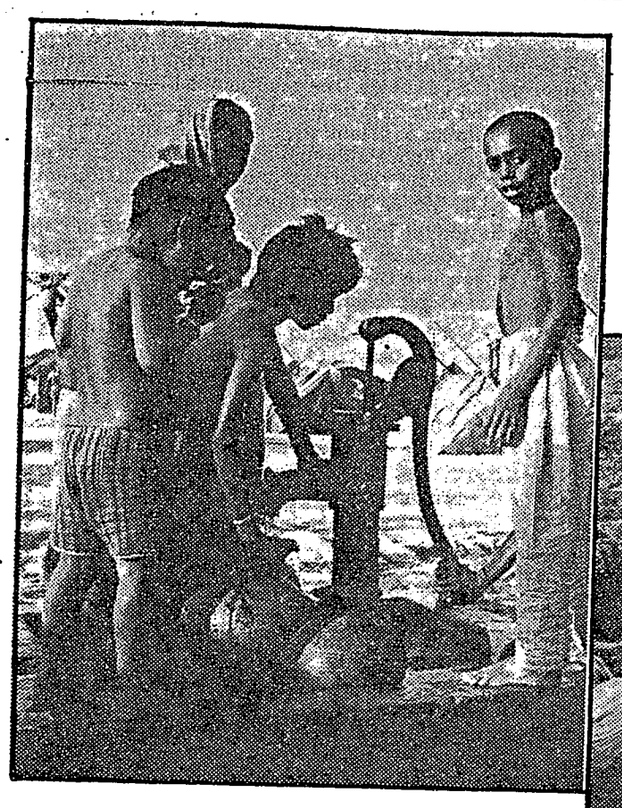
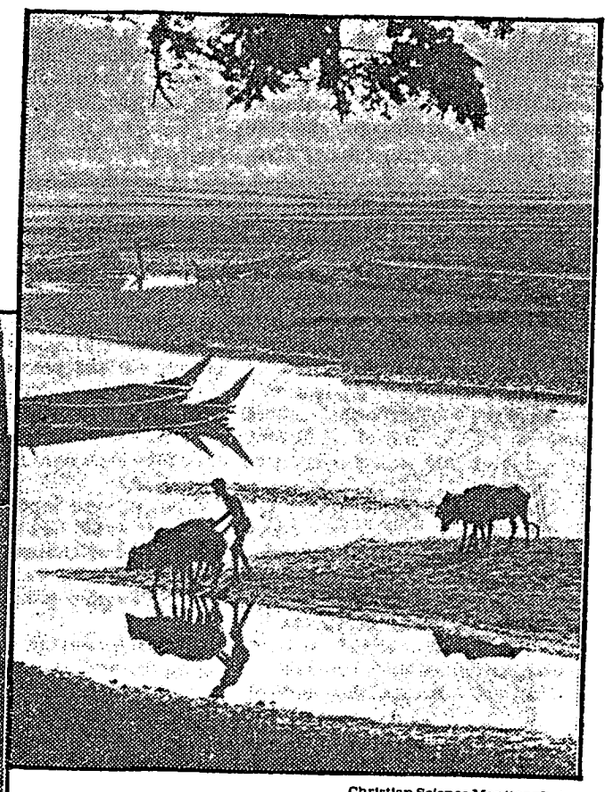
'Lucky' in Bangladesh

A Year's Profit: A Dress, a Sweet and a Loincloth





Christian Science Monitor photos

By Kevin Rafferty

DAUDKHANDI, Bangladesh — Rain is falling steadily, eating up the dirt roads so that the countryside seems muddily afloat. The only sure way of moving around is by boat. Inside the one-room mud house, rain drips through the straw roof. A small girl scurries about mopping up. But in spite of the damp, the owner of the house, Abidur Ali, is happy. Good rain, he says, means good crops, and good crops mean one square meal a day and the chance that he can cling to his 0.66-acre landholding without falling deeper into debt.

Abid already owes something under $100, which is more than a year's income to him. He sold part of his land in 1974 to buy food to allow him, his wife, his son and his three daughters to survive when bad weather spoiled the crops. Land is the straw to which Abid and his family clutch to preserve a slender stake in Bangladesh.

Even with the land, though, it is a constant battle to keep up. It is not easy for Abid to farm because his land is split into three pieces, with half a mile between them. He will have to spend time this year shoring up his house. If he has money left over it will buy a cheap cotton sari for his wife, perhaps a treat of sweets for the children or a loincloth for himself. He has not had a new one for a year; he wears a vest and loincloth gray with washing and held together by darns.

But, says Abid, "Allah is good. I have my land, my son, and I stay alive."

Just how lucky Abidur Ali is compared with most of his 84 million fellow Bangladeshis is made clear in an alarming confidential report recently presented to President Ziaur Rahman by select senior civil servants. They warn that better weather has allowed the country only a respite. Although Bangladesh has staved off screaming disaster headlines for a while, it is drifting toward its biggest disaster ever, toward perpetual poverty. Time is fast running out, say the civil servants, and they urge radical action. There may be as much as five years left or as little as two if the weather turns against the country.

The reason for the bureaucrats' alarm is new evidence indicating that more than half the population of Bangladesh is effectively landless; Abidur Ali is indeed a member of a privileged minority. Moreover, with distress sales continuing, the landless are growing at a rate two to three times as fast as the overall rural population.

To Bangladeshis like Abid, land is everything. Without land a man is without much hope of a job or anything else. He picks up what work he can at harvest time. Possibly he wanders into one of a handful of towns where there is a statutory ration system and some food at cheaper rates, but no house and little prospect of work. Apart from that he is consigned to a twilight living death.

If there is another bad harvest like the one in 1974, millions of marginal farmers will be forced to sell their land and join the army of the unemployed. At existing rates, the numbers of landless and jobless are staggering even to a cynical world that has witnessed widespread hunger and misery: up to 50 million Bangladeshis in the next few years, maybe 100 million affected in 20 years' time.

Hard Work Is Not Enough

BANGLADESH'S 84 million people are packed into a land the size of Florida, and a third of it is under water during the summer monsoon. Per capita income is measured by international bodies at about $120 a year, but this is merely an index of every imaginable kind of deprivation. Ninety percent of the people live in the country's 65,000 villages, typically, like Abid, in mud homes with one room. The whole structure usually has to be propped up, if not completely rebuilt, after each monsoon. Such things as running water and electricty are luxuries only for the rich in the cities; the urban poor have to line up for water from laneside pumps.

Only one in five Bangladeshis can read and write. Schooling is by rote and considered unnecessary by many villagers. A son almost inevitably follows his father's plowprints if he is lucky enought to work land. Abid's 9-year-old son is not in school; he is minding cattle for a few pennies a day to add to the meager family income. Industrial employment is hardly above 6 per cent, and there is little prospect for any rapid incease.

The country's national accounts betray the same poverty. Even though practically every inch of land is used to cultivate rice or jute, Bangladesh has a foodgrain deficit of more than a million tons a year and has to import 10 per cent of its food needs. Without nearly $1 billion of foreign aid each year the economy would collapse. Bangladesh needs $1.3 billion of goods merely to keep it going, but its own exports have not reached $550 million a year. More than 80 per cent of the exports are accounted for by jute, a commodity that is being displaced by synthetics in world markets. There is no other readily viable export in sight.

Independence in 1971 brought euphoria and billions of dollars of aid from East and West, but little progress. Exports have not returned to the level of 1969-70, when Bangladesh was part of Pakistan. Per capita income is still below 1970 in real terms, and food consumption has fallen from a pitifully low 17.1 ounces to 15.5 ounces per person daily last year. Calorie intake has fallen to 2090, only 93 per cent of needs for health, and 60 per cent of families are below this level. Real wages in both agriculture and industry have fallen by half in 10 years.

There have been some improvements in the last two years under the rule of Maj. Gen. Ziaur Rahman. Law and order have largely been restored, the administration has been toned up, and crops have increased. President Zia himself emphasizes the need for hard work. "Work, work, hard work," is the phrase he comes back to time after time in an interview. He has tried to set an example, often walking miles on foot or traveling simply by boat on the many visits he makes to the villages.

He also has kept his hands clean of corruption. Even in the freewheeling days of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, when ministers commonly used their position to grab whatever they could, he resisted temptation. As a senior military official, he took a loan to buy some domestic furniture; when he became Army chief of staff, he continued to pay it off each month. Even today he insists on $17 being deducted from his monthly salary to pay for personal use of an official car. He carries the conviction of a man who risked his life and career in rebelling against the Pakistan army to create Bangladesh.

But the bureaucrats argue that it is naive to believe that poor Bangladeshis can become prosperous by pulling together through their own hard work. As one official puts it, "Anyone who sees a spontaneous cooperative effort is living in cloud cuckooland. It is a fierce jungle out there in the villages."

The officials stress the large and growing gap between rich and poor. The number of landless is only one indicator. Another is the concentration of landholdings. Some landowners have 200 acres or more, though there is supposed to be a ceiling of 30 acres. About 3 percent of households account for more than 25 percent of land, and 11 percent own 52 percent of rural Bangladesh.

The rich farmers, moreover, have access to official credit-giving institutions, from which they can get money at low interest rates to buy tubewells for assured irrigation and new high-yielding seeds. The richer men then act as money-lenders to the smaller men, whom bankers and official institutions will not look at. Though they borrow at official rates, the rich lend at extortionate rates.

The bureaucrats' claims can easily be substantiated, even in Abidur Ali's village. He owes money to a rich farmer, repayable at a monthly interest rate of 10 percent. The rich farmer has been pressing Abid to sell what remains of his land. But Abid says, "No, what would I do if I sold? If I sold I would only get enough food for one year. There is no other job I could go to in the village because people are too poor, and I have no skills to offer if I go to a town."

So Abid has to wait for each monsoon to see if he can hold on another year. He was renting a small area of land; he had to pay for the seed and fertilizer and then had to hand over half the crop to the landowner. Now the landowner has discovered that new seeds pay off, so he has taken over the land himself and hired day laborers to work it.

In these kinds of circumstances, the bureaucrats want Gen. Zia to give security to tenants so they cannot be kicked off at will. Then they would like to see full land reform. "And we mean handing over power to the have-nots, not just land," says one senior civil servant. "The land area of Bangladesh is so small and the plots tiny that land redistribution alone would not produce much. Someone has got to give the poor a say in this country."

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But the bureaucrats are probably living on a cloud with such hopes of radical reform. President Zia says: "I do not want to do radical things. We must keep this people together." His faith that hard work will save the day persists.

Vicious Politics

SO DOES vicious Bangladesh politics. Local politics resembles the Sicily of the Mafia. Abidur Ali is unwilling to talk about politics. He has to live in the village.

One of the reasons why Gen. Zia called elections was to reinforce his power outside Dacca. Though he was head of the armed forces, he found that the countryside was in the grip of rural barons. They had been the main supporters of Ayub Khan's Pakistan and had milked the land. They reappeared as pillars of the Awami League under Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, taking full use of his loose control to run the rice rackets which smuggled food out of the country under the noses of the starving peasants. So President Zia held local elections — and found that the same kind of barons were elected. If anything, the newcomers were more vicious and businesslike: the younger generation found it a bother to observe the time-consuming courtesies that their fathers did.

For Abid and the landless below him it is not a simple matter of having one baron to face up to. In the area around each rural district are up to 12 or 15 families fighting for land and power. One family head emerged victorious in the rural elections literally over the dead bodies of 11 potential rivals.

Poorer Bangladeshis can only try to keep out of the crossfire and hope the landowner to whom they are beholden wins and some of the spoils trickle down to them. This client system makes it unlikely that the have-nots will dare break loose in revolution, as hopeful liberals suggest.

Gen. Zia won an election of his own in June when he secured a massive majority as president. He may hope that this proof of his popularity will give him more leverage. But new candidates have entered the battle for rural land and power. Many of the land transfers recently recorded are to army officers, senior bureaucrats and police, the very people on whom the central system and President Zia depend.

What can be done? It would be unfair to write off Bangladesh as hopeless, as Henry Kissinger did when he called the country a "bottomless basketcase." On the contrary, the poorest Bandladeshis conjure hope and life from the most wretched conditions. Peasants toil over a tiny strip of land to make it produce. Children dressed only in baggy bloomers made out of torn and discarded sacking go round the garbage heaps of Dacca sorting out useful or sellable trinkets. These are sad tributes to the human determination to make something from nothing.

On a more practical level there is a flood of Bangladeshis going to the Middle East and taking jobs in the growing oil economies. No one who has seen Bangladeshis would doubt their abundance of intelligence and energy. The problem is how to release these productively.

The most important task is to increase the room for maneuver. Bangladesh agriculture could produce enough food for everyone and employ more people if cooperative ventures could replace the present competition for precious resources. Giving security of tenure to sharecroppers, reducing the landlord's share of the crop from the existing 50 to 66 percent, prying loose the extortionate grip of moneylenders by sending the banking institutions to the villages — these would all be steps in the right direction.

There is also a role for the industrialized nations. The most obvious connection is their annual aid of more than $1 billion, which underpins the whole economy. Pressure could be used through aid to remind the president of the potential of reforms. But such threats might smack of bullying and reduce rather than open Gen. Zia's maneuvering room.

There is much more that the West can do if it is genuine in its often expressed desire to help. It could open trade and industrial opportunities. But Bangladesh has found that the intentions of the rich countries are not as generous in hard practice. French and other Europeans fought a running battle to restrict exports of jute goods in order to save at most a few thousands of jobs which were being phased out anyway; for some years Bangladesh was denied the privileges of being designated as among the least developed of the developing nations — largely because its inclusion on that list would double the total population of the members of the least developed club.

Bangladesh is poor in resources apart from natural gas and its huge population and potential labor force, but given encouragement and training it could aspire to be another Japan. It may be noteworthy that only Japanese businessmen seem interested at the moment in examining Bandladesh prospects, perhaps out of understanding for another densely populated and resourceless country.

The prospects otherwise are grim. Starry-eyed liberals might hope for a revolution, but it would be a bloody and chaotic one. Chances are that the Bangladeshi have-nots will never muster enough faith and hope to imagine they could rise against their patrons. Without some radical departure, Bangladesh is heading for the kind of nightmare poverty that the western press has so often written about. For the lucky West it would only be a nightmare. The Bangladeshis like Abidur Ali would have to live — or die — through it.

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