

'Allah is good. I have my land, my son, and I stay alive.' That is more than most of his 84 million compatriots can claim as Bangladesh drifts towards unprecedented disaster and the numbers of dispossessed landless soar. KEVIN RAFFERTY reports.

The jungle of the villages, the desert of the towns

RAIN is falling steadily, continuously, eating up the dirt roads so that the countryside seems to be a muddy street. The only sure way of moving around is by boat. Inside the one-room, home-made mud house, rain drips from the straw roof. A small girl scurries about mopping up. But rain means good, for the owner of the house, Abidur Ali, is happy. Good rain, he says, means good crops. The good crops mean one meal of a handful of rice a day and the chance that he is clinging to his two bighas (0.68 acres) land-holding, without falling deeper into debt.

Abidur already owes, taken 1400, less than 500, but more than a year's income to him. He sold 1.5 bighas of land in 1974 to buy food to allow him, his wife, son, and three daughters to survive when bad weather spoiled the crops. It is a constant battle to keep up. Even Abidur's tiny land-holding is split into three pieces, half a mile apart. He will have to spend time this year shoring up his house. If he has money left over it will buy a cheap cotton shirt for his wife, perhaps a treat of sweets for the children, or a new loin-cloth for himself. He has not had a new one for a year and day-in, day-out wears the same vest and loin-cloth, grey with washing and a mild tinge by dawns. But, says Abidur, "Allah is good. I have my land, my son, and I stay alive."

Just how lucky Abidur Ali is compared to most of his 84 million Bangladeshi compatriots comes in an alarming report presented recently by select senior civil servants to President Ziaur Rahman. They give a warning that better weather has allowed the country only a respite. Although Bangladesh has stayed off the disaster headlines for a while, it is still drifting towards its biggest ever disaster — perpetual poverty which not only the foreign aid in the world will be able to buy off.

The reason for the bureaucrats' alarm is new statistics which indicate that more than half of the population of Bangladesh is effectively landless — Abidur Ali is indeed a member of a privileged minority. Moreover, with distress sales continuing, the numbers of landless are growing at a rate two to three times as fast as the overall rural population. To the modern, urban Westerner, landlessness may mean nothing. But to Bangladeshis, like Abidur, land is everything. Without land a man is without much hope of a job and indeed without much hope. He may try to rent land, though competition is fierce. 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. If there is another bad harvest, as there was in 1974, millions of marginal farmers will be forced to sell their land and join the army of rootless and unemployed. At existing rates, the numbers are staggering, even to a cynical world which has witnessed widespread hunger and misery: up to 50 million Bangladeshis in the next few years, maybe 100 million in 20 years' time.

The drift from the land has happened elsewhere, of course. The industrial revolution in Britain and Europe brought a rapid migration from the land and a toll of misery for those who had to go through it. But the pioneer victims of industrial civilisations at least had jobs, dirty, smelly, badly paid though they were. Bangladesh is being displaced from the land without any prospects of work. There are other differences. The total population of Britain was seven or eight million at the start of the industrial revolution; Bangladesh's is 84 million today and projected to reach 140 million by the year 2000. Britain had the backing of

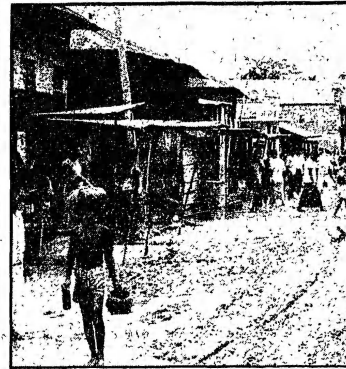


considerable wealth and its infant industry could grow and offer jobs because of a domination of the world trade market and a ready supply of cheap raw materials. Bangladesh finds that rich countries have put up barriers to the few products it does produce. Britain had colonies and adventurous labourers could migrate; adventurous Bangladeshis find doors slammed in their faces by immigration laws. The fact of poverty in Bangladesh is well known; the circumstances are complicated and intriguing. To set the scene: from afar it is a breathtakingly beautiful land, peninsular, flat, floating on the endless rivers of the Ganga-Brahmaputra system. Sunrises and sunsets in the clear unpolluted air are magnificent, with the white clouds and sunsets in a colour and intensity of it. Sailing boats of every shape and size fill the rivers, laden with goods or people so that there is usually something trailing over the edge. Villages team with life.

Close to Bangladesh life has the charm of a long ago whiff to get rid of the rotten stench of discarded humanity. More than 84 million people are packed into a land the size of England and Wales. A third of the land is under water during the summer monsoon. The 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 per cent of the people live in the 65,000 villages. Typically, they live like Abidur — in home-made mud constructions with one room. The whole structure has to be propped up, if not completely rebuilt, after every monsoon. Such things as running water and electricity are luxuries only for the rich in the cities.

Only one in five Bangladeshis can read and write. Schooling is by rote and considered unnecessary by many villagers. A child almost inevitably follows his father's ploughshares if he is lucky enough to get a job. Abidur's nine-year-old son is not in school — he is minding cattle for a few paise (pennies) a day to add to the meagre family income. Industrial employment is hardly above 6 per cent and there is no easy prospect of any rapid increase. The country's national accounts betray the same poverty. Even though practically every inch of land is used for cultivation of rice and 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. Bangladesh needs \$1.3 bn worth of goods merely to keep it ticking over, but its own exports have not reached \$550 million a year. More than 80 per cent of exports are accounted for by jute, a commodity



being displaced by synthetics in world markets. There is no other readily viable export anywhere in sight. Independence 1971 brought euphoria and billions of dollars of aid from East and West, but little progress. Exports have not reached the (US) dollar figures 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 a head a day last year. Calorie intake has fallen to 2,050 a day, only 93 per cent of needs for health and 60 per cent of families are below this level. Bangladeshis' diets are almost exclusively cereal with small amounts of vegetables. Westerners consume more than 3,200 calories daily. Real wages in both agriculture and industry have fallen by half in ten years.

Admittedly there have been improvements in the last two years under the rule of Major-General Ziaur Rahman. Law and order have largely been restored apart from the bloody explosive hiccups when the Army custodians of power have squabbled among themselves. The administration has been toned up; crops have increased.

President Zia himself emphasises the need for hard work. "Work, work, hard work," was the phrase he came back to time after time in a recent interview. He has

certainly tried hard to set an example and visited many of the villages, often going for miles on foot or travelling simply by boat. Remarkably, he has kept his hands clean of corruption. Even in the free-wheeling days of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman when ministers commonly used their position to grab greedily whatever they could, he resisted temptation. As a senior officer he took a loan to buy some domestic furniture. When he became Army Chief of Staff, he continued to pay it off at 50 takas a month. Even today he insists on taka 250 (\$15) being deducted from his taka 2,500 monthly salary to pay for his personal use of the official car.

But work alone will not save Bangladesh. One official who escaped from village life said: "Anyone who sees a spoon and a cup of cooperative cuckooiland, it is a fierce jungle out there in the villages."

Not everyone is equally poor. Some landowners have 200 acres or more, though there is a supposed ceiling of 30 acres. About 8 per cent of households account for more than 21 per cent of land and 11 per cent own 52 per cent of rural Bangladesh. On the other hand there are many peasants — like Abidur Ali — teetering on the brink of ruin at the mercy of the harvest. Half of the Bangladeshis lucky enough to own

land, own less than an acre. Richer farmers have access to official credit-giving institutions where they can get money at low interest to buy tubewells for assured irrigation and new high yielding seeds. They cling to their new possessions greedily and inefficiently. One official cited cases of rich farmers getting tubewells meant to irrigate 50 acres and using them on plots of 10 to 20 acres. But the poor farmer is doubly ground down because the richer men act as moneylenders to the smaller men whom the banker and official institutions will not look at. Though they borrow at official rates the rich landowners lend at extortionate rates.

Abidur himself owes money to a rich farmer who has been pressing him to sell what remains of his land and backing the demand with a rate of interest of 10 per cent a month on the borrowed money. But Abidur 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 Abidur has to wait for each monsoon to see whether he can cling on for another year.

He was renting a small area of land, but he had to pay for the inputs of seed and fertiliser and then had to hand over half of 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 a day labourer to work it. In these circumstances, some senior bureaucrats want President Zia to give security to tenants, so they can not be kicked off at will. Then they would like to see a full blooded land reform. "And we mean handing over power to the have-nots, not just the land," said one senior civil servant. "The land area of the country is so small and the plots so tiny that land redistribution alone would not produce much. Someone has got to give the poor a say in this country." But President Zia told me: "I do not want to do radical things. We must keep this people together." His faith that hard work will save the day persists.

So do the vicious Bangladesh politics. Local politics in Bangladesh resemble the Sicily of the Mafia. Abidur Ali was quite unwilling to talk about politics. He has to live in the village.

General Zia has his local difficulties. Though he was head of the armed forces he found that the countryside was in the grip of rural barons. They had been the pillars in Ayub Khan's Pakistan and had milked the land. They reappeared as leaders of the Awami League under Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, taking full use of

his loose control to run the rice racket which smuggled food out of the country under the noses of 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 business-like: the younger generation finds it a bother to observe the basic time-consuming courtesies that their fathers did.

For Abid and the landless below him it is no simple matter of having one baron to face up to. In the area around each urban (rural district) are anything up to 12 to 15 families fighting for land and power. One family head emerged victorious in the rural elections literally from the dead "bodies of 11 potential rivals." Poorer Bangladeshis can only try to keep out of the crossfire, and are beholden wins and losses to the spoils of victory may trickle down to them. This client system makes it unlikely that the have-nots will dare to break loose in revolution as hopeful liberals suggest.

The village jungle may get fiercer yet. New candidates are entering the battle for rural land and power: many of the land transfers recently recorded are to army officers, senior bureaucrats, and policemen — the very people upon whom the central system and President Zia depend.

What is to be done? It would be easy to point a finger at the profiteering middle-men, or corrupt civil servants, or the notorious land-grabbing rural barons. Simplistic Marxists might see a revolution in the making, the rest of the world to stop propping up the economy and feeding the bloodsuckers. But the "baddies" are as much a symptom as the cause and it would be difficult to cut them out without causing even more hardship. True, they make money out of jute, but to thousands of marginal farmers jute is a constant source of cash. True, they siphon off grain imports, but hundreds of thousands of poor people the ration shop grain is a slender lifeline. It would be difficult to skin the subsistence economy and let people like Abidur set on with the business of raising to a living. What would probably happen if Bangladesh were cut off from the external economy would be more ruthless exploitation by the rural barons of the peasants. The fittest would survive.

A more crude view is that Bangladeshis are as stupid and ignorant that they would be best left to themselves.

But, the poorest Bangladeshis can somehow conjure life and hope from the most wretched conditions. Peasants toil over a tiny strip of land, and the children dressed only in torn sackings rummage through gutter garbage to find something useful. They then go back to back street huts as carefully constructed out of spare materials as any bird's nest. Somehow they manage a smile and keep living. All these are tributes to a human spirit that can produce something out of nothing. On a more practical level there is a flood of Bangladeshis taking jobs in the Middle East oil economies. No one who has met Bangladeshis would doubt their intelligence and energy. The problem is how to release them productively.

It would help if General Zia would give the peasants security of tenure. But that would be a big political gamble and would not be sufficient. Even widespread changes and successful agricultural co-operatives could not provide enough jobs. They would have to be backed by a programme of education, investment, industry, and exports. All of this requires more understanding and help from the outside world.