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In May 1977, the rural development Academy at Comilla observed its eighteenth anniversary. For the first twelve years I was closely involved. Now, after six eventful years, I had come again as a transient visitor, a guest consultant. It is a difficult and embarrassing assignment. I find that the best contribution I can make is to recapitulate.

During the sixties, four concepts enunciated by the Academy were widely accepted. These were the following:

1. Establishment of a training and development center in every thana (TTDC)
2. A road-drainage embankment-works program in every thana (RWP)
3. A decentralized, small scale irrigation program in every thana (TIP)
4. And a two-tiered cooperative system in every thana (TCCA).

These concepts, collectively called the Comilla approach, were formulated after research in the administrative unit around the Academy, the 100 square mile Comilla thana, which served both as a testing laboratory and a training and demonstration model for other thanas.

Although the Comilla approach was formally accepted, it remained a target of attack from supporters of different approaches. Besides, in actual practice, the four programs suffered from distortion, mismanagement, corruption and subversion. After independence of Bangladesh, while the first five year plan gave general endorsement, both theoretical criticisms and practical difficulties became more severe.

Presently there is unprecedented interest in rural development. However, too frequently new ideas are being advocated without

reconciling them with the old ones. Perhaps this conflicting mixture is a natural consequence of the pressing situation. Quick solutions are demanded and are being proposed in plenty. But uncoordinated haste itself may turn out to be an impediment.

Before evolving its model, the Academy had carefully analyzed prevalent conceptions of rural development. Of these, three were most influential, viz: 'rural reconstruction,' 'community development,' and 'agricultural extension.'

'Rural reconstruction' was popularised by administrators in the last decades of the Empire. British administrators had identified ignorance and inertia as the main causes of rural backwardness, and prescribed, as principal remedies, the enlightenment and mobilization of the villagers by government officers. It was taken for granted that beneyolent guidance and self help can solve almost all problems. After the departure of the white sahibs this paternalist approach was dearly loved by their successors, the brown sahibs.

In the fifties the colonial legacy of rural uplift was augmented by two American-sponsored programs: "community development" and "agricultural extension." "Community development" posted multi-purpose workers to guide the villagers and assist various kinds of self-help projects. "Agricultural extension" concentrated on introducing better farming methods. There was the same insistence on posting an agricultural assistant for guidance of farmers. However extension experts wanted their village assistant to be a specialist, not a jack-of-all-trades, like the C.D. multi-purpose worker.

Two decades of colonial rural reconstruction could achieve only insignificant results. By 1960, a decade of community development revealed its limited appeal. It failed to secure general participation. Somewhat similar limitations were found in agricultural extension. The program easily attracted the richer farmers, but not the poorer majority.

Evaluations, especially in India, began to recommend that emphasis should be shifted to democratic decentralization and autonomous institution. This crucial concern for local government and farmers' cooperatives was reinforced by the remarkable example of rural reorganization in China.

The Comilla Academy gained new perspectives from these appraisals and from its own action research. Constraints and priorities appeared in a different order. Evidently, the foremost constraint in Comilla thana was a very defective physical infra-structure. Increased production was scarcely possible without link roads, flood control and irrigation. However, this fundamental network of roads, drains, embankments and irrigation could be constructed and maintained only through vigorous local institutions. Hence, the absence of such institutions was the second serious constraint. Improvement of the physical infra-structure was dependent upon the improvement of the institutional infra-structure. Each was linked with the other. This perspective of interlinked priorities differed from the viewpoints of old rural reconstruction, community development and agricultural extension. It rather conformed to the Chinese view of the priority of land improvement through local organizations.

The rural works program was important in many ways. It enhanced the productive capacity of the land. It expanded the scope of employment, immediate as well as permanent. It benefitted both landowners and labourers. On account of the small holdings, (average less than 2 acres per family), and the large numbers of landless families, (about 20%), more production and more employment, were literally matters of life and death--problems which could not be ignored or postponed. Through rural works the local councils satisfied most urgent needs, and themselves acquired functional vitality. Like two sides of an arch, rural works and local councils strengthened each other.

The smallness of holdings was a third serious constraint, which again was not fully appreciated. Extension experts believed that demonstration of better methods will be quickly followed by adoption. Unfortunately, most Comilla cultivators, owners of tiny plots and meager resources, were too weak for enterprising individualism. Much organisation was needed before their farming could be improved. For instance, two crucial factors in the development of agriculture were credit and irrigation. Without mutual assistance and joint action both factors would remain beyond the reach of most tiny proprietors.

But, organised in cooperatives, small farmers could soon learn functions of thrifty savings and investment loans, and thus start the practice of better farming. Besides, cooperatives could protect them from exorbitant moneylenders and traders. Fortunately, land reforms of 1950, had removed the aristocratic landlords, who had dominated the cultivators for several generations. Rural society in Comilla still had

its classes. But the disparity was much less glaring than in many other regions.

Cooperatives made possible a significant change in extension methods. The old system relied mainly on activation by a government agent of demonstration leaders or progressive farmers, who would serve as examplars. Instead, in a cooperative village, the members forming a group, chose from their ranks a manager and a model farmer, both of whom attended weekly conferences at the Thana Center, and were directly trained by Thana level specialists. Once every week, the members themselves assembled in their village to discuss their affairs, make thrift deposits, and receive advice or supplies brought from the Center by their representatives.

Thus training, services, supplies, and management were combined and local talent was encouraged. Cooperative management and group learning gradually made traditional subsistence farmers far more progressive. This approach implied much faith in the intelligence, skill and compassion of peasants. It was contrary to the paternalist obsession of guiding them through officers, or agricultural assistants or village level workers.

To recapitulate: the Academy clearly identified three main constraints consisting of high risk of flood and drought, social anarchy, and impoverished small holdings. These constraints were at least partially removed by a sustained organizational effort in Comilla thana. The risk of flood was reduced by digging drains and building

embankments. Irrigation was widely introduced. Local councils and cooperatives were made important and strong.

There was little doubt about the response from the farmers. They quickly joined the cooperatives in large numbers, adopted improved methods, and used larger inputs. Both loans and savings grew in volume. In less than a decade Comilla thana showed a distinct advance in respect of production, employment, agricultural skill, and capital accumulation. It was a well-documented demonstration of how much rural works, local council and cooperatives, if properly managed, can change a previously destitute and backward region.

However, the model was surrounded by difficulties. There was the disapproval of rural autonomy by politicians and bureaucrats. They had more faith in their own paternal role than in village wisdom. There was a pervasive urban bias. Local councils and rural works were condemned and cooperatives held in contempt. All around programs of official guidance and quick assistance were promoted, and local organisation and cooperative discipline were discounted. In Comilla a 'hard' program had to compete with 'soft' programs. Most of the time villagers were being tempted and confused.

In addition to many kinds of external opposition, there were internal shortcomings. Management or training or member behavior was far from perfect. Examples of corruption or subversion were not unknown. Obviously the road to institutional development had many pitfalls. And then national politics created a climate of total uncertainty, discipline mostly lapsed and all organizations faltered.

After the establishment of Bangladesh, the Comilla model suffered bigger shocks. First, as a reaction to their previous privileges, the local councils were dismantled. Their crucial role in building and maintaining the physical infrastructure of rural development was denigrated. Rural works were taken over by politicians, officers and contractors. Concepts of decentralization and autonomy, already weak, were further weakened. The Thana Center, although it was resilient enough to survive, lost much of its vitality.

While local councils and rural works were torn apart by centralism and urban bias, the cooperatives were attacked by radicals. They declared the Comilla cooperatives to be strongholds of "large" farmers, mere kulak clubs, useless or even harmful for the poor and the landless. A drastic reorganization was urged in favour of the latter classes.

Theoretically, the egalitarian argument was irrefutable. Judged by a high socialist criterion, the cooperative performance was indeed paltry. But in actual practice, within the context of private ownership of land, the cooperatives did increase employment as much as production, and evidently benefitted both landowners and labourers, of course in varying proportions. Furthermore, cooperatives created at least the rudiments of a new social consciousness. Even Chairman Mao had accepted agricultural cooperatives as a 'midway house' or semi-socialism. It is a pity that the purists of Bangladesh did not possess his patience or realism.

Notwithstanding these jolts and upsets, conditions in Comilla thana are surprisingly good. Production is much higher than what it was eighteen years ago. Cropping is more intensive and yields are bigger. Irrigation is widespread. Improved varieties are more commonly planted. Because of winter irrigation and year long intensive cultivation, the demand for labour and the scope of employment is also much greater. Throughout Bangladesh the farmers of Comilla are now well known for their progressive behavior.

However, the progress may be precarious because its institutiona foundations are crumbling. For several years thana and union councils have been dormant and rural works have been neglected. If further neglected, the infrastructure of roads, drainage, embankments, and irrigation, built over a decade with immense investment, may break down. Once again flooding and drought may prevail.

Although the cooperatives are still active, the system is showing signs of decay. Loans and savings have shrunk dangerously. Prospects of self supporting cooperative banking, marketing and processing are fading away. Weekly training conferences at the Center, and weekly group discussion meetings in the villages, which were mainsprings of a cooperative movement, are now irregular or perfunctory.

Unless local government, rural works and cooperatives regain their vigor, I fear that flood and drought, diminishing capital and stagnant skills may cause a regression.

Under the name of IRDP (Integrated Rural Development Program) the Comilla model is being followed in other thanas. IRDP is included

in the first five year plan and is thus officially approved. It has attracted the World Bank and foreign donors. Apparently, it is welcomed by the farmers, who are everywhere joining in large numbers, and readily taking loans, depositing savings and learning improved methods.

However, in spite of the name, too often there is no real integration. Economic growth in Comilla thana resulted from a simultaneous reconstruction of physical and institutional infra-structures--roads, drains, embankment, irrigation on one side, and thana center, local councils and cooperatives on the other side. As I have repeatedly explained, each was dependent on the other. When local councils built and maintained the rural works the risk of flood and drought was reduced and the ground was prepared for improved farming. When cooperatives made capital, machines, new inputs and new skills easily accessible, intensive cultivation became common in small holdings. This coordination of rural works, local councils and cooperatives constituted the process of integration. Unless this process is implemented, IRDP may prove to be another frustrated effort like the old credit cooperative movement.

Non-integration is one handicap of IRDP. Another handicap is autogonism of rival approaches. Theoretically IRDP stands for decentralization, for self-managed institutions, local councils and cooperatives, combined action and group agents. It demands discipline, thrift, mutual assistance, and much joint work. Its objective is a steady and permanent transformation.

But powerful experts propagate simpler and quicker ways of development. They insist on posting their own assistants in the villages

to make demonstrations and distribute inputs. These experts have unlimited self-confidence and want to solve the food problem in a hurry. In their view institutional organization and cooperative action are not crucial factors but rather tedious digressions.

Then there are the executives of state corporations which control important inputs like loans, machines and fertilisers. They display a singular antipathy to rural autonomy, and disregarding government directives, discriminate against cooperative societies, and prefer their own special agents.

Next there are fervent believers in the good old cult of rural reconstruction who inculcate faith in the paternal role of officers and leaders and the efficacy of little self-help projects.

And, finally, the radicals are giving short shrift to IRDP. In their opinion, real development can begin only after revolutionary land reforms, or a total change of property relations. Otherwise rural institutions merely pauperize and oppress the masses. The radicals argue that, under the present system, local councils come to be stronghold of an exploiting elite, and cooperatives turn into Kulak clubs. Curiously, nowadays in Bangladesh, how-so-ever conservative or even reactionary practical conduct may be, in the theoretical arena radical posturing alone is respectable.

Of course, I may be prejudiced, but I would think that presently the creation of progressive agriculture through rural works, local government and cooperatives is still a good practical alternative. Let us look at the basic facts.

First and foremost, in any case, the risk of flood and drought must be reduced. That requires an elaborate network of roads, drains, embankment and irrigation. Such a network can be built and maintained only by strong local institutions. Non-recognition of the priority of infrastructure works and the constructive responsibility of local institutions will ultimately prevent any significant advance.

Secondly, the fact that Bangladesh is mostly a country of tiny holdings makes cooperative management unavoidable. Purely individualistic agriculture may flourish in states like the Punjab, because there exist numerous large holdings and an affluent class of commercial farmers. Both are rare in Bengal. Hence an identical attempt to promote capitalist agriculture shows far more success in Punjab than in Bengal.

In Bangladesh there are far better prospects for cooperative agriculture. Cooperatives can overcome the constraint of impoverished little holdings. They can make credit, machines, fertilizers, pesticides and other modern inputs easily available. By promoting habits of thrift, savings and investment, they can start the process of capital accumulation. They can widely diffuse new technical and managerial skills.

Above all, rural cooperatives can create a healthy social consciousness and a desire for harmony and order. They can counteract the prevailing lawlessness. Today, in the disturbed countryside, cooperative groups alone can provide the umbrella of security which is urgently needed for investment and development.

Besides, there is some reason to believe that, if the foundation is well and truly laid, cooperative agriculture may in fact serve as a

midway house. Under good leaders, the villagers may proceed step by step towards a new way of life. In Bangladesh the average size of land holdings is shrinking so rapidly that before long the only viable alternative may be socialist agriculture.

In the meanwhile intensive farming created by means of rural works and cooperatives can ensure self-reliant survival by increasing both production and employment. Planners are rightly worried about the multiplying numbers of landless families. The plight of the landless, present or future, is indeed a critical issue. However, because resources are so scarce, lands or ponds or cash loans can be given only to a few. Not many wage workers can be transformed into petty traders or owner cultivators. As a class they are more effectively helped by the manifold expansion of employment which follows the general improvement of land and its intensive culture. "Agriculture is the base," was an important slogan in China for tackling the problem of rural unemployment. It is a slogan worth remembering in Bangladesh.

Creating cooperative agriculture is by no means an easy or simple undertaking. It is an immense educational and organizational endeavour. It is beset with countless difficulties. As yet there are many unknown factors and, undoubtedly many modifications must be made. Therefore unceasing evaluations are necessary. The Comilla Academy must retain its old pioneering role. Although years of inimical criticism have battered the Academy, I see no reason why it should abandon the integrated approach, or withdraw from its experimental area. On the contrary, this is an appropriate time for accelerating further progress

not only in Comilla thana, but also in the other twenty thanas, and thus making the entire district an advanced model of cooperative agriculture.

This latter suggestion was in fact first made in 1970. During my recent tour I found the farmers more ready for a progressive cooperative agriculture than they were seven years ago. I would gladly make whatever little contribution I can for this purpose.