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Bangladesh : Politics, Development and Perspectives of the Poor

Introduction

Due to its very geographical setting, nature has always dominated the lives of the people of Bangladesh. They have had to fight nature in the form of floods, droughts, tornados and cyclones for their survival. Their history is replete with tales of suffering, diseases and deaths. The pervasive poverty that engulfs this nation also historically has had much to do with its natural environment.

Interestingly this has had some positive influence on the lives and attitudes of the people of Bangladesh. They are resilient and politically conscious. Much of the rebellions that took place against the British rule in the then undivided India had in fact their roots here. Titumir, Surja Sen, Khudi Ram and many other known and unknown Bengalees laid down their lives fighting the British occupation. With this in background, India was partitioned in 1947 making Bangladesh the eastern province of Pakistan. This alliance of politically conscious population of the then East Pakistan with feudal dominated West Pakistan was never meant to be a happy one.

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This was first felt when the rulers of Pakistan, coming dominantly from the Western part, tried to impose Urdu as the state language of Pakistan ignoring Bengali, the language of the majority. Bengalees protested and died on the streets of Dhaka and this was the beginning of a political movement that culminated in the armed struggle for freedom from Pakistani occupation. Hundreds of thousands lost their lives in the struggle that led to the birth of Bangladesh on 16 December 1971. The country was devastated as a result of the war.

As the reconstruction work of the new nation commenced, much of the generic problems started to surface. In the early 1970s the country which had become independent without any assets and many liabilities encountered severe floods and food shortages. Petroleum price had then spiralled up and this added to the suffering of the nation. A famine ensued in 1974 as a result of which many people died and the government lost its popularity very fast. Law, order and discipline deteriorated. In a pre-dawn coup on August 15, 1975 led by a small group of young disgruntled serving and retired army officers Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the founding father of the nation, along with his several family members was brutally killed.

The government that then took over the power had lasted only a few weeks. After a series of coups and counter coups General Ziaur Rahman, the army commander and a hero of the war of independence, assumed power. He was also killed in an abortive coup in 1981. General H.M. Ershad, the then army commander forcibly took over power from Ziaur Rahman's successor in a bloodless coup. General Ershad remained in power for long 9 years and was overthrown in 1990 by a popular mass movement led by Sheikh Hasina, a surviving daughter of Sheikh Mujib and Begum Khaleda, widow of Ziaur Rahman. In the general elections that followed Ershad's ouster, conducted by a neutral caretaker government, Khaleda Zia's Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) swept into power. Hasina's Awami League dismissed the election results with allegations of subtle rigging and vowed to topple the new government. The two ladies (Hasina and Khaleda) are arch rivals : even their personal relationship is one of animosity.

and mistrust. In the Parliament, out of 330 members BNP had 166 and Awami League 90, followed by Ershad's Jatiya party 35, and Jamaat-e-Islami (a Muslim fundamentalist party) 18.

BNP was formed by General Ziaur Rahman when he was the president. He quite successfully used the pro-Islamic and anti-India populist politics to his benefit. The BNP did not have a strong base in the rural areas although Ziaur Rahman, and later Khaleda Zia, commanded significant support from the younger generation, particularly students. Awami League, on the other hand, was born in the early 1950s as a secular party and led the country to independence. It has a solid organizational base in the rural areas which could not be shattered by years of non-Awami rule. Historically, the League was considered to maintain closer ties with India and this was quite successfully used by BNP in their tirade against this party particularly during the 1991 election.

As the BNP started to consolidate its power, the party high command found itself sharply divided. The dominant group took a hard-line attitude in dealing with the threat posed by the Awami League. With this came a by-election in 1994 following the death of an Awami League member in the parliament. The BNP nominee won that election which was widely believed to have been massively rigged. This gave fresh grounds for a new movement against the BNP government. The Awami League quickly forged alliance with Ershad's party and the Jamaat and demanded new constitutional provisions to hold all the future general elections under neutral caretaker government. The BNP rejected the idea instantly terming the demand as unconstitutional.

The movement that granulated in 1994 centering the by-election came to an end on 30 March 1996. Many events occurred during these two years. In December 1994, some 146 MPs belonging to the opposition parties resigned from parliament *en masse* protesting the government's failure to accept their demand for caretaker government. Before that an Ex-Australian Governor General on behalf of the Secretary General of the Commonwealth tried to negotiate but, because of the rigidity of the two sides, his efforts went futile. An influential minister lost his job as he favoured a softened

attitude towards the demand of the opposition. Efforts of some top intellectuals of the country to negotiate a settlement also went in vain. Under this situation, the election of 15 February 1996 was held, boycotted by the mainstream opposition political parties. Few voters turned up but the government claimed a huge turnout. With this election the government quickly lost all its remaining credibility. The situation sharply turned against the BNP government. Those who were neutral or against the movement during these two years also started to see the future of the country in this movement. Different professional organizations of the country declared their active support for the movement branding the new government formed after the 15 February elections as 'illegal' or 'illegitimate' and demanded its immediate resignation. A continuous non-cooperation movement that started on March 9 forced the government to step down 21 days later. The government in its last act quickly made constitutional amendments paving the way to hold all the future elections under neutral caretaker government.

This non-cooperation movement caused havoc to the country's economy. The export oriented garment industry was about to collapse. Activities at the main seaport of Chittagong came to a standstill and the road and rail communications were totally disrupted. Banks and other offices remained closed and law and order situation deteriorated sharply. The educational institutions were shut.

Those who suffered most during this movement were the poor, especially the poor women. Different non-government organisations (NGOs) have been working in Bangladesh for the alleviation of poverty since the early 1970s. Disbursement of loan to the poor with little or no collateral is an important intervention in such programmes. In 1995 alone, the NGOs disbursed Tk. 2,000 crore in loan with a recovery rate of over 90%. The impact of such loan on poverty alleviation has been quite significant and such efforts have received admiration at home and abroad. The non-cooperation movement had an adverse effect on the activities of NGOs.

BRAC is a national NGO in Bangladesh with a large credit programme. The activities of BRAC were also adversely affected, and we decided to document the effect of the movement. Specifically

the objectives of this study were to document the problems faced by the poor women and how the poverty alleviation programmes run by NGOs were affected due to this movement. This study provided an opportunity to know the attitudes of the poor people towards the movement, and towards the parties involved, viz., the government and the opposition. Here we present some selected aspects from this study. It is important to remember that the study was conducted when the movement was at its peak, i. e., the period of this study was March 20-27, 1996.

Research methodology

Rural Development Programme (RDP) is one of the core programmes of BRAC¹ covering 35,000 villages in 50 districts. RDP has been working for the last ten years for the uplift of the rural poor through village-based cooperatives ; it assists in economic development through disbursement of loan on easy terms and training. It also runs a large number of non-formal primary schools. The programme carries out its activities through 235 area offices in different parts of Bangladesh. We selected all the area offices for this study but interview results actually came from about 150. Data were collected through checklist by interviewers who were also the field workers of BRAC.

The study was conducted in two villages in each RDP area, one close to town and the other far from it. Two groups, one with 8-10 women and the other with 8-10 men, were interviewed separately in every village. We tried to document the opinion of the rural poor who consists of half of the country's population. Besides, two research teams from BRAC's Research and Evaluation Division collected data with the same checklist from Syedpur, Gazipur and Sylhet. These data provided additional materials for the analysis.

Knowledge about the movement

The non-cooperation movement spread like wild fire to remote rural areas surpassing the boundaries of the towns, probably for the first time since the liberation war of 1971. All the participants of this study irrespective of gender had knowledge about this move-

One Kalimun of Manikganj told that peace prevailed in the country but the opposition leaders created restlessness. "The opposition wants to realize their demands at the cost of whatever happens to the people," they added. Fazila of Barisal opined, "Sheikh Hasina calls hartals to avenge her father's death."

A woman opined that the Prime Minister (Khaleda Zia) had usurped power. Many others expressed their strong voice in favour of the opposition as well. A group of poor women of Sharishabari, Jamalpur told, "Sheikh Hasina wants a government of Shahabuddin" who conducted a free and fair election." A group of women of Mymensingh remarked that the government was responsible for this crisis. "Their indifference and rigid mentality made the period of sufferings longer. As they are in power they should think of the sufferings of the people. They want to be in power at any cost. Some respondents of Paglapir, Rangpur said, "After Khaleda is ousted, Ershad will be free and then she will be hanged." Some respondents of Fulbaria, Mymensingh told "Khaleda assumed power for five years, why does she still stay in power after her term?" Another respondent of the same area told, "Khaleda thinks that if she resigns she will be taken to the jail and that is why she wants to remain in power by force. Sheikh Hasina does not accept this. That is why the political situation is going worse."

This study revealed that the way the election was conducted on February 15 in fact added fuel to the movement and hastened the fall of the government. "Khaleda Zia held polls but nobody voted, Sir. Even I did not cast my vote" informed a woman labourer of Modhukhali, Faridpur. This election helped the opposition to reach the movement at the doorsteps of the villagers. A group of labourer said, "Hooligans, on behalf of Khaleda, rig all votes, so this poll should be canceled and a new one held again." Rahima Begum of Shalikhah informed that there was no polls held in their locality. She thought that the same thing had happened all over the country. A group of women of Sylhet informed, "Not more than twenty people went to the polling centre here but thousands of people were shown to have voted."

As mentioned before, this study was conducted on March 20-27,

i.e. immediately before the resignation of the BNP government.. The participants of this study were asked about the ways of resolving this crisis. They gave different ideas and passed different comments. Some of these are reproduced below :

This crisis can be overcome if :

- * Khaleda Zia resigns and a caretaker government is formed ;
- * these two leaders wither away ;
- * the election is canceled ;
- * the military intervenes ;
- * Khaleda and Hasina are sent on exile ;
- * they are shot and killed ; and
- * people in general rise (against the politicians).

Impact on life and livelihood

A mother of Daulatpur, Manikganj had the following story :

"My daughter died due to hartal. There was no doctor in the hospital. Consultation fee of a private doctor is high. No doctor would come without a fee. We could not provide her with medicine on time. That is why my daughter died."

That such tragic events happened during the movement might be unknown to many people and the politicians. Fortunately the number of such events was not large. Though the movement had been going on for two years, its real adverse impact on the life of the people started to be apparent with the non-cooperation movement. After the resignation of the government everything became normal within a few weeks. If the movement had lingered on, the effect would have undoubtedly been many times more. It became clear from this study that adverse effect of the movement was starting to descend on the lives of the rural people, although there was no famine situation or death due to starvation. The people were suffering enormously due to scarcity and price hike of essential commodities, closure of banks and offices, and lack of work for day labourers. Everybody was eagerly waiting to see a quick end to this suffocating situation. It was observed that the poorest people suffered most due to the movement.

A good number of people of Shilam near Sylhet town survive

income earning assets which were bought with the loan.

Many BRAC members, however, borrowed money at a high rate of interest from the money lenders to repay the BRAC loans, to make sure that the BRAC workers do not become dissatisfied on them. They feared that if the workers were dissatisfied, they would not get any loan in future. In a few localities, some BRAC workers were less sympathetic ; in such cases the borrowers did not attend weekly meetings and ran away. Some vested interests in the village instigated the members against BRAC. They said "BRAC has come to help you. But now what do they do ?" Some spread rumours in one area that BRAC office was burnt down and as such there was no need to repay the loans.

Giving assistance in poultry rearing is a major component of BRAC programmes. This can be divided into various stages ; hatching chicks from eggs, distribution of day-old chicks, vaccination and prevention of diseases. Activities in each stage were disrupted due to the movement. An official of a local government farm was harassed for distributing chicks to BRAC during the movement. There was also scarcity of poultry feed as there was no supply of wheat ; so were the irregularities and shortage in supply of medicines and vaccines. According to BRAC workers the death rate of poultry increased manifold because of such scarcity. Similarly, aquaculture, mulberry plantation and sericulture were also affected by the movement.

Primary education is another programme of BRAC. About 35,000 primary schools are operated in different areas of Bangladesh. Fortunately, this programme did not suffer much. When all the government or non-government schools were shut efforts were successful to keep BRAC schools open. Only about 5 to 10% of the schools were closed. The workers of BRAC successfully convinced the political workers to keep the schools open. It is an example of how we can keep our children out of political milieu and controversy. The attendance of the students in the schools was also satisfactory. In Matlab, Chandpur, the attendance was 95%. In other schools the attendance remained about the same as before.

Impact on women

In case of any crisis, the weaker sections of the population suffer most. In our country, the women in general are deprived, oppressed and powerless. BRAC and other NGOs have been working to empower the women. Among the participants of BRAC activities, 80% are women. Unfortunately, they are the major victims of the loss caused to BRAC programmes during this movement. The lion share of this burden of loss has to be borne by them for quite a long time. We saw how the livelihood of poor people was affected due to the movement. A group of women labourer of Manikganj told: Due to the lack of work opportunities, men are doing the works which we used to do in normal times. Practically we have no income now." One Rahim of Nakla, Sherpur, had sent away his wife and son to her parents' house. Rahima of Bera, Pabna told.

"Our husbands do not have any work to do. They quarrel with us staying in the house. My son wanted to have ice-cream. I did not have any money to buy him ice-cream. I beat him and for which his father beat me. If there was no hartal his father could go for work and such incident would not happen."

Discussion

Successful political movements bring changes in the direction of the movement. Such movements, whether successful or not, are done at some costs and sufferings. Unfortunately, the common people who in many cases are only passive participants take the brunt of the fallout. This was certainly the case during the non cooperation movement of 1996 in Bangladesh. The movement to make constitutional provisions for a neutral caretaker government to conduct general elections was successful, but sufferings of the common people, particularly the poor, was endless. Such sufferings often go unknown and unrecognized. This study tried to document some specific impact in the lives of the poor. The study also documented how the movement had impacts on the activities of development programmes designed to benefit the poor.

Although no other movement could affect BRAC or other NGO activities before, the non-cooperation movement of March 1996 in

Bangladesh was an exception. The activities of BRAC were hampered in different ways and at many levels. Disbursement of loan almost stopped and recovery declined. Many people spent their loan to meet emergency consumption needs.

Many people were compelled to sell their assets bought with loan money at much lower price. The debtors tried their best to repay the defaulted loan as early as possible. Some tried to repay sooner and the others took time. They faced excessive hardship for this. Most BRAC workers apprehended that impact of this irregularity would adversely affect the future discipline of the loan programme.

The non-cooperation movement of March can claim some uniqueness of its own. The political movement percolated to the rural areas breaking through the boundaries of the towns. This is for the first time since 1971 that the villages were taken on board in a political movement. Our notion of the villages and the villagers has been put to test. Many people thought that the hartals and other political movements were confined only to the boundary of the town, and the villagers were either ignorant or mute. But this myth has been exploded by this study. They had clear knowledge about the movement, and possessed informed and rationale views about the government and the opposition. This is true for women as much as it is true for men.

The villagers have less education and are poor. They do not have access to newspapers. But some do have access to radios and television. To them the news aired through the latter was not at all authentic ; neutral or reliable, so they turned to BBC or VOA as they did in 1971. A group of women mentioned with anger, "The news aired by the Bangladesh Radio and Television tells that everything is normal, but no vehicle runs on the roads. People gather to listen to the BBC."

The rural people were cynical and frustrated about the politics in the country. Many people were annoyed at and passed bitter and sharp comments about the two top leaders of the country. Such opinion coming from the villagers about our national leaders is a matter of deep relief and as well as concern. We usually heard such

comments from the urban middle classes. This study reveals that the poor villagers are also concerned about politics and they do not lag behind in any respect. The sooner the politicians understand this the better for themselves and the country. The people cannot be fooled any longer. The politicians must talk about development, poor people and about the plight of the poor.

So, what's our future? What can we expect? Unfortunately the villagers are not much optimistic about it. A woman of Manikganj anguished, "Whoever comes to power, the problems will still be there. Peace can prevail, at best, for one or two years, and afterwards unrest will start again."

This study found out how the poor people particularly the women were affected. The garment sector was affected and the owners of such factories would be able to make-up their losses with the help of the government and through new contacts with the buyers in the West. The NGOs also can make-up their losses. But could the poor make-up? What would the government do for them? The NGOs would probably give additional moratorium to repay the loan. But can the government or the NGOs create more opportunities for work so that they can go back to their previous position?

As was said before, BRAC runs 35,000 non-formal primary schools where more than eleven lakh students attend. But during the non-cooperation movement this programme had not been affected much, while all other schools were totally closed. The rate of attendance in the BRAC schools was satisfactory. This was possible because of the mutual understanding between the BRAC workers and the picketeers of the movement. BRAC workers were able to convince them that it was necessary to keep the schools open.

A significant characteristic about this movement was the absence of students in the leadership. In all previously successful movements students played the most important leadership role. Whether this indicates a point of departure for future movements remains to be seen.

R. Chowdhury, Alam : Bangladesh : Politics, Development

Notes

1. BRAC is the largest NGO in Bangladesh with a yearly budget of US \$ 86 million.
2. Hartal is a form of political protest through which work is stopped, transportation disrupted and educational institutions are shutdown.
3. Justice Shahabuddin Ahmed was the head of the interim government in 1999-91 following Ershad's ouster and before BNP came to power through elections.
4. Rangpur is a stronghold of Ershad.