for bringing about some improvement in the lives of our village poor women".

In both developed and developing societies alike monetary incentives to grassroots level workers is assumed to contribute to some extent to work commitment. Since it is more so in a society such as Bangladesh monetary rewards to the Outreach GSs are of importance. Nevertheless, in some cases the GSs do not necessarily continue to do their work purely for financial gains. As Monowara Akhtar remarked, "I work for BRAC not so much because I receive a monthly remuneration of Tk.150, but because I have had the chance to help the poor women who are after all our sisters". While discussion continued on the same topic, Shah Maya Rani commented, "Had I been asked I could even work for BRAC in the absence of this small remuneration. I enjoy work with our own women ... money has no direct association with my work satisfaction". Similar sentiments were also echoed by a Bangladesh Rural Development Board lady inspector who was working with women cooperatives at Kishoreganj villages<sup>14</sup>.

Most Outreach POs are Master's degree holders, and in spite of the wide gap between their educational achievements and those of the GSs, the GSs were found to be satisfied with

the general dealings with the POs. The POs also hold a high opinion about the performance of the GSs. No problem of relationship between these two functionaries has been reported. The mutual respect contributes significantly to GSs' motivation to work. The advantageous positions of the GSs over the POs in interacting with the village women also bring them some job satisfaction which contributes to their work commitment. These advantageous positions are recognized by Kathleen A. Staudt who maintains, "Female staff present greater possibilities (or perhaps the only viable one) for contacting women's groups or individual women, particularly in societies where contact between unrelated men and women is discouraged"<sup>15</sup>.

Other than what has been discussed in the foregoing paragraphs, the overall work environment in relation to job satisfaction of the GSs merits close attention. As already understood, the job of the GSs is purely village-based; the work jurisdiction is limited to their own village and/or to an adjacent one. This arrangement brings at least three advantages for the GSs: they can work within a known circle; most of them need not travel more than four kilometers within the village(s); and they are not worried about any dislocation with their family members. Significantly, moreover, these situations contribute to a healthy work environment in the context of the Bangladesh village community and it is likely that a healthy work environment is associated with their motivation to work.

Though females' going out to work traditionally confront existing village norms and values, such value confrontations with the GSs seem to have been substantially resolved at the

village level. Compared with many other Bangladesh villages Mirzapur people are a little more exposed to outside world, therefore they are not generally reported to have opposed female participation in development work. According to the GSs, there is hardly any evidence of the villagers resisting or openly criticising their engagement with BRAC. The average vilagers do not see anything wrong with the GSs' work, rather their activities are approved by them since they are working hard in association with BRAC to ameliorate the abysmal conditions of the poor women. In some cases it is reported that the villagers feel satisfied and proud that their educated but unemployed girls are rightly engaged in rural advancement activities. Moreover, the simplicity of the GSs, their movement and behaviour do not seem to have created any confusion and distaste among the local people. On the whole, while all these situations refer to the prevalence of a congenial work atmosphere there are reasons to believe that the GSs sustain their motivation to Outreach activities.

#### IV. Summary and Conclusion

The POs were mainly instrumental in choosing the GSs; their choice was not based on a process of selection per se but on a systematic search. They searched them from the local villages and later cross-checked their suitability with the group/VO members. However, none of the GSs was chosen from among the group/VO members. Their ages range between 18 and 32, the mean age is 23. Out of eight six either passed or appeared at the SSC examinations, only two received secondary school education. Five of the eight are married. Their work experience is almost non-existent; only two have worked elsewhere prior to joining BRAC. Most of the GSs have been

chosen from lower middle class families whose parents and/or husbands do not normally belong to the existing rural power structures but are generally sympathetic to the cause of the underprivileged villagers.

As regard to their activities, six GSs work with two female groups/VOs each and receive a monthly remuneration of Tk.150, and the remaining two work with only one group/VO each and receive a remuneration of Tk.100 per month. They perform a variety of activities, namely conducting the functional education classes, holding weekly meetings of the group/VO members, collecting their weekly savings, making personal contacts and doing motivational work and also listening to the personal and group problems and attending their innumerable queries. In addition to their normal duties the GSs are also assigned other activities which arise out of urgent necessities and require immediate execution. Since the joining of the GSs, female memberships in almost all the groups/VOs has shown an upward trend, and functional education courses have been continued uninterrupted.

Work motivation of the grassroots workers depends, inter alia, on three factors: job satisfaction, relations with immediate supervisors and overall work environment. With regard to these aspects the GSs are found generally satisfied with their job assignments. Opportunity for work in and around their villages, psychological gratification for having engaged themselves with their own village women, and feeling of social and political importance within the village sub-system seem some of the most important factors which positively contribute to their job satisfaction and hence to their positive motivation.



POs and GSs work side by side. No problems of relationship between these two functionaries has been reported. POs recognize the worthy contribution by GSs to the overall Outreach activities. The GSs also feel satisfied with their work environment for three basic reasons: they can work within a known circle; most of them need not travel more than four kilometers within the village(s); and they are not worried about dislocation with other family members. The traditional resistance to female engagement in village development work is virtually non-existent at Mirzapur villages.

From a detailed analysis of the study it is plausible to argue that the GSs have definite roles to play in the whole functioning process of the Outreach Programme. The rationale of the experiment with GSs has not only been well founded but the optimism of the programme planners and the executors in the experiment has turned out to be a reality. However, before the planners decide to replicate the experiment in other Outreach areas they should proceed cautiously particularly in regard to the choice of the GSs. While mere selection of some village women as GSs may not be a problem, finding the really qualified and committed workers from among them will always remain a formidable task.

As in the case of Mirzapur, sufficient autonomy should be given to the respective Camp POs for identifying, searching and finally selecting the GSs from their own operational villages. While making a final choice of a prospective GS the POs should focus on an appropriate combination of her following attributes: (1) she has strong motivation for social services; (2) she comes not from a family belonging to a high income

bracket; (3) she is one whose family members are generally sympathetic toward BRAC's efforts; and (4) she is well behaved, appears simple in fashion and is generally aware of the community sentiments. In addition, it would be also interesting to identify, if a GS should (5) receive secondary school education, preferably pass the SSC examinations; and (6) be either married or is in her <sup>early</sup> ~~late~~ thirties. These, of course, could only be confirmed by a further investigation.

Programme organizers' conscious attempts might enable them to choose suitable GSs in many Outreach areas. But they are afraid, it might be difficult to sustain in the long run their motivation particularly in the absence of reasonable monetary incentives. It would be more so when other organizations, e.g., Gramin Bank, CARE-Bangladesh, ICDDR,B, etc. come forward for local recruitment of female workers offering them a competitive remuneration. However, in such events BRAC should think of a gradual increment of their remuneration structure and give them a feeling that their engagement is considered worth in the whole Outreach performance. BRAC can also provide as a token of incentive a limited educational assistance for their schoolgoing children. Provision for some welfare funds for the GSs may be also made.

Increased communication, cooperation and interaction among the POs and the GSs can go a long way toward sustainment of the latter's motivation. The POs should continue to play a decisive supportive roles; they should work as friend, philosopher and guide of the Gram Shebikas.

## Notes and References

- 1 In RCTP Phase II, it has been decided that the Outreach will establish the foundation for RCTP in new Upazilas organizing and mobilizing the landless, providing extensive training, education, etc. See Report on Rural Credit and Training Programme, (Mimeo.), Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee, Dhaka, June 1984, p.9
- 2 Taherunnessa Abdullah et al. Evaluation Report, BRAC, NOVIB, 28 Feb.- 15 March, 1983, p.8
- 3 Ibid., p.9
- 4 Six Monthly Report Outreach Programme (Phase II), (Mimeo.), Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee, Dhaka, June 1984, p.4
- 5 Zafar Ahmed and Izzedin I. Imam, A Study of BRAC's Outreach Programme (Mimeo.), Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee, Dhaka, 1983, pp. 4-5
- 6 See Taherunnessa Abdualah et al., op cit., p.16
- 7 Zafar Ahmed and Izzedin I. Imam, op. cit., p.5
- 8 Ibid., p.5
- 9 Six Monthly Report Outreach Programme (Phase-II), op. cit., p.4
- 10 Sheboks/Shebikas are Bengali words: Shebok stands for male worker, and shebika<sup>r</sup> for female worker. Gram Shebika means village female worker.
- 11 Six Monthly Report Outreach Programme (Phase II), op. cit., p.7
- 12 Six Monthly Report Outreach Programme (Phase III), op. cit., p.3
- 13 Zafar Ahmed and Izzedin I. Imam, op. cit., p.2
- 14 Commenting on her job she said, "for the amount of money I get, I should have quit the job, but I cannot because I have developed a great attachment with the members of the MSS. They are so good, so cooperative with us!". See M. Mahbubur Rahman, Role Analysis of Officials: A Case Study of an Upazila of Kishoreganj District, (Mimeo.),

Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee, Dhaka, 1984,  
p.4

- 15 Kathleen A. Staunt, Women and Participation in Rural Development: A Framework for Project Design and Policy-oriented Research. (Occasional Paper No. 8), Rural Development Committee, Cornell University, Ithaca, N.Y., 1979, p.15.