"FROM NOBODY TO SOMEBODY"
Women’s Struggle to Achieve Dignity and Self-reliance in a Bangladeshi Village

Annika Forsslund
"FROM NOBODY TO SOMEBODY"

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av

Annika Forsslund
Fil kand

Abstract

This study concerns a rural development project in a village in Bangladesh, initiated in 1973 and followed up regularly until 1991. The original project included the development of a jute handicraft cooperative for women, started and supervised by the author.

The aims of the thesis are: to describe and analyze the process of change in the lives of some women, engaged in the cooperative, to shed light on this process from the women’s perspective, and to discuss what can and should be a target for development education for rural women, coming from the lowest social stratum of society. The ten women who first joined the cooperative are focused in this thesis. The thesis includes their own tales of their experience of the training involved in participation in the cooperative, and their own development process.

In the study, the concept of dialogue is used both as a pedagogical method of imparting knowledge, as a form of conversation/interview, aiming at obtaining information from an insider perspective, and also as a concept when compiling data in life histories. The life history approach has been helpful in investigating the educational and developmental process from the women’s point of view.

Beside skills training, the content of the education for the cooperative was alphabetization, cooperative training and management. Other topics such as nutrition, hygiene, health- and child-care and family planning, were eventually included after the need for training in such areas was articulated in the dialogue between the participating women and the project leader. In contrast to many development projects managed entirely from the top down, all aspects of the training programme were discussed with and approved by the targeted group.

The main effect of the training programme was empowerment of the women, which was expressed as an articulated consciousness of their human dignity and a feeling of freedom. The women had developed a professional identity and an awareness of the relevance of contextualised education. A further effect of their new identity was a reduced birth rate.

The results of the project are discussed in relation to development education.

Key words: Empowering women, development education, rural development, self-reliance, dialogue, life history approach, Bangladesh.
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<td>148</td>
<td>Islam, S. <em>Exploring the other half</em>. Field research with rural women in Bangladesh. BRAC Printers, Dhaka 1982a.</td>
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"From Nobody to Somebody"

Abstract

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UNIVERSITY OF UMEÅ
Department of Education
1995
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So many people have assisted me during my long journey, both in Bangladesh and elsewhere, that it is impossible to thank them all individually. First of all my gratitude goes to the villagers of Shantipur and particularly to the women of Jute Handicraft Cooperative. Without their kind reception and trust to me, our project had never been realized. The women showed strength and courage when they joined me on the journey and became my fellow passengers.

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Umeå in April 1995

Annika Forslund
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BANGLADESH

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INDIA

BAY OF BENGAL

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SCALE
CHAPTER 1

The beginning of a journey

First impressions - letters home

October 1973

"When the airplane was circling over the city before landing in Dhaka and I looked out of the window I saw water everywhere and didn’t understand how we could find a large area of dry space enough to land! Here and there one could see small islands with some trees and houses surrounded by water. Once on the ground I felt as if I was in a greenhouse or draped in a warm, wet rug. After document clearance we were immediately surrounded by people who pulled at our luggage...

After days of formalities in the capital we started the long journey to the village in the Northwest, close to the Indian border. The bridges over the small rivers were destroyed during the war and the roads are damaged. Road repairs are going on here and there but they don’t seem to be organized. Small huts in clusters along the road and thin people in rags seem to be everywhere. The crossing of the Jamuna river (Brahmaputra) took about three hours on a launch crammed with people, all kinds of goods, chickens, goats, dried fish and smells. At the ghat on the other side of the river the crowd pushed their way up to different kinds of transport; buses, lorries, rickshaws, baby-taxis, bullock-carts, toms-toms...

And we were also pushed on to a bus. The last part of the journey was by train; a slow, dusty hour and just as crowded. Everybody in our compartment seemed to be involved in speculations about us. As our knowledge of Bengali is far too poor a Rakhi Bahini, who knew some English, interpreted. They ask about everything; who you are, where
you come from, whether you are married, have children, your religion, education, employment, salary, what you are doing here, how you like Bangladesh? Each of our answers was repeated for the benefit of the whole compartment.

At ‘our’ railway station we were met by a student who will help us during the first period of our stay. It was pitch-dark, of course, and we couldn’t see anything that evening, but we were installed in a hut on his compound. At sunrise next morning the door to our hut was opened and outside was a crowd of people; adults and children, who wanted to look at us. In answer to our questions via our host about what they wanted, we got no other explanation than that they wanted to look at us (Apnaderke dekhte chan)".

November 1973

“The village is situated along a small river and in our close neighbourhood are the country’s famous mango gardens and a lot of lichee and jackfruit trees and different palms, which I don’t know the names of yet.

The house, where we are going to stay, is an old stone house dating from colonial times. It is very dilapidated. During the war it was used as a military camp, so the windows, doors and walls have been used as targets for shooting practice. For a long time its inhabitants have been big rats, owls, snakes and mongooses, feeding on each other. The house has to be repaired. That is something very concrete and positive to start with while we are digesting all our new impressions...

That first night when we sat on the flat roof of our house the full moon was illuminating the sugarcane fields in bloom. They looked like a sea of silver and the only disturbance was the howling of the jackals. We discussed the situation in the country, the total collapse and the questions of what could be done, where to start, what was most important, as there is a need to sort out our priorities. Many people seem apathetic. How do you wake them up, make them do something about it? Some people approach us with the beggar’s staff and that mentality must be opposed. Their remaining energy must be channelled into constructive thinking. We can give them the keys, but they have to open the doors for themselves. What factors need to be included to make a development process sustainable, even when the project leaders have left? I am convinced that there are opportunities to reach certain goals here, but we need patience an a strong sense of humour to survive!”

********
The above are excerpts from letters home to my parents written in October and November 1973, and illustrate my first impressions and thoughts at the beginning of a journey. The travellers were my husband and myself. We were on our way to a Bangladeshi village where we were to stay for two years and to take part in the daily life of the villagers. Together with them we were going to be part of a development process that is the topic of this thesis.

After the liberation war of 1971 Bangladesh was in great need of assistance in order to rebuild the country. A number of governmental and non-governmental (NGO) national and international organizations initiated different development programmes. Through the Ministry of Relief and Rehabilitation a Swedish voluntary organization was invited and received permission to participate in the rehabilitation and reconstruction of a village in the Rajshahi district of north-western Bangladesh. Two volunteers, my husband and myself, were recruited for this task. The motto and principles of the organization were “help for self-help” and “help first those who suffer most”. The programme was supported and financed by money raised by the inhabitants of a small Swedish town.

We lived and worked in the village during the years 1973-75, when various projects were planned and started. When we first arrived in the village in 1973 everything was new and unfamiliar to us. We were strangers. Today I consider this village and culture a part of me and my frame of reference and I feel at home there. We have returned to the village many times since we first left in 1975.

In this thesis a particular project - a women's project, a jute cooperative - is in focus. Even if the project was developed by both of us, this is a report on what happened to the women, a piece of research for which only I, the author, is responsible. I want to give the women involved a possibility to speak for themselves and describe what has happened in their lives. As the compilation of their life histories has been an interplay, a team work, between me, a white, Western, educated woman and them, rural Bangladeshi, uneducated women, I think it is fair to also present myself, the researcher, who analyses and interprets the women's life histories. Recently several feminist education researchers have discussed the desirability to scrutinize own life experiences and their possible impact on interpretation, when using the life-history approach (Martin 1994, Middleton 1993, Weiner 1994, Elgqvist-Saltzman 1995). "The work we do and the perspectives we hold are the products of the interrelationship between personal biography, our place in the social
structure and the cultural milieu and historical period in which we live” (Weiner 1994, p. 10). I have therefore as an introduction selected some important influences in my life in order to provide an indication of how the ideas in this thesis originated and developed. In this way I try to give the reader a fair chance to locate “the author’s ideas in a specific historical and cultural frame” (ibid., p. 12).

The researcher’s cultural luggage

Impressions from a childhood in a model-community.

The small island of Norrbyskär in the Gulf of Bothnia, Sweden, where I was born and brought up was also the site of a saw-mill industry with an attached harbour, frequented by cargo-ships from abroad. The saw-mill community built on the island in the 1890’s was a thoroughly planned model-community intended to enhance life quality of the workers. The man behind the idea was an idealist with strong charisma (See Ahnlund, 1978, Norstedt, 1994). While I grew up in the 1940s and 50s there were frequent contacts with the world through the shipping and also through missionaries who visited the school and showed sciopticon pictures from Asia and Africa. This gave me the insight of a world existing outside ‘my’ island. The necessity of knowing languages was developed early.

The school had a very central position on the island and the teachers were authorities. My father was one of the teachers. The school curriculum was applied to what was useful in that environment. Wood and metal crafts for boys and textile crafts for girls as well as physical training were emphasised. In other subjects, out-door audio-visual education was used extensively, when possible.

Another important influence during childhood was the summers spent at my grandparent’s farm on the border to Finland which automatically gave a bilingual and bicultural training. The rural life in the farm gave me further insights. I have learnt that rural people in the world have often more in common than have rural and urban people in the same country.

I was number seven and the youngest of my sisters and brothers and together with them brought up in a kind of extended family system with broad-minded parents and a positive surrounding.
Educational influences.

My first pedagogical opinion was expressed when I was six years old. My father and I were walking back from our usual afternoon fishing tour through the park surrounding the school building and my home. Approaching the school my father said: "Now it will soon be time for you to start school!" I stopped on the path and examined the school building. Then I looked at my father and said: "And what do you think I could learn in that 'house' that I cannot learn better out here in the park?" My informal training had thus far been a continuous process of learning and observing the activities going on in the model community. The learning included visits to my father's class room, and sitting under his desk on those days when the weather did not invite outdoor activity.¹

The study being reported in this thesis is the outcome of a long pedagogical process. The overall objectives of my efforts, especially in my role as an agent of change and a development worker, aiming at optimizing people's quality of life, have been constant, but the means have continuously changed after the circumstances.

I have gradually developed a certain view of educational planning, educational methods and educational science. My studies in social sciences started in the mid 1960s when educational reforms and optimism, but also a shift of theoretical paradigms, characterised university life. I learnt that education can be seen as an instrument of social change on micro and macro levels. The first time I got in contact with the concept 'action-cum-research' was in lectures by Professor Trankell at the Department of Education, Stockholm. Trankell emphasized the importance of minimizing the distance between the researcher and the objects studied, for the benefit of both parties. He stressed the importance of first hand data. The time gap between research and action should be shortened. All kinds of knowledge, quantitative as well as qualitative, should be seen in relation to action and monitoring functions. The systematic collection of information should be designed to bring about social change. The process of change has to be studied continuously and the observations and reflections gained utilized successively as immediate adjustments of the action programme under test. This way of working means, inter alia, that the researcher's role is redefined from the passive observer to an active participant in the change process and the researcher can be seen as a change agent.

In the late 1960’s, when I was participating in and evaluating some training courses for SIDA-staff, the concept of development education was discussed and I became aware of the complexity of development issues (Bengtson and Forsslund, 1969). The concept was also thoroughly considered at a special course called “Training for development assistance” (Utbildning för biståndsverksamhet-UBV) which took place at a Folk High School during the spring term of 1970. At this time I wanted to take a break in my theoretical studies in social sciences as I - like many of my fellow students - felt the lack of practical experience. Like Bertaux (1981) we criticized students going straight from school to university, without ever leaving the school system. What did they know about the society they were studying? My engagement and work in the Third World began here.

During work in Colombia in 1970-71 where I came in contact with the thoughts of Freire (1972a, 1972b) and his approach on conscientization, my view on education were further consolidated. Freire’s emphasis on awareness raising, cultural understanding, respect and sensitivity to linguistic issues had a strong impact on me. His theories identified and conceptualized what I had been aiming at but yet not articulated.²

My first field work within an action research project was implemented in Colombia, where I was inspired by the Colombian sociologist Fals-Borda (1987, 1991). (see Forsslund, Johanson and Torres, 1971).

In 1973-75 my husband and I became engaged in a development task offered in a village in Bangladesh, the object of this book. My husband is a rural sociologist, born on a small farm in Sweden, also with bilingual and bicultural background.

After several years of development and research work in different parts of the world I returned to Sweden and my doctoral studies at the Department of Education in Umeå. One of the courses was on the role of education in social development in general and on education and social change in the Third World in particular. With years of practical field experience in both Colombia and Bangladesh I now felt better prepared for theoretical studies. My research work on women in rural Bangladesh, became one of the cases in the WEED-project. WEED stands for Women, Education and Equality in Development. The project began in 1980 and was a joint enterprise between female researchers at the Departments of
Education in Umeå, Uppsala and Stockholm. The aim of the project was to investigate how educational reforms and innovations affected women’s possibilities to take an active part in social and economic development in societies with different political, social, religious, and cultural patterns.

Aims of thesis

The main aims of this study are:

• to describe and analyse the process of change in the lives of some women, engaged in a jute handicraft cooperative started by me and my husband 20 years ago. Educational aspects of the process will be emphasized.

• to shed light on this process from the perspectives of the first ten women enrolled in the cooperative. My intention is to give them faces and voices, in order to conjure up individuals out of those anonymous, poor masses.

• to examine what can and should be a target for development education in the environment surrounding the poor rural women.

Disposition

In order to facilitate the walk along the path to the women’s Jute Handicraft Cooperative at Shantipur village in Bangladesh, we shall be introduced to the country in Chapter 2, and through the socio-economic findings of the study implemented in 1974, to the village, in Chapter 3. In Chapter 4 the theoretical and methodological concepts used, will be presented. Chapter 5 discusses the my empirical approach, difficulties, obstacles, data collection and compilation. Chapter 6 describes the women’s jute cooperative and in Chapter 7 we will meet the women themselves taking their first stumbling steps “from being nobody to being somebody”, as one of them has expressed it. This chapter contains the main empirical data in this study; parts of the life histories of the first ten women joining the cooperative. The researcher summarizes and analyses the women’s stories in Chapter 8. Finally Chapter 9 attempts to pull the threads together before the Epilogue in the form of an updated picture of the village.
CHAPTER 2

The Bangladesh context

Background

When Bangladesh is mentioned in the mass media it is often in connection with floods, cyclones, famine, epidemics and similar catastrophes. Today it is one of the poorest and most densely populated countries in the world. This has not, however, always been the case. During Moghul rule from the 16th century to the time of British rule East Bengal was the rice granary of the empire. Its handicrafts were very advanced and highly ranked in the world market. Important export products included muslin, jute, raw silk and dye-stuffs. Cultural life flourished and was encouraged by the rulers. It was said that East Bengal was “the brightest jewel in the Moghul imperial crown.” Robert Clive (1725-74), the founder of British rule in India, described East Bengal as “a country of inexhaustible wealth, that cannot escape making its new rulers the richest union in the world.”

The British ruled Bengal as a part of the Indian empire up to 1947 when the Indian subcontinent became independent. It was then partitioned, for religious reasons, into India where the majority were Hindus and Pakistan where the majority were Muslims. The western part of Bengal went to India and the eastern part to Pakistan. East Bengal, now called East Pakistan, remained as Pakistan’s eastern wing till December 16, 1971, when the liberation war ended in its becoming an independent country, Bangladesh (Bangla=Bengal, desh=country).

Among the reasons for the liberation from Pakistan were national symbols like the Bengali language and culture which had been neglected during the Pakistani dominance. Bengali is a Sanskrit language and
phonetic with approximately 50 characters and some combined letters. As the majority of the population is illiterate the spoken Bengali dialect varies considerably in the different areas of the country. The written language of the Nobel Prize winner, Rabindra Nath Tagore (Thakur), is not spoken by many.

The country was seriously ravaged by the war. Towns and villages were devastated, forests and fields burnt down and many harvests lost. The war left many thousands of widows and orphaned children, approximately 10 million refugees returned from refugee camps in India, mass starvation, cholera and smallpox epidemics broke out. The infrastructure, roads, bridges, railways, airfields were completely destroyed. Many of the technically and administratively educated men had been killed deliberately during the final phase of the war. The country’s new leaders put out massive propaganda for the free “Sonar Bangla” (Golden Bengal) that had been the driving force during the war and that would hopefully continue to sustain them in the rehabilitation of the country. The mission of the new Bangladeshi government was gigantic.

Under the leadership of Sheik Mujibur Rahman who became the first Prime Minister of Bangladesh, parliamentary democracy was introduced. He announced the nationalization of the domestic banks, insurance companies, and jute, textile and sugar mills and promised his people that their Sonar Bangla would become a reality. Hopes were held high both among the people and by the Government. The constitution would guarantee fundamental rights to the citizens including equality before the law, equality of the sexes, freedom of assembly and association, freedom of religion (changed in 1978 to Islam as the State religion), freedom of thought and speech. There was a lack of educated staff capable of establishing a functioning bureaucracy and this led to difficulties for the government to maintain its position in the rural areas, where the local leader system persisted. National problems like floods, famine and inflation made the task of rehabilitation very difficult and the country became dependent on foreign support. The administrative system taken over from the East Pakistan period consisted of five levels below the central administration: 4 Divisions, 21 Districts, 62 Subdivisions, 416 Thanas and 4,355 Unions (see Table 1). This continued for some years until a new system was established that divided the country into Four Divisions, 21 Regions, 64 Districts (Zilla) and 464 Sub districts (Upazilla) with each Upazilla divided into 4-10 Unions. Measures for decentralization at each level were adopted gradually.
Table 1: The old administrative structure

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<td>Sub-divisional Officer (SDO)</td>
<td>Sub-division (62)</td>
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<td>Thana (416)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Circle Officer, Revenue (CO-Rev)</td>
<td>Union (4,355)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Union Parishad</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Geography

Bangladesh is a delta country at the foot of the Himalayas through which the great rivers the Ganges/Padma, the Brahmaputra/Jamuna and the Meghna flow out into the Bay of Bengal. The country is surrounded by India on three sides, west, north and east, except for a short section on the very south-east where it borders Burma. Most of the territory is flat alluvial plane crossed by rivers. The fertile alluvial soil makes Bangladesh a lush, green land with rich resources for all kinds of agriculture. The tropical monsoon climate means warm and humid weather (80-95%) for most of the year; the day temperatures during 'winter' (November-February) are between 15 and 25°C and the highest temperatures are during April-May when they may reach 35-40°C. The rainy season between June and September gives an annual rainfall of approximately 40"-60". The heavy rains, together with almost yearly cyclones before and after the monsoon, cause substantial damage to crops and the infrastructure in large areas of the country. About one third of the cultivated area is flooded every year.

The conditions are ideal for agriculture, but despite the fertile soil output is much below the potential due to lack of proper irrigation, uneven distribution of land and inadequate utilization of resources. Rice is the staple food and is cultivated almost all over the country, but the yield is low. Other important products are jute, tea, tobacco, sugarcane and vegetable oil seeds. The main export income comes from raw jute and
jute products, tea and leather products. Consequently the small industrial sector and the economy of the country as a whole are based on agriculture and the majority of the population lives in the rural areas.

Population

Bangladesh is one of the most populous nations in the world. The population rose from about 75 million in 1974 to about 120 million in 1990, a growth rate of approximately 2.5% per annum, on an area of some 144,000 thousand square kilometres.

One effect of this rapid increase in population is the migration to the cities, which has caused increased pressure on urban facilities and income-generating activities. Different programmes of family planning have been administered during the last few decades. Since the 1970s it has been stated that the family planning programme would be integrated with the Health Service in order to improve health conditions and reduce the child and infant mortality rates. Today the birth rate shows a downward trend over the past 20 years. High mortality rates have been one of the main factors behind the high birth ratio, combined with the desire for sons. Sons are regarded as an asset, a social security, an extra hand for farm work and an old age pension, while daughters after their childhood are a costly burden, particularly when they are to be married and the parents have to pay a dowry.

Malnutrition and deficiencies in food intake primarily affect the women and children, resulting in diseases and high death rates. In the light of the conditions and resources of the growing population, with uneven land distribution, low yields in food crop production, lack of employment and purchasing power, slow industrial development, poor health standards and lack of an adequate health service, especially in the rural areas, it is understandable that these factors all interact and contribute to the aggravation of poverty in Bangladesh.
The religion of the majority of the population (about 85%) is Islam, with some 10% Hindus and the rest Buddhists, Christians and Animists. Religion is central to everyday life and knowledge about it is essential for understanding its different manifestations in society. The grade of orthodoxy among Muslims and Hindus varies in different areas of the country and hence the feasibility of different development projects.

The Muslims in Bangladesh belong to the Sunni branch of Islam, acknowledging the Koran and Sunna, the traditional Islamic law. The majority are the descendants of converted Hindus and many of them belonged to the caste of the untouchables. Hinduism is not a missionary religion; one must be born a Hindu. It is a pantheistic religion, tolerating various views ranging from polytheism to monotheism. Hinduism believes in reincarnation which means that after death a person is reborn in another body and his future state depends on his actions during his present life. The Hindu life is also based on the inherited caste system and according to his karma the Hindu must carry out the duties of his caste. In other words he can not change caste during his lifetime, but a life of dignity may enable him to be reborn as a member of a higher caste. The caste system is officially no longer valid today, but the myth of origin seems to be embedded deep in the subcontinent and the Bengali culture, irrespective of religious affiliation.

Differences between Hindus and Muslims are often enhanced. They have different funeral rituals, with the Hindus burning their corpses while the Muslims bury them in graves. The Hindus neither kill nor eat beef and the Muslims do not eat pork. There is a tendency for the Hindus to invest their money in gold and jewellery, which are easy to take with you if escape is necessary, while the Muslims prefer to invest their money in land. The language, Bengali, has been regarded as a Hindu language by Muslims from Arabic and Urdu dominated cultures and creates a dilemma for the Bengali Muslims. Religion has always been used as a tool in political manipulation, with disastrous effects when cultural and social contrasts have been exaggerated, although there have been efforts to bridge the differences. (For discussion of religion, see for instance, von Glasenapp (1967 pp. 292-304), Lockerbie and Stagg (1980), Rozario (1992). See also Aziz (1979) for an exhaustive description of the kinship, social life, etc., in Bangladesh.)
The Situation of women

Of importance in Bangladesh is anti-poverty research the aim of which is to understand the obstacles to the creation of income-generating options for women. Too little is known about the number of woman labour days lost per year by the shift from home production to factory production. The micro-effects of technological change ought to be studied, e.g., electrification introduced by foreign assistance. Women have often been pushed out of the labour market by technological changes. New agricultural equipment has resulted in poor landless women losing their main source of income as seasonal day-labourers. Had it not been possible to improve the existing tools, for instance the dheki, used by women, before introducing new mechanical tools like local mills? The socio-economical structure is disturbed by technical change. Quite often a task that for generations has been considered as typically female becomes a male task as soon as a technological improvement or innovation takes place. Productivity must be increased for women as well as men, but for them economic integration is not enough. They must also fight oppression and subordination in a hierarchical society. One has to bear in mind that economic emancipation for women does not immediately lead to further emancipation but is a prerequisite for eking out their influence on decision-making.

The capacity of women to survive on very small and poor resources is not studied sufficiently. When an economic crisis occurs in a Bangladeshi family it is always the woman who first sells her jewellery, if she has any, or her other few belongings. Only when the situation becomes extremely critical will the husband consider selling his belongings, e.g., his wrist-watch. If the husband is ill and needs money for a doctor, the wife will first sell her belongings. The last property to be sold is his inherited land and she will never get part of it. Her access to credit facilities is very limited. In spite of this the role of the woman in the survival of the family is not studied.

In the 1970s the Government of Bangladesh declared a policy of involving women as a target in national development. A number of institutional facilities and programmes were established. National as well as international NGOs (Non Governmental Organizations) have been encouraged to work with activities supporting women (see Chaudhury & Ahmed, 1980, Chapter 5). Unfortunately the efforts of the Government were mainly on paper and few, if any, of the Government programmes have been successful in assisting the poorest strata of women in the
rural areas to achieve improved and sustainable living conditions. One of the reasons is that men have always been the policy and decision-makers and thus in charge of all the government programmes. Women’s interests have not been properly adhered to.

A special effort for rural women was started in the early 1960s in Comilla, Bangladesh, by the Women’s Education and Home Development Programme, sponsored by the Academy for Rural Development (BARD). The basic ideology was that real development is not possible without the emancipation of women. The segregation and seclusion of women were the main obstacles to progress, and the adoption of new methods in agriculture, health and education. Thus the purpose of the programme was to get women to move outside the confines of the homestead and to take an active part in development processes (Qadir, 1980). It was an experiment of particular interest as the extension service was involved in the educational components and the movements came from the grassroots instead of being the usual top-down direction. The cooperative movement was advocated. This programme was resumed after the war of liberation and is still running (see Development Dialogue, 1977:2, p. 28 and 1987:1, p. 41, Schramm and Learner, 1978, pp. 67-80, Islam, 1982, p. 94). One of the major concerns of the programme is to motivate men and the leaders of the villages to take the initiative in women’s affairs. Unless and until the attitude of the men is changed, it may not be possible to have a better programme for women.

In 1975 the Bangladeshi Government introduced a programme on Population Planning and Rural Women’s Cooperatives. The administration of the programme was given to the Integrated Rural Development Programmes (IRDP), nowadays known as the Bangladesh Rural Development Board (BRDB) (see also Rozario, 1992, Chapter 7).

The Bangladesh Women’s Rehabilitation and Welfare Foundation (BWRWF) is also addressing rural women with courses on family planning, health, hygiene, child welfare and literacy.

Programmes with a similar purpose, with education and motivation for development as the main ingredients, were started after the war by, for instance, the Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC). BRAC was founded in 1972 and initiated local programmes in agriculture, horticulture, fisheries, cooperatives, functional education and vocational training. The construction of community centres for health care and family planning was also part of its programme. BRAC gained recognition and its training centre was often used by other NGOs and
government agencies. The methods of functional education can be adapted to different situations and groups of trainees. The illustrative posters and charts aim at literacy training and awareness-raising of the poor groups of villagers to help them recognize and analyse their own problems and find solutions. Chen (1983) has evaluated BRAC’s first decade of development process exhaustively.

Some local NGOs like *Nijera Kori* (We Do It Ourselves) have started women’s cooperatives in agriculture and tried out a credit system for illiterates of loans for rice-processing. The handling of the credits has been positive.

The Grameen Bank, initiated by Prof. Md. Yunus, is a local banking system giving small loans to the illiterate and the poor, in particular women (90%). His philosophy on the development of a society is to help the mothers to earn an income as the most dependable way of helping children and preparing the next generation to shake off all signs of poverty and instilling in them a sense of human dignity and hope for future. This movement spread all over the country in the 1980s. One problem when multiplying projects is the lack of trained leaders, which often resulting in corruption.\(^5\)

*Gono Shyastra Kendra* (People’s Health Centre) was developed during the war of liberation in 1971 when it served refugees and soldiers (*Mukti Bahini*). It is a cooperative health programme focussing the poor strata and particularly women’s diseases. It is integrated with rural development and a paramedical training programme. It has been very successful and is recognized as such.

CONCERN, Care, Oxfam, the Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) are other examples of organizations working successfully to develop activities for women, including functional education, agricultural development and marketing for export. Literacy training as such is not enough to offer starving people. As incentives different kinds of income-generating activities like handicrafts, horticulture, cottage industries must be included. The skills training and income are regarded as the road to self-reliance.

A number of voluntary movements aiming at rehabilitation of the country started immediately after the war and the methods of engagement were rooted in the experience of the independence struggle. The famine of 1974 halted many of the voluntary activities and the traditional forces in society resumed power. Nevertheless the movements were
important as demonstrations of what is possible and should be mentioned (see also Gerard et al., 1977, Jahan and Papanek, 1979, pp. 379-96, Stromquist, 1986, Begum, 1989, pp. 519-27).

Along with the Governmental cooperatives (BRDB) there are today (1990s) many local NGOs working for cooperative movements among landless people and for their legal rights to use, e.g., khashland. The Grameen Bank idea, mentioned above, has also spread to other local NGOs giving loans to petty traders, especially women.

Generally speaking, the NGOs have proved to be more successful in the non formal efforts as compared with the Government-sponsored programmes. As seen above, they have played an important role in integrating women into their programmes.

Purdah

One needs to be acquainted with the purdah system when dealing with most social studies in Bangladesh. Therefore I shall bring up the phenomenon, in order to facilitate the understanding of the obstacles for women, who want to change their lives.

The word parda/purdah literally means curtain or veil. ‘Veil’ has a religious meaning as well as a political one. There is the ‘veil’ used as a religious manifestation among Muslims to segregate females from males and then there is the ideology which serves to control women in order to maintain male domination and also the hierarchical structure of the society. Female seclusion is practised all over Bangladesh, but it varies in different regions of the country due to the level of religious orthodoxy, but also to social and economic status. The strict following of purdah keeps the woman within the home and, if she ventures out she is dressed in a burkha; a garment covering the body from top to toe with holes for the eyes only. If she is transported by rickshaw it is draped with a piece of cloth. In the wider sense purdah refers to women’s modesty and the restrictions on interaction with males from puberty onwards. A great deal has been written on the purdah system in Bangladesh (for detailed discussions see, e.g., Jahan, 1975, Chaudhury and Ahmed, 1979, chapter 2, Maloney et al., 1981, Feldman and McCarty, 1984, pp. 94-95, Rozario, 1992, Chen, 1993).

In most traditional civilizations gender differences have been manifested by a clear and division of labour and strict rules on social behaviour. The women in Bangladesh tended to be isolated in the home
and restricted from public activities; this was the ideal of Muslim society, but also practised in Hindu societies as well as in parts of Christian societies. The system was developed by the patriarchy to ensure the prerogatives of the male half of the population, irrespective of time, space or religious circumstances. Both men and women are preserving the status quo by performing adequately. They are conditioned to serve the prevailing system since the power factors of the society are not to be changed (see Hoodfar, 1993).

The custom of *purdah* plays an intricate role in Bangladeshi society, with advantages and disadvantages for its participants. The social status of women is affected in many ways including access to schooling and health care and mobility. Women are considered to be a liability. *Purdah* has a lot to do with the respectability of the family and the concept of honour and shame (*lodjja*) and is not to be ignored. However, the poorest classes cannot afford the expenses involved in observing strict *purdah* and the increasing poverty has necessitated the vindication of adapted forms of female mobility. Before the war of liberation rural women were seldom seen working outside their homes, apart from the tribal women, who were not prevented from working due to religion. After the war numerous programmes were started to care for the women, e.g., Food For Work Programmes with paddy husking and road maintenance work. They were more or less successful depending on the locality. Many women realized after the war that they could no longer rely on husband and family for shelter and support, but had to find a platform of their own. “...but they have to look carefully at projects that offer them new resources to calculate what they must risk for what possible gains” (Abdullah and Zeidenstein, 1982).

Women who are forced, or who want, to take steps in the direction of coming out of the *purdah* system have thick walls to penetrate to find the cracks in this male-dominated society. The mothers-in-law are not the easy part; at least not in the rural areas! There is a tendency and an attitude of “because I have suffered, you shall not escape!”

**Education**

The schooling system in Bangladesh is part of the British colonial inheritance and was primarily established with the purpose of training people for employment at the lower levels of the public administration, as clerical staff, civil servants and other functionaries. The curriculum
was modelled on schooling in industrialized Europe and the knowledge it imparted was very far removed from Bangladeshi agricultural life. The Bangladeshis lived and continued to live by simple subsistence agriculture, farming, fishing and crafts. After independence in 1947 and during the Pakistani time (1947-71) the educational system was greatly expanded with little change in the colonial schooling system. In the First, Second and Third Five-Year Plans of Pakistan the need for more emphasis on primary education was recognized and education for girls was specially mentioned. The literacy rate did not improve, however, and the Census Reports of 1951, 1961, 1974 and 1981 show a more or less constant sex-wise literacy rate: male/female, 33 percent/11 percent, 29 percent/10 percent, 29 percent/13 percent and 31 percent/16 percent for those years (see Table 2).

Table 2: Literacy Rate by Sex (%)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>1951</th>
<th>1961</th>
<th>1974</th>
<th>1981</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>33.3</td>
<td>29.3</td>
<td>29.9</td>
<td>31.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>11.3</td>
<td>10.7</td>
<td>13.7</td>
<td>16.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: National male range from 16.0 - 50.1 and female range from 5.8 - 35.1

The definition of literacy has changed over the years and one has to be cautious in drawing conclusions, correctly observed by S. Islam (1982), but comparisons between 1961 and 1974 are possible. The imbalance in the urban-rural literacy rates is also a factor to note, while bearing in mind that the rural population of Bangladesh constitutes about 90 percent and the women one half of the total population. There are no standardized cross-national definitions of urban and rural.

The literacy rate in 1981 ranges from 48 percent to 27 percent for urban-rural men and from 30 percent to 13 percent for females (see Table 3). The imbalance can be illustrated further by different age-groups derived from the 1974 Census (see Table 3). The lower literacy rate found in the oldest age group has to do with poor school attendance and few opportunities to sustain and practise the abilities once achieved.
The figures in Table 4 are taken from different sources which use various definitions for literacy, urban and rural population and age cohorts. The accuracy of the figures is likely to be suspect, but they still give some indication of the literacy imbalance between the sexes and the different age groups.

The literacy rate differs also between religious groups. In general the Christians have the highest literacy rate.

Table 3: Urban/Rural Literacy Rates (%)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>1961</th>
<th>1974</th>
<th>1981</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>46.4</td>
<td>45.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>24.8</td>
<td>27.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>22.8</td>
<td>25.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>7.0</td>
<td>10.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4: Literacy Rate by Age-group (%)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age Group</th>
<th>5-14</th>
<th>15-24</th>
<th>25+</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>34.9</td>
<td>58.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>31.0</td>
<td>43.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>22.4</td>
<td>37.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>14.8</td>
<td>18.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>23.4</td>
<td>40.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>6.1</td>
<td>20.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The formal education system

The formal education system comprises five years of Primary school and five years of Secondary school. A Secondary School Certificate (SSC) is awarded at the end of Grade 10. To qualify for admission to higher education at universities/colleges another two years of Higher Secondary (Intermediate) school with a Higher Secondary Certificate (HSC) are required. Both the Secondary (Grades 9-10) and the Higher Secondary schools (Grades 11-12) are divided along the various lines of study, e.g. Humanities, Science, Commerce and Agriculture.

To have a college or university degree is a high status symbol. Irrespective of the subject, a Bachelor of Arts (B.A.) or a Master of Arts (M.A.) gives one status and legitimate opinions about everything "as I am a Master"!

Enrolment, Drop-out, Attendance.

Only slightly more than half of all children aged between five and eleven are enrolled in school and of those enrolled only about 30 percent are girls. Besides the low enrolment rate, the drop-out rate is also very high, estimated at somewhere between 60 and 80 percent after Grade 1 with only about 20-25 percent completing primary education. Available data are insufficient on the urban-rural drop-out rate, the sex drop-out rate and the low enrolment rate among girls, but it is assumed that the tendency is negative as regards rural girls. The low and irregular attendance is another factor, and this often results in very low standards of attainment. The underlying reasons for these low enrolment rates, high drop-out rates and irregular attendance are many. Poverty is the main reason mentioned generally by people and by teachers in particular.

The low attendance rate in the rural areas is, among other things, due to the structure of the school system. The hours of the school day overlap with the children's work, the school terms operate regardless of the agricultural peak seasons. The children's contribution to the family economy is indispensable and is deemed more important than that gained from school work. The poor standard of attainment is obvious and the low degree of literacy achieved at school is soon lost, due to the few opportunities to sustain and practise the simplest reading ability.

School Costs

The government schools are free, but school uniform or decent clothes, books, paper, pens, etc. are costs that automatically exclude children from the poorest strata of society as school means a loss of income. The children have to contribute to the family income by day-labour or petty trade or, if they are too young to get a paid job, boys are often leased out as herd-boys to farmers, who provide them with food, clothes and a place to sleep.
Some of the teaching staff has no formal qualifications at all; many are students with a Secondary School Certificate (SSC) or a Higher School Certificate (HSC) only. Their salary is low and this often obliges them to cultivate land or work as a tutor in the evenings or take up some other business to support their family. This double employment also means that their attendance at school is often poor and irregular. Their motivation, teaching methods and powers of innovation are weak and the only known and practised method seems to be the learning by rote (memorizing) through repetitive chanting.

Traditionally the alphabet is taught as a song in which each letter has a name as well as a sound. The same applies to numbers which are taught as a chorus. The pupils learn the songs by rote. If, however, you pick out a single number and ask what it is you may often get no answer. They know the letters/numbers songs, but have no comprehension of the individual letters or numbers, which was the aim of the exercise. I wonder whether this is due to the old tradition of the much appreciated Tagore chants that appeal to the people, as his poems are often built on alliteration? When you hear the ‘letter-songs’ you may easily associate them with a Tagore song.

Lack of pedagogical and subject matter knowledge, syllabi, materials, funds, etc., makes it understandable that interest and motivation among teachers fade after a time. The primary school functions properly only for a few pupils who have the opportunity to continue to the secondary level. Big, overcrowded classes with the well known back-row problem are a reality, with only the selected pupils on the front rows seeing and hearing properly what the teacher is doing.13
The choice of District for the rehabilitation work of our organization was made by the Ministry of Relief and Rehabilitation and the choice of thana and area by the District Commissioner (DC), the head of the district, an officer with extensive powers (see Table 1). At the thana level the Circle Officer, Development (CO, Dev.) was very helpful in outlining the status of the different areas of his thana and made suggestions of suitable villages. After visits to many villages, discussions on different project proposals with villagers and local authorities (parishad), Shantipur was finally chosen, partly at the request of the villagers themselves. Their interest and readiness to participate in the reconstruction and rehabilitation of their village is a sine qua non for development of this kind.

Village survey

One of our first tasks was to establish contact with the villagers. We wanted to learn about their customs and traditions, to tell them about ours, to discuss development and underdevelopment and their underlying reasons, to channel their problems into active participation in changing their life situations.

In early 1974 we initiated the village programme by introducing ourselves to each bari at the same time as we implemented a socio-economic survey. We drew a simple village map and numbered each bari. We constructed a standardized questionnaire, in order to map the
status and conditions of the inhabitants and their needs of, and interest in, development and social change. The test interviews were carried out in the neighbourhood of our house and a few modifications were made to the questionnaire. As our knowledge of the language, Bangla, was still poor at that time, we were assisted by a student from the village during the interviewing.

The total number of inhabitants was about 1,000 distributed among 150 baris. A considerable amount of data was collected and constituted the basis for the development activities later initiated in the village; this applies to choice of activities as well as the recruitment of participants.

The data showed a division of the village into three parts that could be characterized as the ‘rich’ Muslim part, the ‘poor’ Hindu part and the ‘poor’ Muslim new-settler part (see the village map)!

The survey activity per se provided an opportunity to get acquainted with the inhabitants of each bari. This proved to be invaluable to the project later on.

As the interviews were mainly carried out in the daytime the majority of the respondents were women. In a village study like this, one can never count on a private interview. One has to realize that this surveying as such was the event of the year! On the other hand, there are few secrets in this type of society. In almost every case the respondent was surrounded by other people from the bari or by neighbours. Often the neighbour answered instead of the respondent. Some questions could not be answered by the respondent herself, e.g., the name of her husband. Due to custom and traditional respect and servility, a village woman is not allowed to mention her husband by name.

Very little socio-economic data were available in the country and it was therefore necessary to collect the data required before any action was taken. The positive factor with data collected by yourself is that you know that they are as correct as can possibly be obtained and thereby more reliable to be used as baseline data for further planning and implementation.

Below follows a description of the village based on the Thana Official Statistics and the survey data from 1974 (Forsslund and Johanson, 1974). It is necessary to acquaint oneself with this background information before reading the following chapters.
Shantipur village

It should be mentioned, at the outset, that except for the district and capital, I am using pseudonyms for places and persons mentioned in this presentation out of consideration for the villagers concerned.

Shantipur is located in the angle between the railway and the bank of a small river. In 1973 the total population of the whole thana was 68,466, with 90 percent Muslims and 10 percent non-Muslims. The distance to Dhaka,\(^1\) the capital, is about 140 miles, to the district town 40 miles and to the nearest town 10 miles. The old brick roads to the railway station and the nearest town were in a bad condition. There was no bus service from the thana. An irregular train connection was available to the nearest town and the district town, from where there are buses along the main roads. At the railway station there was also a post-office and telegraph, but no telephone connection.

As regards medical facilities there was a Government Dispensary in the thana, but a shortage of medicines. There was a medical shop with a poor assortment at the bazaar close to the railway station. Hospital facilities were available in the nearest town and in the district town.

There were seven primary schools and two high schools in the area and a university in the district town, but there was no adult education.

Small-scale industries in the area consisted of mustard oil preparation, bullock cart production and carpentry. The village was not electrified. The distance to the nearest socket was 10 miles!

Village population

Almost half the population (48.1 \%) was under the age of 15. Both the birth-rate and the death-rate were higher for infant boys. The death-rate among women aged between 15 and 29 was high, possibly due to child-birth and malnutrition. The concept of age and time was vague and the meaning of words like year, month, week, yesterday, tomorrow was often foggy.\(^2\) Even an educated man could state a mother’s age to be 23 and her son to be 17.

To give the age of a child, parents often indicated with the hand the height above the ground to show how old the child was. For the age of a woman it was sometimes easier to judge the age of her eldest child and add on 15 years to arrive at her approximate age.
Table 6: Village population

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Adults (15&gt; years)</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>252</td>
<td>51.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>236</td>
<td>48.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>488</td>
<td>51.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children (&lt;15 years)</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>211</td>
<td>46.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>242</td>
<td>53.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>453</td>
<td>48.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>463</td>
<td>49.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>478</td>
<td>50.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total population</td>
<td></td>
<td>941</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The average number of members per household was 6.3 and the average number of children per family 4.5. In many cases it was difficult to get an answer to the question about children. Some women were uncertain about how many children they had given birth to and how many had died. In some cases they did not remember all the names. The husbands could not always say how many children they had, or their ages and names. Quite often only the number of sons was mentioned and the question had to be followed up by asking how many were boys and how many were girls.

On the question about family planning methods, the woman immediately covered her mouth with her sari, but her female neighbour was able to answer for her. Nobody in the village had adopted any family planning methods except for one case of sterilization. Almost all the women, especially the poor ones, did not want any more children and thought that an injection would be the solution. On the whole ‘an injection’ seemed to have a very strong curative effect here. The matter of abortion was certainly not discussed, although ‘everyone’ knows about the method.
Religion

The percentage of Muslims and Hindus was about 70 percent Muslims and 30 percent Hindus. This distribution is abnormal in Bangladesh. One of the reasons was that at the time of partition in 1947 people thought that this area should remain in India. So many Hindus did not move. Another reason was the British-owned industry built up there during the colonial period. The British brought labourers with them from Calcutta in West Bengal.

There was no antagonism between the two groups at the time we arrived there. Children played and adults worked together. We were careful to keep the 70/30 proportion in recruiting for the project activities, however.
Table 7: Distribution of students by level of education and age

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>Primary School</th>
<th>Secondary School</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>6-8</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>F</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9-10</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>F</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11-14</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>F</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
<td>76</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Literacy

Table 7 shows that only 96 (21%) of the 453 children in the village were enrolled in school. This corresponds fairly well to the national figures. 23 boys and 10 girls over the age of 15 attended Secondary or Higher Secondary school and two boys from the village were studying at the university.

Many children have to work to contribute to the family budget and there is no money for school uniforms, text books, etc. Girls often get married after the age of 12. Some parents considered it less important to send their daughters to school (see The Formal Education System).

Adult illiteracy

Over half (54%) of the adult men and 81 percent of the women had no education at all. 12 percent of the men and three percent of the women had received between one and three years formal school education. Consequently, one might say that 66 percent of the adult men and 84 percent of the adult women were illiterate; 79 percent of the men and 94 percent of the women had less than six years school education.
Occupation

Almost half the male population were day-labourers (47%). The women had no paid work, apart from a few who went from house to house working in return for food. 45 women were widows and 15 of them were under the age of 40. Six women earned their living as beggars. Very few were studying, partly due to the fact that they get married at a very young age (12-16 years).

Landholdings and agriculture

The total area in the village amounted to 627 bighas = 209 acres = 83.6 ha. (One bigha = 1/3 acre or 0.12 ha). One bigha supports one adult with rice. The average income per bigha/year was calculated to be 650 taka.

![Figure 1: Distribution of Landholdings per household.](image-url)
The distribution showed that 46% of the villagers were landless and 26% had up to three bighas only. These households (72%) were the target group of our activities in the village.

Almost all farmers cultivated paddy, sugarcane, jute and vegetables. Paddy and some vegetables produced two harvests; jute and sugarcane one harvest per year. No irrigation system was available. The soil is very fertile.

The village livestock consisted of some cows and bullocks and a few water-buffaloes owned by the better-off farmers. Goats and poultry were kept by the small farmers.

A large part of the income came from the sale of fruits like mango, lichee and jackfruit. Rajshahi district is famous for the high quality of its mangoes and buyers usually come from Dhaka and buy the harvest while it is still on the trees.

The wood from the trees is used for furniture and some agricultural tools. Jackfruit is considered to be particularly high quality.

**Income**

It is barely possible to calculate income correctly. The only relatively true data are on income below 1,000 taka/year. The figures indicate, however, the gaps between the various levels of the society. According to the calculation the richest people got about 30-40,000 taka/year from their own land. On top of this they also cultivate Government land, *khashland*, and this will double their income.

*Khashland* refers to abandoned, expropriated or newly formed riverine land controlled by the Government. Figure 2 shows that 22 percent of the households has an income of maximum 1,000 taka/year and 39 percent earns more than 1,000 but less than 5,000 taka/year. More than 3/4 (78 %) earns less than 10,000 taka/year.

**Housing and sanitation**

The majority constructs the houses or huts of bamboo and mud, with roofs made of sungrass or sugarcane leaves. Some huts had tin roofs (corrugated iron sheets) and only two houses in the village were built of bricks and cement, i.e., ‘pucca house’. Covering the bamboo walls with mud is a woman’s job. Often poor, old widows survive by doing this
kind of seasonal job. It is ranked as one of the lowest in status next to begging.

Problems with clean drinking water were often discussed during my visits to the baris. Only 37 households obtained their drinking water from tube wells, 107 from open wells and six households directly from the river. Nine working tube wells existed in the village at that time, i.e., in the ‘rich’ part. Very few families had a latrine.

Figure 2: Distribution of income per household
**Diet**

The diet was monotonous and depended on the season. During the dry season there was a variety of vegetables and fruits available that provided a more nutritious diet than during the rainy season. Preserving and storage facilities were poor and living from hand to mouth was the rule. Some of the rich people were secretive about their diet, while the poor openly declared their habits. In some baris where several families lived in separate huts, one family would be able to eat rice every day while another family was starving. The majority has *chapati* and vegetables, e.g., lentils, edible leaves, as their staple food. A gruel called *khitchuri*, made from lentils and potatoes or flour, is quite common among poor people. Body paralysis occurs if one eats nothing but *khitchuri* for a long time. About 15 percent of the villagers did not eat anything in the morning. The most common evening dish was rice and curry made from vegetables, with fish or chicken for those who could afford it.

**Health standards**

Many people were physically weak due to malnutrition and undernourishment, which resulted in disease. The most common diseases reported were recurrent fever and stomach problems, for instance dysentery, parasites and worms. Skin diseases like scabies, boils and burns as well as fever, pain and tuberculosis were also common. Moreover, there were epidemics like small-pox and cholera.

In case of illness the majority went to the Government Dispensary or to the medical shop at the *bazaar*, but the help was poor due to the constant shortage of medicines. A few went to the hospital in the nearest town, to a native healer or simply cured themselves at home. All respondents expressed the need for preventive health care, education on nutrition, hygiene and family planning. These statements would be recalled later on in the training of the women.
Improvements in living conditions

On the question of what were the most permanent needs for improving living conditions for the family and for the whole village, the majority of the respondents had difficulty in answering. They found it difficult to think of activities that would change anything in the future. They were thinking of today, not of tomorrow. A typical answer was: food and clothes.

However, some respondents indicated that they needed medicines, clean drinking water, land, improved agriculture, irrigation, work for women, school for the children and some industry for the whole village.

The objectives of the village programme

The main objective and principle of the development programme was ‘help for self-help’ which means that the volunteers were systematically training the participants in each project activity to take over all the functions involved. The aim was also that each activity would become self-supporting.

In accordance with the second principle, ‘help first those who suffer most’, the target group were the poorest strata of the society, i.e., the 72 percent landless and those with less than three bigha of land (see Figure 1). As mentioned earlier the data had shown that the village area could be divided into three parts - the ‘rich’ Muslim part, the ‘poor’ Hindu part and the poor ‘new-settler’ Muslim part. Consequently, the villagers of the latter two parts were the target of the project activities (see Village map).

Distrust on the part of the rich part of the village and objections from some of the elder village leaders, samaj, who saw their traditional powers threatened, existed from the beginning. Some promotional action was taken at both village and thana level to neutralize these groups and this was reinforced by strong support from the DC and CO (Dev.). Of vital importance, of course, was the post-war situation as such, and the new kind of spirit aroused among people to build up their own country. The war and post-war situation involved the whole population and gave the poor strata and the women also a participating role. This was an advantage to the NGOs working in the country at the time.
The special needs of the village had to be considered thoroughly when planning development projects of this kind, plus the needs expressed by the villagers concerned. Based on these socio-economic data and the picture of village life they provided, project proposals in the following areas were formulated.

**Project proposals**

1. **Women’s project**
   Many women were left as the sole family support because of widowhood, divorce or being abandoned. It was obviously necessary to engage these women in an income-generating activity. The difficulty was to find a feasible activity. This project will be presented in Chapter 6.

2. **Primary school with a practical approach**
   A primary school for children who could not afford to attend the Government school in the neighbouring village was to be opened in collaboration with the *Thana* Educational Office and local students. A Feeding Centre was to be attached to the school, providing the children with a daily main meal. The purpose was to combine theoretical and practical education on village conditions and gradually make the school self-supporting.

3. **Health, hygiene and sanitation project**
   In order to improve health standards, in many aspects caused by polluted water, it was suggested that a number of tubewells should be introduced in the village. These would be given to the villagers under cooperative conditions. A certain group of *baris* would be responsible for each tubewell and later on night-school groups (adult education) could be initiated in each tube-well cooperative.

4. **Vocational training**
   Vocational training on a clerical basis was to be started in collaboration with the high school in the neighbouring village. The purpose was to give students with secondary or high school education and no possibility of continuing in higher education an opportunity to get a job. This might also be regarded as a neutralizing action to comply with the views of the rich people.
In this thesis the focus will be only on the first project component, i.e., the project that became the Jute handicraft cooperative for women. I have, however, also mentioned the other three proposed projects that were implemented as they were all interrelated and supported each other in different ways.

The common denominator of all the projects was a combination of practical and theoretical training. This was certainly in conflict with the established traditional systems.

The whole programme was supported by the Swedish voluntary organization for about 10 years. Gradually national and local organizations took over its running, support and integration.
CHAPTER 4

Theoretical points of departure

Education in developing countries

During the 1960’s educational planners did not question the notion that education was a necessary instrument for development in non-industrialized countries. Education was considered a key to solving most problems in the world. Formal education was over-emphasized as the sole remedy for social and economic stagnation and underdevelopment in the Third World. The industrialized countries adopted a generous attitude to financial support of educational programmes designed according to Western ideals. Universal basic formal education was given first priority by donor agencies. Education was considered equally beneficial for all citizens in a country. Desirable results was thought to automatically occur when launching educational reforms and campaigns. UN allocated huge resources to global literacy campaigns with the view that a literate population would automatically lead to national development.

Structural/functional theories dominated educational planning during the sixties, which was the period when foreign aid to non-industrialized countries became the means of coping with problems of inequality and poverty, of malnutrition and low productivity. By applying Western solutions to problems of poor countries, they were to become affluent and better developed. One role of education according to the structural/functional theories is to maintain social equilibrium, and any conflict or inequality should be corrected through reforms. Human Capital theory (Schultz, 1961) fitted in well in this philosophy. Education was regarded as a productive investment in a capital of human knowledge and skills,
leading to increased individual productivity as well as national economic growth. Effectiveness and motivation became key words, while the content of education was not to be questioned. Neither were the issues of education used for power and control.

By the seventies a number of critical voices could be heard. Both the Western world and the developing countries had experienced failures and negative consequences when applying the structural/functional paradigm on national education. Criticism was formulated both from political and pedagogical perspectives. Among the critics should be noted Bowles (1977), Collins (1977), Dore (1976), Paulston (1976) and Young (1971) who brought up issues like the overemphasis on technology, the theoretical education, leading to underemployment of graduates, and a 'white collar proletariat'. The neglect of the educational needs of the agrarian population was pointed out.  

In many developing countries the national education system was patterned after that of the former colonial power, often with the purpose of creating a semi-elite of bureaucrats. No steps were taken to cater for the special educational needs of women. Carnoy (1974) stressed the danger of the Westernised educational system as a form of cultural imperialism that would gradually wipe out all value systems in the developing countries, unless they were guarded and developed with care and consideration for the cultures and traditions concerned. The earlier mentioned Carnoy, Collins, and Bowles brought up the political implications of educational planning. They stated that education could be a key agent for preserving inequality and emphasized the strong relation between class, education and work. (Sjöström and Sjöström, 1982). Among others Odora (1993) criticised the colonial influences and impact on the African culture and, hence, the educational systems.

The structural/functional approach in developing countries became also very costly, with large percentage of drop-outs, absenteeism and repetition of grades.

**Education as a concept**

Education is a wide concept and can be categorized in different ways. Coombs (1974) has distinguished three modes of education, viz., informal, formal and nonformal. According to these terms "the informal education is the lifelong process by which every person acquires and accumulates knowledge, skills, attitudes and insights from daily experiences
and exposures to the environment. Formal education is the highly institutionalized, chronologically graded and hierarchically structured ‘education system’, spanning lower primary school and the upper reaches of the university”, i.e., national, centralized, formalized schooling. “The nonformal education is any organized, systematic, educational activity carried on outside the framework of the formal system to provide selected types of learning to particular sub-groups in the population, adults as well as children.”

According to Coombs it bridges the gap between formal education and working life, and should be an integral part of every action programme aimed at development and change. Nonformal education is not a ‘system’ of interrelated parts like formal education, but has a wider scope, and a greater diversity and adaptability. In a broad context formal and nonformal education could be seen as a supplement to informal education.

Dore (1976) has in his criticism of formal education referred to nonformal education as an alternative form of social development (see Comparative Education Review, 1977, Vol 21, 2/3; Karabel & Halsey 1977).

**Literacy**

The concept of literacy is a mixture of objectives, methods and values used differently in different countries and programmes (Lind & Johnston 1989). A number of reviews of literacy issues have been presented during the last decade (Lind & Johnston, 1989, Odora et al. 1992). The positive view of literacy as an agent of economic development was a theme in the 1960s and 1970s “Since illiteracy is an integral part of underdevelopment, literacy must become an integral part of development”, was a declaration emanating from the World Conference on Literacy in 1965 (Rafe-uz-Zaman, 1978). In 1978 UNESCO defined a functionally literate person as able to engage in all activities in which literacy is required for effective functioning of his/her group and community and also able to continue to read, write and calculate for his/her own community’s development. UNESCO’s definition is different from the one used in Bangladesh, where a person is defined as literate if he/she can read and write in any language. See Footnote 8.
The earlier mentioned criticism towards formal education is also relevant as regards literacy programmes, which could be seen as a catalyst for development. The question has been raised, whether literacy is a tool for change or for preservation of reproduction of existing social order.

Freire’s (1972 a,b, 1973) theories on education and development through ‘conscientization’ were important sources for inspiration to many development workers from the 1970s when his ideas were spread internationally. According to Freire literacy is a potential political act which is important for liberation and thereby development. He points out that literacy cannot be politically neutral. A further point, however, is that literacy can be used to serve any political position and thus, does not necessarily solve problems on development.

In Bangladesh, BRAC (Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee) and Grameen Bank are two organizations that have combined literacy and skills training. Both emphasize the need for a combination to reach desirable goals. BRAC started already in 1972 with a Freire-inspired literacy programme, adjusted to the Bangladeshi culture. Grameen Bank was started by Prof. Md. Yunus in the late 1970s by giving credits to the rural poor (90% women) and argued that the motivation for literacy and development would follow automatically.

Development as a Concept

The concept of development is ambiguous and has been used in a variety of contexts throughout history. Development at its most general level is multi-dimensional in both conceptualization and reality. Words with a similar meaning are: social change, economic growth and evolutionary progress, advancement and modernization. Generally it connotes positive change and a Western outlook in terms of sophisticated technology, large-scale industrial operations and economic growth. A simple statement and close to the human beings, would be “the overall improvement of people’s conditions of life, as seen and accepted first and foremost by the people concerned.” (Mupawaenda 1992).

A distinction should be drawn between development and social change, however. Social change includes the possibility of the downward movement of a social system as well as an upward one. The notion of development is generally restricted to the latter meaning. In this study I do not delve into disputes about the meaning and use of these contested
concepts. They have been repeatedly dealt with in other studies and reviews (Fägerlind & Saha 1989; Hettne 1983; Keenleyside 1966; Myrdal 1968; Stokke 1978).

When development was defined as economic growth, the positive role of education appeared uncontroversial: "education is the key that unlocks the doors to modernization" (Kazamias & Schwartz 1977). However, there were not many reflections regarding a socio-economic levelling of differences through reforms, on neither national nor international levels. All changes should occur automatically. Infrastructural obstacles in transfers of technical and financial know-how were not analysed or reflected on. A holistic view of national planning was neglected and the expected results failed to appear.

Donor agencies mushroomed from the 1960s onwards, with a variety of intentions; everything from the good Samaritans to more politically directed movements, from authoritarian to laissez-faire. Lissner (1977) has exhaustively described the concepts of the politics of altruism and has analysed the various forms of development aid, its intentions, objectives and attitudes. The output of all these efforts has been both positive and negative for the recipients. The poor strata of the recipient societies have often been excluded and socio-economic gaps have widened. Lack of cultural awareness and consideration when designing assistance programmes have resulted in help that has not been appropriate. Western 'do-good' intentions and the spread of 'know-how' and its 'top-down' strategy are quite the opposite of the 'awareness-raising' strategy advocated by Freire, for instance.

The former President of Tanzania, Julius Nyerere said: "To develop people is not like building roads or wells, people cannot be developed by others, they must develop themselves." (Mupawaenda 1992, p 98),

In development work I think it is important to be sensitive to needs, particularities and values of the society in which you work, i.e., to bring the 'right' message, at the 'right' time, in the 'right' environment. The vision presented by Mahatma Gandhi and his philosophy of non-violence are in line with the spiritual and non-materialistic way of living in the Indian sub-continent. His resistance to Western civilization was a desire to protect the South Asian culture. Freire's visions of a better world were likewise appropriate in Latin America.
The development optimism of the 1960s had its drawbacks and frustrations. The necessity to pay attention to the different needs and functions of educational systems in different cultures and contexts was being recognized. In the early 1970s the educational term ‘development education’ was articulated and became widespread in workshops and seminars all over the world. It was quickly adopted by people working in development assistance agencies, e.g., NGOs and the UN agencies. According to Adams (1977) the term had a wide definition referring to education and societal change and the role of education in development. A certain agreement about the concept of development should be assumed when discussing.

The term Development Education implies a political standpoint towards oppression and underdevelopment. It starts in people’s own situation, making them reflect and act. An important aspect is the method of learning. To become active participants in our own future we have to participate in decisions and act together to reach the desired changes. It is a prerequisite for creating and governing a democratic form of society. Freire (1970) argues that reflection without action is “verbalism” and action without reflection is “action for the sake of action”. I agree with his emphasis on awareness raising, cultural understanding, respect and sensitivity to linguistic issues. The theory on literacy and practice aims at making it possible for the oppressed illiterates to become aware that they can change their own situation. Dialogue and participation are key elements of liberating education. The main task is to start the process of critical reflection leading to action and change.

The definition of development education used by Robin Burns corresponded well with this view: “Development Education is concerned with man, society and social change. It is developmental insofar as it is concerned with both individual and social development. It is educational in the broadest sense of a process of individual learning about self and society. It is thus an interactive process of education for development” (Burns, 1980). Burns’ work on development education has influenced my own work (1978a, 1978b, 1978c, 1979).
At the time of my first journey to Bangladesh and the initiating of the rural development project in 1973 there was little systematic research on women development projects. A research group, ‘Women for Women’, funded by UNICEF and Ford Foundation in Dhaka in the 1970s published mainly fragmented and descriptive rather than analytical reports on women. The scarcity of research is verified by Rozario (1992), who has performed research on rural women and social change in Bangladesh, where she thoroughly examines the factors reinforcing the gender inequalities. In her study Rozario recognizes a few research studies, all of them performed after my arrival in Bangladesh, Jahan & Papanek (1979), Chaudhury & Ahmed (1980), Abdullah & Zeidenstein (1982), Chen (1983), Westergaard (1983), Aziz & Maloney (1985), and Kabeer (1985). Rozario is a Bangladeshi woman herself and has noted the fact that most studies are done by non-Bengali social scientists. Reasons behind this are, i.a., the Bengali women’s constraints on mobility and lack of resources.

In a general review on Women and Schooling in the Third World, Kelly and Kelly (1982) found that research on education for women was scarce and lacking in analytical perspective. Statistics presented were often fragmentary and of poor quality. They also found that the performed studies were narrow, focusing mainly on women’s visible productivity, leaving out women’s family and social roles.

The poverty within this field of research was also a general finding that the WEED project of the University of Umeå could verify in an inventory done during the first years of 1980s (Elgqvist-Saltzman & Opper, 1983).

Through the UN Decade for Women, 1975-85, the donor agencies got the pressure to provide specially designed projects for women. The knowledge of women’s conditions in urban and rural areas in different aid receiving countries was, however, very poor. The package solutions for women development were decided in Washington or Geneva for instance, and often run through ministerial levels in the country with no connection to the women concerned. Projects started were traditional, designed by male, middle-class Westerners. The projects aimed to cover the basic needs of the households, with topics like ‘home economics’, sewing, knitting, and child care. These projects mostly reached the middle-class women while the lower strata of women were left out.
Stromquist (1989) has criticised government programmes for women and their persistent definition of women as mothers, not producers or citizens. She points out that these programmes are often “of a compensatory nature, trying to correct ‘wrongs’ done by the formal educational system but without modifying the basis for gender discrimination in society.” However, she says. “various NFE programmes offered by NGOs and, particularly, women-led NGOs do consider knowledge that will empower women to seek more equality. These programmes, though few in number and poorly funded, are making significant inroads in the development of women with social and gender awareness-women capable of organizing themselves and making demands on the existing political structures. These programmes deserve more understanding and financial support”.

In another study Stromquist (1986) observed that the most successful cases of income generating projects are being implemented by NGOs. BRAC and its programmes in Bangladesh are mentioned as an example that combines skills with awareness-raising and incorporates women as active participants. These will allow marginal and destitute populations to become more effective members of their societies. Nonformal education is advocated not only as a resource that will enable women to become ‘integrated’ into the development process, but also as a resource which is much more attainable than capital or land. Nonformal education has the flexibility needed to meet the women’s different needs for integrative training at different stages of life, that is interleaved with child care and other domestic duties.

Studies by UNICEF have pointed out the importance of basic education among women for the welfare of their children. In families where the mother is illiterate, child mortality is higher than in families where she can read and write. A literate environment at home has an immense effect on a child’s ability to develop its talents (Stromquist 1991). A number of micro-projects have shown that women seek literacy themselves at a point when its meaning and value become evident to them (Dighe 1992).

In a draft discussion on Pauperization and Rural Women in Bangladesh, Westergaard (1981) looks at the work patterns of women and the economic and social situation among the poorest of them. “The data collected from the sample villages showed that women had little knowledge of local or national affairs. The majority of the women did participate in elections, but there was no awareness of the issues involved.” These women worked outside their homes in post harvest
tasks and earned some money, but their awareness and social status were not changed. They had no kind of education and their energy and possibilities remained dormant.

Westergaard’s data emanate from a rather conservative area of Bangladesh, and this is also an important factor to bear in mind when analysing results from rural studies in Bangladesh. The situation of women is very different depending on where in the country they live. Generally speaking, the Southeast is more conservative and religiously orthodox, while the Northwest is more liberal.

Consciousness-raising, comprehension of inequality and literacy are, however, not sufficient to create change. They must be combined with the means of earning money for basic needs. This is shown in programmes by BRAC and the Grameen Bank, mentioned above. However, employment outside the home is not enough on its own to mobilize people in this situation. Relevant, contextualized education must be a parallel component. Chen (1983) has evaluated the first decade of BRAC’s training for development. The programme is oriented towards the lower social strata and evaluations have shown that it has been successful in the strivings to increase material and social resources. Chen has critically analyzed the women, poverty, and economic development of more than 250 cooperative groups and over 6000 women involved. The evaluation shows the generation of higher incomes, power and autonomy as well as the complexity of programme implementation of this kind.

In one of the first analytical studies of women in Bangladesh Abdullah and Zeidenstein (1982) underlined some of the problems with women oriented programmes. Efforts are made to enrol women in cooperatives, but the administration is run by men, which hinders the women from becoming integrated in the activities and thereby also hampers their comprehension of the programme as such. The result is failure. It should be noted, however, that this kind of programme generally fails to addressing the poorest strata of the female population. Studies have shown that it is easier for women from the lower strata of a society to break established patterns, etc., than it is for middle-class women. This ‘level-system’ is also noticed among the village women where there is a big difference regarding what can and cannot be done, if you are a woman, with or without land. Middle-class women seem to be more bound by the purdahah system than others (see e.g. Rozario, 1992).
Also in what looks like a homogeneous rural population in a poor village in Bangladesh there are sharp differences to be considered, which one realizes after some period of observation. Regarding rural women many studies generalize far too much. When planning vocational training for rural women it is important to know which category of women is concerned, otherwise the programme will fail to achieve its goals. Already in the 1970s Ardener (1975), Lamphere (1974) and Rosaldo (1974) criticised male dominated anthropology, giving a biased description of society. Many appraisal studies implemented in this field can be criticised because they are male biased and therefore give wrong information to the planners. Male economic thinking often neglects the working conditions of women resulting in, for example, worsened health of the family.

This narrow view is also reflected in statistics and plans. Palmer (1984) and Jörgensen (1982) point out ‘the systematic bias observed among statisticians and planners’ concerning employment and distribution. Planning based on biased statistics, (read: male, paid, visible) results in biased development assistance. Within agriculture, for instance lots of unnecessary mistakes are being made, due to misleading information on the actual work contribution of women. New equipment has been introduced without a first hand information on prevailing systems. These changes have in many cases disturbed the traditional harvest system and the poorest women have lost their seasonal source of income. The dheki, e.g., a wooden paddy-husking tool, used by the rural women and an accepted income generating task outside the home, could rather have been improved and thereby remained as their income, instead of introducing the local electrified mill.

During the phase of writing this thesis there has been a tremendous increase of feminist research in the Western world. A new field of research in gender and education is growing and new handbooks and journals appearing. The International Handbook of Women’s Education (Kelly, 1989) gives an overview of women’s education in developed as well as developing countries. Overall questions are whether education can be liberating rather than oppressing women and how education affects their social status. The conclusion is that the missing effects of educational reforms on women’s lives can be related to a narrow definition of education. Women’s lives and total context are not taken into consideration.
In this thesis I have chosen not to discuss standard feminist social science literature in-depth, but rather refer to available literature on gender issues, structure and social and cultural constructions (Martin 1985, Harding 1986, Smith 1987, 1990, cf. also Berge 1992, Staberg 1992 as regards Swedish summaries). However, in the following discussion I will bring up some researchers specially relevant to my field of interest. Such a study is Belenky and her colleagues’ (1986) studies of American women’s ways of knowing. Their ‘silent knowing’, invisible world and the necessity to give them a voice seem to be relevant also for my study on women in Bangladesh.

The idea of awareness-raising and the participation of the poor articulated by Freire is equally adequate as a statement for women. Weiler (1991) has pointed out that Freire and the feminists share the same vision of social transformation and the same perspectives on oppression. Freire (1972) had observed the silent culture and the oppressed groups and discussed the reasons behind. He saw the lack of holistic views of society among social researchers. The feminists compared and noted the silenced half of the population and tried to map out the segregated society.

Conclusions

One of the aims of the pedagogy I practised in the Bangladeshi village was to help the village women reflect on their own situation, their society, culture, way of living, and to relate to other forms of living. I wanted to start a process which can be described as an ‘action-reflection spiral’ enabling people to take advantage of their own knowledge and put it into practice in their own situation (see Thunberg et al., pp. 80-85, 1978). In my opinion the educational process opens doors and emits impulses. It aims at producing creative, active citizens, participating in their own future instead of merely repeating other people’s views and experiences. Development education concerns both the individual and her/his potential, and the group and its collective potential. This development process is a liberation from dependence, with effects on both micro and macro levels. The concepts of development education and nonformal education are obviously applicable to my visions.

I have in reaction to top-down management and patronizing found the dialogue approach useful. In this thesis the concept of dialogue is used both as a theory of development, as a pedagogical method of
imparting knowledge, as a form of conversation/interview aiming at obtaining information from an inside-perspective and also as a concept when compiling data in life histories.

My intention has been to show the development process through the perspectives of the women concerned. I will now present the life history approach which I found helpful in my attempts to give the women voices.

The Life-history approach

The life-history approach has a long history in social research. The Chicago school used the life-history method in empirical sociology in the 1920s and 1930s. Thomas and Znaniecki (1927) and their studies of the Polish emigrant culture, based on private letters and other documents, are the most frequently mentioned representatives of this method. They stated that "personal life-records, as complete as possible, constitute the perfect type of sociological material."

During the decades when quantitative surveys were the main tool of social scientists, qualitative methods like the life-history method were rarely used. Lately phenomenological, ethnomethodological, and ethnographic approaches have opened up a growing interest in everyday life experiences and the life-history method has experienced a revival. In his review of the Life History Approach in the Social Sciences, Bertaux (1981) has re-established the method as being advantageous to describe social changes. Bertaux in France and Kohli (1981) in Germany have been active in forming networks to facilitate the collaboration amongst researchers interested in a life-history or biographical methodology. This methodology widens and deepens the research on social, class and individual levels. It is a way of approaching the mosaic that is human reality. Bertaux points out the limitations of pure quantitative paradigms in describing a society and the danger of disregarding the context. Standardized tools give standardized pictures of the multitudes of processes that create a life process. "If given a chance to talk freely, people appear to know a lot about what is going on, a lot more, sometimes, than sociologists" (Bertaux, 1981 p 38) He invites more flexible methods and combinations to supplement and cover up the limitations in the approach of deciphering the society. He argues that the flexibility is an important aspect of the qualitative life-history method. It is a combination
of exploring and questioning, a dialogue between the informant and the researcher. The information given is determined by the informant’s view of life, not by the researcher.

Bertaux and Bertaux-Wiame (1981) have pointed out that the study of a homogeneous, small-scale organization needs only a few stories to be collected and compared before one reaches ‘saturation’ point. “Life stories taken from the same set of socio cultural relations support each other and make up, all together, a strong body of evidence.” (Bertaux, 1981 p 187). Likewise Huotelin & Kauppila (1994) also argue that it is easy to understand why people of the same generation tend to give situations and events similar meaning, as they have the same historical location in the same social process. This may also be one of the explanations why there are many similarities in the ten life histories below in the study.

In their handbook on Qualitative Research for Education, Bogdan and Biklen (1982) refer to the life-history method as an important approach to show social change. The researcher conducts extensive interviews with one person in order to collect ‘a first-person narrative’, which is usual as a vehicle for understanding aspects of human behaviour or institutions. Life careers may be constructed, emphasizing crucial events and significant others in shaping subjects’ definitions of self and their perspectives on life. Data on a particular period in the person’s life or on a particular topic by a specific sequence of a person’s life can be focused. “The feasibility of a life-history case study is mostly determined by the nature of the potential subject. Is the person articulate and does he/she have a good memory?” (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982 p 61).

Dex (1991) argues that the life history method has helped to break down the barrier between quantitative and qualitative research, and she emphasizes the need for a combination to achieve an improved picture of the society on both micro and macro levels.

Middleton (1988,1993) has used the life history method in New Zealand in women’s research where she finds it particularly applicable. She has found that the method also functions as an awareness-agent and is therefore useful within action research. The very interviewing of the women gives them a sense of security and dignity. It has an affirming and fortifying effect. It is the psychological effect of the factual demonstration of interest in a person, that gives strength. Geiger (1986) also points to the life-history research as a feminist method for the broader and deeper understanding of women’s consciousness, both historically and in the present.
The Canadian researcher, Warren, who in 1980 introduced the life-history approach to the Department of Education at Umeå, shows in her research the advantage of the methods to obtain insight of perspectives normally not obtained through surveys and standardized interview techniques. According to Warren "autobiographies, questionnaires, interviews, diaries, letters and expressive and projective documents might all be used to construct a life history". She says that: ... "life histories may best be obtained by asking people to write and to structure their own life histories, giving them but minimal directions as to what to include. Such an approach would seem to have the best chance of allowing the respondent to give the perspective of the important dimensions of his or her life rather than to respond to dimensions which the researcher has decided a priori are or should be important." (Warren 1980 p 7) She also referred to Denzin's (1978) view that life history should be ideally a blending of three viewpoints: the view of the subject, of those who know or observe the subject and of the researcher or analyst.

Our WEED-group in Umeå found the life-history approach useful in our attempts to focus on the complex interplay of education, work and homework in women's lives. The approach seemed to be a valuable tool in combining information at a societal level with information at an individual level. The life-line methodology, which had been developed by Elgqvist-Saltzman in her studies on Swedish women in higher education became one of the tools in the WEED-project and was used in some studies (Elgqvist-Saltzman, et al. 1985). In this methodology the life-history is included as the last step in a three step methodology including educational statistics, questionnaires, in which a life-line question is a part and finally life-stories collected through interviews or written life-stories. This methodology has also been used in a Nordic network studying women and men in higher education. (Bjerén and Elgqvist-Saltzman, 1994.)

One task of adult education researchers is, among other things, to examine how different educational programmes respond to the developmental goals of a population. The social reality of the lower strata tends to be unknown and neglected by those formulating the curricula and it is therefore of the utmost importance that these strata are given a voice. Härnsten (1994) has studied the life-history or life-span of some cleaning women in the form of "research circles". The study aimed at explaining the women’s environment and situation seen from their own perspectives and as close as possible catch their views, concepts and categories of what is important, instead of the usual
academic (male) traditional categories. Some other Swedish researchers, Skantze (1983) and Bron-Wojciechowska (1988) have discussed the usefulness of the methodology in educational research. Bron has found it useful in research on women and men in higher education and among them, Skantze has pointed out the advantage of the approach to study human beings in their psychological, social, historical and cultural contexts during the whole life span.

The method has also proved useful when the ambition is to get the views of those whose views of reality are less often heard or listened to. The Swedish social scientists Bernler and Bjerkman (1990) consider the biography as a method of visualizing the individual and giving him/her legitimate dignity. They state that one of the intentions of the social biography must be to give a voice to those who have no opportunity to express themselves. They emphasize the necessity of a sensitive ear and understanding in order to avoid another kind of oppression. Like Middleton they point out that the biography should have an emancipatory function.

In the following chapter I will describe how the approach gives me the opportunity to amalgamate and use knowledge gathered during many years of involvement in development and research work both internationally and nationally. It has functioned as a tool when collecting and analysing data. The life-history in this study is a continuous dialogue in which the women and I produce a text together. It is a mutual product. I capture the woman’s story, her ‘truth’, certainly contextual and only partial, but I do not question her story as she is the authority (cf. Middleton, 1993, p. 68).
CHAPTER 5

An empirical approach

Difficulties and obstacles

When conducting studies or initiating development works in rural Bangladesh as a foreigner, and a woman, there are many problems and difficulties to consider and face and many questions to raise. How to approach the villagers? How to introduce yourself and explain your presence in the village? How will people receive you? How do they interpret your body language, your stumbling trials to speak their language, etc., etc.? How do you behave as a researcher amongst the people you are studying? How do you report the observations and results in a comprehensible way? Is it ever possible to write an exact and ‘true’ research report from a study in a rural setting and be fair to the people involved?

These are problems all anthropologists and qualitative social researchers meet when they go to the particular setting under study. In their Handbook on Qualitative Research for Education, Bogdan and Biklen (1982) emphasize the issues involved in gaining access to the field as one of the first problems to face.

In order to start processes of change leading to an improved quality of life for the poorest strata in a village, it is very important for the researcher to be ‘en rapport’ with the population with whom he/she works. Without the support of the locals, both rich and poor, a development project will fail, because the prerequisite for dialogue is absent. In our work at Shantipur village much time and patience were spent in meetings, discussions, explanations, etc., trying to build up relations with the villa-
gers; to open up opportunities for opinions, ideas, support and willingness to contribute. It took time, but I knew that I was on the right way when the women started to call me didi instead of mem-shahib.

In order to understand the villagers and be understood by them we stayed quite some time in the village, before any activities were started, socializing with people. The ‘roof discussions’ mentioned earlier in the letters home, was one of the methods used at the initial stage.

The roof discussions became frequent evening events and included the male employees during the first years of the project in the village. The topics discussed were, among others, the conditions and needs of development, what was meant by help for self-help, the different ways of measuring material and mental change respectively, etc. The dialogue was mutually constructive and fruitful and we learnt a lot about village life and attitudes. It provided us with some of the information we needed to be able to initiate the project activities.

Apart from its information aspects the dialogue is also a useful tool or method for creating an atmosphere of mutual trust and confidence in a strange and unfamiliar environment. Without the trust and confidence of the people concerned, no sustainable development and research work can be successful. Very often the villagers’ viewpoints and attitudes on certain questions were mirrored through the dialogue with the project employees. We could send out a message or a question one evening and get the answer back the next evening.

An initial obstacle was the unsatisfactory knowledge about the population, the environment and culture. Linguistically the topical message must be translated into the appropriate local tongue with its special terminology and the relevant logic. If you use the wrong tongue and/or approach your message will not be accepted and reach the target group. Understanding the language and social behaviour of a culture, in order to participate, is a sine qua non for the non formal educational process among illiterate people.\textsuperscript{20, 21}

A language course in Bengali (Bangla) was included in my theoretical and practical preparations before the start of my journey to Bangladesh. Language training was a continuous action of improvements and thereby of insight into the local culture. In the village in Bangladesh the children were the most eager teachers.

The study became a process over time; a longitudinal investigation for almost two decades. This fact, implies certain difficulties and obstacles, both methodologically and practically. Certain periods I have spent in the research area and been able to follow the process closely;
other times I have been far away and only been able to study the change process from a distance. The insight that not only our ‘objects’ are changing but also we ourselves, makes us aware of the difficulty to keep a stringent approach in the research work. Not only the ageing as such changes perspectives, but also general infrastructural conditions in the village change, a shift of generations and attitudes is a continuous process to consider.

To work in a Muslim culture involves specific problems for a non-Muslim, especially for a female researcher. It is necessary to know the woman’s role according to the local interpretation of the Koran. This kind of village life cannot be learnt by reading; you have to live there for quite some time (See also Islam, 1982).

The roles as a researcher and development worker, a foreigner and a white woman, sometimes caused problems due to suspicion from the villagers and the women concerned and due to unrecognized biases of my own.

Set of roles

In the following I will further elaborate one of the major constraints faced as a foreign, female researcher living and working at village level. During the periods I spent in Shantipur village I had several roles, e.g., as woman, stranger, foreigner, researcher, educator, project administrator, fellow human-being. In Figure 5 I have tried to summarize the positive and negative effects of these roles.

Some of the roles are changeable and as a researcher you can be quite flexible in terms of influencing events, while other roles are constant and you can do nothing to change them. As an action researcher I do not deny my influential role in the course of events and do not assume neutrality. The objectives of my being in the village were to initiate rural development, i.e., changes to improve living conditions for the poorest strata of the village population.

I could not change the fact that I am a woman, mohila, nor that I was a stranger, foreigner, bideshi, in the village and that the colour of my skin is white.

These facts put me in a certain position of both good and bad; positive and negative. On the positive side I had access to certain preserves, where my husband for example was excluded. As a woman I understood the women differently from how a man would. There were also certain
drawbacks in this unchangeable role, viz., my exclusion from the male world, where all important matters are discussed and decided. As Bangladeshi society is very male dominated, it takes some time before information, decisions, etc. taken by the men, percolate down to the world of the women. A great advantage in my situation was, of course,

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Roles</th>
<th>Effects</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Constant</strong></td>
<td><strong>Changeable</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>woman 'mohila'</td>
<td>NA (not applicable)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>foreigner 'bideshi'</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NA</td>
<td>educator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NA</td>
<td>project administrator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fellow-being</td>
<td>fellow-being researcher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
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</table>

*Figure 3: Set of Roles.*
that I could obtain information on decisions from my husband earlier than the village women. In order to get a whole picture of a society, it is convenient to work as a couple. You get different information at different times depending on whether you are male or female.

As a stranger and a foreigner, *bideshi*, I was able to break certain rules, with few, if any, negative effects. I could not be banished like the village women if I broke a rule, but was excused as somebody who did not know better. Here there is need of a balance, and the reaction to breach of the rules varies. If, for instance, you break religious or serious ethical rules you would not be able to work in the area. In such a case the women would be forbidden to talk to you. In contrast to the situation of a poor village woman, I did not have to wait at the railway station until all the men had bought tickets, before I was allowed to approach the counter. I could address a question to an unknown man, without the risk that I would be considered a ‘bad woman’. I could even go to the village market, although I did not, as I would not have got anything positive out of it. Going to the market would have been tolerated but not considered proper behaviour. In order to start a process leading to change, somebody has to break the old procedures. I could do it as a *bideshi*, while a poor village woman would not have been able to do it without encouragement and a lot of moral support. I could not have given them the support they needed if I had behaved in an improper way as a woman.

A negative effect of being a white stranger was, of course, the fact that I was always observed. And here I mean *always!* I was observed not only within the project premises, but also when moving around in the village or privately at home. As a foreigner you are visible all the time and consequently exercising an influence whether you want to or not. In public I had to perform ‘perfectly’. Most of the time I was looked upon as a curiosity, an object and as my husband’s wife (read: belonging), not as an individual, a human being with my own thoughts, intellect and ideas. In my presence people, i.e., men, could ask my husband: “How does she like Bangladesh?” This was not being rude, but to show respect to my husband by not addressing themselves directly to me in his presence and at the same time being polite both to him and to me. However, this can be quite trying and you must have your own identity to be able to cope with it and keep smiling. To be observed and judged all the time, to show exemplary conduct in all situations, may be an arduous task, but is quite crucial.
As a researcher and educator and at the same time the Projects Administrator I could, and certainly did, initiate various educational and training programmes, some of which were controversial at the time. The Women’s Jute Handicraft Co-operative is only one of them. Other projects worth mentioning are the Clerical Vocational Training School (See Chapter 3) for students with a minimum of 10 years school education, where I insisted that the training should be open to girls as well. There were lots of discussions and arguments both for and against it, but finally the school was opened by the Deputy Commissioner (DC) as a mixed school. The Project School which recruited children only from the very poorest stratum in the village, covered, along with the alphabetization, topics like book-keeping, agriculture, hygiene, drawing, knowledge and training about cooperatives, and sport and games where you could not win unless you co-operated with your fellow school mates. Society and the authorities, i.e., the Officers at the Thana, Sub-Divisional and District levels acknowledged me as a highly educated professional woman. Thanks to this status I had access to various kinds of information and support from the local elite. Some of the religious, conservative social leaders were not happy, but they could not find anything in my appearance and behaviour to reproach me for.

As an educator I served as a model to be referred to, when various subjects in the women’s training were discussed. I was not allowed to make obvious mistakes unless I wanted to jeopardize the situation for the women in the co-operative and return them to a life as beggars and oppressed, obedient servants of the wealthier farmers. I was expected to ‘know’ everything and to have a solution to every problem. This is a negative factor as you are left completely alone, and there were moments when I feared that I had started a process that could turn out to be difficult to handle in a constructive way. It was difficult to know whether the information I received was biased in order to favour somebody, who wanted to be seen to be close to the bideshi to gain political status and power. Or, whether it was a plot to trap me, so that the forces, that were opposed to the idea of uplifting the poor women and giving them a status in society, could get something substantial to point at, when they claimed that “the foreigners were destroying the society and misleading the poor”. It was difficult to persevere, when you were pressed by all the poverty and misery around you, and to stick to the device of ‘help for self-help’, in trying to fight the begging mentality, which was supported by those who wanted to do good by giving alms to the poor. You had to find a balance in a difficult situation (Cf. also Lissner’s discussion, 1977).
In 1974 the floods caused starvation and disease all over the country and without losing ground one had to be a fellow human-being and show concern in a precarious situation.

As regards qualitative research you have to consider the twofold role of being close and at the same time being detached. It may seem to be a contradiction. Bogdan & Biklen (1982) have thoroughly discussed the role of the researcher in qualitative research, suggesting, i.a., detailed reflections on own subjectivity and various forms of guard against own biases. They also recommend to be two field researchers to discuss and check each other’s observations. I would also emphasize the advantage in being two, or rather a married couple, in this kind of research in a village in Bangladesh, along with the systematic observation of oneself.

In the Bangladeshi culture, in the rural areas, as a foreigner, you are always an outsider, you will never be one of them. My non-changeable roles will automatically hinder me from getting too close to the women and thereby obscuring my attitude as a researcher. Certainly there may be problems in keeping the ‘objectivity’, but my various kinds of ‘book-keeping’ on all activities make the risks more controllable and possible to monitor. The mutual trust is, however, nothing you can bargain about in this kind of qualitative research.

Data collection for the life-histories

The years indicated in Figure 4 below are the years when I have visited or stayed in the village. The years not mentioned in Figure 6 are the years when I have received data through other means than visiting the project myself.

The data on the project development process were collected continuously through correspondence, reports, features etc. Various methods have been used and quantitative as well as qualitative data were collected over time. The socio-economic survey implemented in 1974 was mainly quantitative and data obtained formed the base for all activities started. (Results presented in chapter 3).

The criticalincident method, developed by Flanagan in the 1940s and 1950s (Andersson & Nilsson, 1966) was helpful in structuring my experiences in the development process. In this study the method has been to great help in structuring my notes about the women’s progress.
During 1974-75 when the cooperative was started and I was personally engaged in the development of the training of the women in handicrafts, literacy and other life skills, I kept a diary in which I noted different kinds of information about each of them and about the changes that occurred. The changes I observed were multi-dimensional, covering transitions in technical skills as well as in personal appearances, changes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Activities</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1974</td>
<td>socio-economic survey, start of cooperative, time-studies, participant observation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1975</td>
<td>development education, training, participant observation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1977</td>
<td>meeting in Dhaka, thematic interviews ar Shantipur</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1980-83</td>
<td>thematic in-depth interviews, participant observation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1984</td>
<td>compiling life-histories follow-ups, programme evaluation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1986</td>
<td>meetings, discussions, follow-ups, date review</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1989-91</td>
<td>meetings, discussions, follow-ups, future options, check-ups on data evaluation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 4: Basic information flow on the process of data collection.
from being shy and introvert to becoming open and extrovert or vice versa. The women told me about themselves and about others, both privately and in the group. To catch their original expressions I noted the information in an ‘adapted’ short-hand, consisting of a mixed onomatopoetic Bengali-English-Swedish vocabulary. Using this method I could afterwards, when transcribing from the shorthand, reconstruct, translate and decipher what was actually said. The transcribing as such is also a form of analysis, from the oral to the written, from talk to text.

Some of our preliminary discussions in 1974-75 were recorded and I later transcribed them. However, a tape-recorder was not an appropriate device in this situation. It was unknown and disturbed the spontaneous talks in the group. A tape does not catch the non-verbal communication, how things are said, things that are **not** said aloud, the body language, hesitations in expressions, etc. A conversation between the women should be seen and heard. I therefore stuck to paper and pencil, my permanent companions, which I found the most appropriate ones. My habit since childhood of keeping a diary helps, of course, in this kind of documentation. It served also the purpose of making the women relaxed and unaware of being observed and not being disturbed by seeing me writing.

In the period 1976-80 I received continuous information about the group and its progress through correspondence by letter and reports from both Bangladeshi and Swedish programme representatives at the project and also from the home office in Sweden. The official reports home were of course more brief but personal follow-up letters gave details. Sometimes short greetings from the women were included, to show their ability to read and write. Some events gave rise to a more vivid correspondence than others. In 1977 when I was in Dhaka for a short time I met some of the women from the cooperative at the office of the Jute Works and got a summary of the latest events at the cooperative. A visit to the project at Shantipur was also paid.

During 1981-83 I was working for another project in the southern part of the country and had the opportunity to visit the Jute Cooperative every second month for one week each time, i.e., 6-7 times per year. Some times I stayed longer than seven days. In this period I undertook in-depth thematic interviews with each of them. In the interviews in dialogue form I asked them to summarize the previous ten years since we first met. Certain, on beforehand selected themes and variables, or a check-list, (Nilsen, 1994) were to be covered.22 Patton (1980, 1987) has called this form of data collecting “the informal conversational interview”
in which the time aspect is important. The researcher stay at the site for a period and this gives an opportunity to be flexible in gathering data, bringing up questions when suitable, in the right situation and at the right moment and to complete the missing data at another opportunity. The condition of interviewing is favourable when the time aspect is open, and you can be flexible and catch the opportunities both regarding themes and forms, when new ideas arise unexpectedly during a process. Whyte (1991) names it ‘creative surprise’. This may end up in a fairly holistic picture of the relevant situation under study with all kinds of information integrated.

The relationship between me and the women is a part of the research process and I would like to emphasize the trust that developed between them and me. Without this mutual trust it would have been quite difficult, not to say impossible, to implement this kind of research. It is a key factor I venture to say. My various forms for interviews or conversations with the women to get information may also be placed on a sliding scale from object-subject to subject-subject relations.

There is a discussion in qualitative research concerning various techniques. In her interviewing of women Oakley (1982) found the need to settle the myth on pure research and stop mystifying the researcher and the objects of research. She argues that it is preferable to admit the personal engagement and see it as an asset and condition to reach desirable goals regarding mutual trust. She found it important to minimize the gap between the interviewer and interviewees. The interview should be regarded as a process of collaboration, and seen as a means of generating theory collectively. The ‘non-hierarchic’ interview as a possible condition advocated by Oakley, has been debated. In Sweden Davies & Esseveld (1989) have thoroughly discussed the forms of qualitative interviewing and the ‘solidary’ interview. I prefer the ‘solidary’ interview as a concept for my form of continuous thematic conversations over a long period of time, where the interviewer is an active listener. Middleton (1988, 1993), advocates the collaboration between the researcher and the women interviewed. She emphasizes the relationship between the researcher and the researched as important.

When I undertook the in-depth interviews with the women I was able to refresh their memory of what they had said and thought in 1974-75 with the support of my diary notes and photographs and they were able to correct my impressions and certain misunderstandings from that period. It was a matter of mutual give and take. The women did not always consider the thematic, in-depth interviews as ‘being interviewed’, and if
some of them did, they did not mind. They knew that I followed the
development process of the cooperative and their involvement,
continuously, and they were interested and had agreed to be part of it.
This may also be expressed as topics of different relevance to interviewer
and interviewee. What may be regarded as irrelevant, may later on, when
analysed, turn out to be a qualified piece of information. My experiences
support the open approach when interviewing, i.e., to be flexible and
with a sensitive ear.

Dex (1991) refers to certain ‘key’ events in life that are remembered
with a reasonable degree of accuracy. My notes from the first years of
their activity functioned as a source of ‘reminders’ of events. Also my
frequent returns to the village and my presence at the co-operative per
se certainly served as ‘reminders’. I think it is important to recognize
the phenomenon regarding events which happen in stimuli-poor
environments. Such events have an immeasurable impact and the people
concerned may recapitulate the events quite accurately. I realized this
when listening to the women. A sharpening of memory, an increased
awareness and perception can be interpreted as a compensation for
illiteracy. 23

To my mind we cannot judge changes in the life course until we have
a ‘total’ picture, i.e., everyday events should also be covered and the
critical incidents or events might serve as a ‘skeleton’. Dex asks whether
the perspectives of one’s past change systematically over time referring
to specific events and critical incidents, interchanging with the
environment and cultural norms. She states that life-history data are
important in showing the time factor which is often neglected in studies
of sociological processes. To understand what is happening today you
need data about yesterday and the course of time. This is certainly re­
levant when doing longitudinal research. To perceive the process of change
in a society, changes have to occur. Otherwise the process can not be
seen or measured (Cf. Lewin, 1948).

Among my reflections after the in-depth interviews I did with the
women was the idea that the human being needs a time perspective in
order to be able to identify a phenomenon and describe events verbally.
The thought is abstract but it may lead to concrete expressions. The
subconscious has no language and is often disregarded. Not until the
pictures, knowledge, insights etc. reach the conscious mind are they
verbalized. It is impossible to write down non-verbalized insights on
paper and it takes time and patience to stand at the threshold of one’s
subconscious and draw out information which is not yet verbalized.
My purpose was to capture the women’s interpretation of their lives. The in-depth interview was a kind of dialogue, which enriched both parties. The most interesting was to find out their view on important events in their lives and society (Cf. Middleton, 1993). To them the stories became a structuring of their lives that had never been straightened out before. They were quite fascinated to see their own story noted down on paper, verbatim. To them it was only boro lok, important people, who could express themselves in written form (Cf. Forsslund et al., 1971). Clinchy (1989) has discussed the type of conversation among women that is more of a dialogue with an empathized approach and opposed to the male form of arguments. This reminds me of Martin’s idea of the talk as “a good conversation is neither a fight or a contest. Circular in form, cooperative in manner and constructive in intent, it is an interchange of ideas by those who see themselves not as adversaries but as human beings come together to talk and listen and learn from one another” (1985, p 10).

My approach may also be compared to Clinchey’s discussion on ‘separate knowing’, which means the detached knowledge trying to be objective, analytical, academic. “The separate knower keeps her distance from the object she is trying to analyze. She takes an impersonal stance” (1989, p 649). This to ensure that her judgements are unbiased. Separate knowing is powerful and important, but not the only way of knowing. As a contrast she puts the ‘connected knowledge’, which uses the empathizing approach, trying to understand and believe in the perceptions of the informants. ‘Connected knowing’ is to have an imaginative attachment and to try to look from another person’s point of view. “The voice of separate knowing is argument; the voice of connected knowing is a narrative voice” (p 652). As a researcher one has to switch between these two positions and still keep one’s perspective.

Compiling of data

The process of reporting of this thesis has been long and laborious. The systematic documentation as such was collected continuously from the very start of the journey in various forms, providing various kinds of data. The compilation of the histories was a collaboration between me and the women concerned and the final history has been scrutinized by each of them and approved. This serves as a kind of validation.
The first step before writing the life-histories was to compile and collate all data collected about each woman and to concentrate on one of them at a time. The second step was to isolate myself totally from the outside world and try to enter into the environment of the village life while reading the information about the woman, whose story I was going to compile and write. I played typical Bengali music, put the picture of the particular woman in front of me and tried to recall her way of speaking and behaving. I tried also to enter into her situation. This process can be compared to the work of an actor taking on a new role and performing as that person. The third step was the writing itself. Sometimes, after having made these preparations, I felt so inspired that it was as if the pencil was writing of its own accord. This was, of course, not always the case which I think had to do with the personalities of the women. Some of them were very talkative and open while others were not. Another detail to recognize is the fact that over time you develop a closer relationship with some people than with others which results in different quality and quantity of information.

One difficulty has been the translation from Bengali to English as neither is my mother tongue and I want the life-histories to reflect the women's personalities. Sometimes I understand what they mean in Bengali, but as I have no concept of it in Swedish it is difficult to translate it into English! Language is one of the most important tools in development work. The more one understands of a language, culture, sub-culture, the more one understands of its symbols and it cannot be emphasized enough how much is lost in each translation; from oral to written, from one language to another. A lot of the culture and identity is expressed through the language, spoken and written. Especially when dealing with illiterate people one perceives how much is taken for granted and how easy it is to misunderstand. Based on my own bilingual childhood I have a strong feeling for this important and often neglected factor among people.
CHAPTER 6

The case in points: the women's jute cooperative

The Organization of the jute works in Dhaka

The survey of the village of Shantipur indicated that many young women had been widowed during the war of liberation. Many were left with children, siblings and parents to care for and needed to find a source of income. The survey asked questions about how best to improve living conditions. The answers given by some of the better off respondents who had the energy to think beyond today were the provision of job opportunities, some industry and work for women.

Due to the limited economic resources and the overwhelmingly chaotic situation we found in the country, the priorities and choices of activities for a rural development programme had to be made with care and realism. The situation of the young women abandoned and widows was striking and had to be taken into consideration.

One of the important criteria to reflect on was the choice of income generating or supplementing activity which would suit the given target group, i.e., the lowest stratum of the village society. The matters to consider were the craft traditions in the area, the supply and availability of raw materials, market demands and opportunities for sale, communication networks, etc. Discussions with people at the local government level and NGOs acquainted with these matters opened up the contact with the Jute Works in Dhaka. Originally the organization was run by the Sisters of the Holy Cross, who started giving training in jute handicrafts as well as cooperative training in the late 1960s to poor women at the Jagaroni Women's Cooperative Training Centre in Dhaka, where women from all over the country could come for a couple of
months. As the Jute Works exporting marketing cooperative, it was organized and expanded in 1973 by the Christian Organization for Relief and Rehabilitation (CORR) with funding from Caritas, and some co-operation from the MCC and Oxfam. As a non-profit organization its objectives were to support underprivileged rural women with some home-based supplementary income generating activity and its motto was “to provide employment among the marginalised through Trade not Aid”.24

The idea was that when a trained woman came home from the Jagaroni Training Centre she was to start a women’s cooperative (Mohila Samity) in her village, train the women’s group herself and when established, get orders from the Jute Works in Dhaka for different items to be produced and then retail them through the Jute works. The members were to save some of the income as an expenses account which could also give access to individual loans.25

The choice of jute as the raw material is an obvious one as jute is cultivated in most parts of the country and is the chief export product. The first and easiest jute item to be trained to make was table mats. After they had gained some skill in this came the sikas, a traditional jute net used for hanging different kinds of pots and vessels in the kitchen as a protection from rats, well known traditional item easily sold on the local market as well as for export. For the export market new items and designs were developed such as bags, mats and wall hangings. The number of women’s co-operatives and products increased over the years. The Jute Works was, however, aware of the growing competition from other exporting countries, e.g., the Philippines, Thailand, Sri Lanka, and also anticipated market saturation. At an early stage of the programme began the planning for the diversification of income earning sources to reduce dependence on jute handicrafts only.

In addition to training in earning skills the aim of the Jute Works has also been to provide non formal training to develop humanistic skills, i.e., to enhance the women’s social cohesion, and critical awareness, as well as to increase their productivity and income (CORR - The Jute Works Report, 1982). The Jute Works believes that economic gain is not an end in itself but a means to achieve the goals of a collective development of the producers, to become their own decision makers, thus providing steps towards realizing women’s rights. The ambitions of the Jute Works seem to be somewhat ambiguous here as they want to raise the self-respect of the women concerned through democratic cooperative and skills training, while at the same time conserving their role in the family and the community. As an example one could mention
the Jute Works' policy of keeping down the payment for jute items in order to keep the women's income below that of their husbands so as not to create domestic conflicts. The need for extended training activities grew over the years, however, and the Jute Works sent their staff on training available within the country in various fields like “Staff Management”, “Export, Marketing and Financing” and “Functional Education Teachers’ Training” at the BRAC Training Centre.

The training environment at the Jute Works’ Training Centre along with the interaction between the rural women from all parts of the country had a striking impact on the trainees. This in turn had an impact on the women in the trainees’ home village co-operatives. Evidence of this can be found in the life histories in Chapter 7.

As the Jute Works in Dhaka had decided that these jute co-operatives should be spread all over the country there was a limit to how many women’s groups could be recruited in each district. The agreement regarding our village was to start with one group of 10 women and later extend it to approximately 50 women. This expansion was dependent on the quality of their products and the handling of orders and deliveries to the Jute Works.

Initial recruitment

Consequently, our initial position as project leaders in the village was to recruit 10 illiterate, young women to be trained in jute handicrafts and eventually to become self-reliant cooperative members. From the data of the socio-economic baseline survey it was quite easy to identify families which met the recruitment criteria:

- The lowest stratum families were those who were landless or had only up to one bigha of land. This criterion gave us 80 eligible households out of 150.
- Young women between the ages of 15 and 25, i.e., over school age; old enough to marry, with hands not too worn out to learn a handicraft which demands a certain manual dexterity.
- War widows or abandoned women left with a family to care for.
- Illiterate, either because of total lack of education or through inability to maintain basic reading and writing skills gained during a couple of years of primary education.
These were the main recruitment criteria. In addition to all this, of course, there was the pronounced desire to change the women’s situation by their own efforts.

The selection

The choice of the first two women to be sent to Dhaka for the handicraft training was certainly the crucial point in the selection process. This link was extremely important as a mistake could have been fatal. They would be the first women to break the pattern and withstand the pressure from village society and particularly from its social leaders. They would function as instructors for the members of the cooperative which was to be established. These two women needed extraordinary mental calibre and determination to guide the project to success in the village. Joining the project was for them ‘the point of no return’.

Who were they then? Who would be able to break the rules?

The first to be selected was Fatima; a young woman who fulfilled the recruitment criteria and whose family was noted already at the time of the survey as one of the most deserving cases. She lived with her mother and younger sister in a small hut built of twigs and grass, balanced on the edge of a ditch and a field. They earned their living by working at richer families’ houses all day and were remunerated in kind (chapati). Fatima possessed one worn-out old sari, which was almost transparent, but carefully draped for its purpose. So it was a poor, badly clothed and slightly undernourished girl we met on the village path the day we put to her the suggestion that she should go to Dhaka for the jute handicrafts training course. On that first occasion she immediately responded positively in her then rather reserved and laconic way by saying ami jabo (I’ll go)! She seemed to be very determined but as this was a crucial and decisive step both for her and her family and for the feasibility of the planned project, the proposal was repeated several times during the following months and its consequences thoroughly discussed. At that time I didn’t know what kind of character I was dealing with, I just had a vague feeling that she was the right person. She was informed that she
could withdraw from the project and be recruited later on. Her decision was, however, firm and the subsequent discussions served to reinforce it. See further her own version in Chapter 7!

The second woman to qualify for selection was Rani from the Hindu part of the village. She was very eager to go and seemed to be the right type. Unfortunately she became pregnant some months before the two women were to begin their training in Dhaka which prevented her departure, but she was guaranteed a membership of the jute cooperative from the start. See her story in Chapter 7!

This situation made it necessary to find an alternative candidate and there was not much time left before they had to be installed in Dhaka.

Shahanara had been considered earlier but she gave an impression of being very fragile. She had a small son to care for and she could not take a child with her. She was married but her husband was frequently absent looking for work in other parts of the country. She lived with her parents-in-law, in a bari of 10 members to provide for from about one bigha of land. Her mother-in-law assured us that she would take care of the child and she supported Shahanara and persuaded her to go. Most probably this support helped Shahanara to overcome her hesitation. Their first trip to Dhaka and the training is told by herself in her story, Chapter 7!

Barriers

The barriers to be overcome were at several levels. The fact that two young women from the lowest stratum of the village had the chance of professional training and thereafter a ‘well’ paid job was looked upon with disapproval by the better off villagers. They regarded these people as serfs. Even the richest and most powerful man in the village took the trouble to go personally to the women’s houses the night before their departure to forbid them to leave their homes. The traditional purdah system was referred to and the immediate sexual degradation of the women was anticipated, thereby bringing disgrace on their families and seclusion and banishment as a consequence. Temporary ostracism is a common form of punishment, which means that the victim is excluded from all activities in the village, viz., job opportunities, access to clean drinking water, market facilities and participation in religious and social life. The decision to send two young, poor village women to Dhaka was certainly discussed in the *samaj* (village leader’s group). The often used concept of *hingsha* (envy) as an explanation certainly hang around
and the air was heavily charged!

This event did indeed concern every villager as some kind of change was obviously going to take place. To expose oneself to change can be a risk. Who is incurring the risks? Is it an opportunity or a challenge? The choice of word might probably depend on the person and the context. Fatima told me many times that she had nothing to lose and the choice was therefore simple. Her self-confidence was somewhat paradoxical. Was it out of desperation or because of some unrealized or dormant talent?

Shahanara was the self-effacing type who would go through hell if that would rescue her family. She was torn between her feeling of responsibility and lack of trust in herself.

The chaotic period after the liberation war in 1971 and the hardships caused by the flood and famine of the year in question (1974) contributed to the breakdown of the traditional rules for people from the lowest social stratum. The women were also ‘protected’ by the presence of the foreign project and the conceivable contributions it could make to the village. There are pros and cons in coming as a foreigner, an outsider and a newcomer into an established system and trying to change it or break some of its rules and routines. Depending on the degree of tolerance you may be excused as being ignorant and therefore be corrected. One of the social leaders of the village visited even our house and talked casually about the ‘good old days’, when the British always approached his family regarding issues like choice of activities, employment, etc.. This was his way of criticising our method of establishing relationships in his village and an attempt to correct our ‘wrong’ behaviour in sending the women to Dhaka without his consent and approval.

To take these two young women away from their traditional rural society to the capital for training in professional skills was a kind of revolution. Activities ‘at the margin’ are, however, less likely to be opposed by established interests as long as they are not regarded as a threat. Our challenge was obviously to balance on the edge of being regarded as a threat or not.

The Women at the training centre in Dhaka

For two months Fatima and Shahanara stayed at the Jute Works’ training centre. They were trained in jute handicrafts and all matters involved. There was no problem regarding their motivation or ability to learn the
skills, rather the opposite. The American teacher and adviser on craftsmanship, design and quality, praised their willingness to learn and their innate talent. She confirmed the reports of other instructors that Fatima was the most artistically talented trainee they had seen so far. Her self-confidence grew visibly during this period.

Meeting with women from other parts of the country, being trained together in different groups, taking part in daily discussions and seeing both Bangladeshis and foreigners buying jute items from the Centre’s shop, were all factors in the broadening of their perspectives. From conversations with the women later during my time at the project, when the jute cooperative was being developed, I realized the great importance of the training period. The influence of the environment and the atmosphere carried the women through their first phase of personal and social change. The door was slightly opened and they had caught a glimpse of a different reality. The two women I brought back to the village to start a jute cooperative for the poorest women had been initiated into their new life.

The Role as instructors

Fatima and Shahanara were now instructors and responsible for the handicraft training of eight more women recruited for the cooperative. According to the initial plans the handicrafts and cooperative training was to take place on the premises of the project during those first 5-6 months until the cooperative was established and production was running smoothly. Thereafter the cooperative members were to work at home. In fact the training period and the start-up of production were managed much faster than expected and the women’s faces were beaming with pride the day they got their first order delivered and accepted in total by the Jute Works. The cooperative members wanted, however, to stay on at the project’s premises and extended management training was developed.

Fatima and Shahanara organized the skills training in the same way as they had been taught themselves. They started with plaiting the jute from which the trainees learnt how to handle and treat the material. The quality of the plaiting process is of vital importance for the end product, such as a sika or a mat. To emphasize the importance of quality in the manufacture of the products the process was divided into stages, and the time taken to complete each of the stages was measured. This informa-
tion was then available for monitoring the quality of the production and to assist the women in estimating the time needed to complete orders and deliver the goods within the agreed time. A cooperative which delivered high quality goods on time gained a high reputation and that was necessary, as the competition for orders was strong among the cooperatives.

During this first phase of pure skills training, in plaiting and making the different jute items, the women often came to me and to ask whether their product was acceptable or not. Referring to the sample from the Jute Works which they were supposed to copy in detail I returned their question and asked for their judgement. Accustomed as they were only to obeying orders, and never having their own opinions, they felt both confused and doubtful about the proper way of dealing with this kind of important judgement.

I also referred them, of course, to the two instructors, Fatima and Shahanara, who were now in charge of the handicraft training. Their new role among the women was difficult and demanding. The change from being a poor village woman with no reference outside the village to being a professionally trained woman with experience of life in the capital is quite a step. The problems of superiority which I expected did, however, not arise.

Together we had many discussions on quality control and management and the women’s self-reliance developed gradually. The aim of ‘help for self-help’ was maintained as a lodestar and tendencies to restrain the women’s initiative and autonomy had to be opposed otherwise they would remain reliant on the organization. There are plenty of examples of development agencies making the beneficiaries of a programme totally passive by implementing everything at the agencies’ own pace, with no demands for active participation and contribution in return. Such an attitude on the part of a development worker creates a dole-minded and petition-minded people.\(^2\)

My role as a development worker was a delicate one to handle. It is very easy to fall into the trap since you are constantly facing the dilemma of the information-imparting, teaching role and the easier and faster role of doing things yourself. Most development workers have experienced this dilemma. It should be pointed out here that the ‘teacher role’ is not always appreciated. As a white well educated person you are always expected to know everything; consequently you should never ask questions or say “I don’t know”. My method of using dialogue was from the outset foreign and suspect.
How to design an appropriate education for the women? My answer was simply to ask the women concerned.

The pure handicraft training was taken care of by Fatima and Shahanara. During the first working hour of the day the women underwent literacy and numeracy training by one project assistant who was also a school teacher. Small slates and chalks were used instead of paper as there was a shortage of paper in the country. Gradually the literacy and numeracy training was extended to cover book-keeping, the calculation of raw material consumption, the cooperative rationale on shared income distribution, administration and other practical matters concerning the cooperative and its management. In this context some of the women realized why it was useful to note down details in order to remember later, when doing book-keeping, for instance. Hence my method of keeping a diary was recognized.

My observations about progress of each woman in technical skills were noted in a diary together with other kinds of information on personal development that I gained from listening, observing and undertaking dialogue. Also sociograms were constructed at monthly intervals. I obtained a varied picture of each of them and these impressions were carefully noted down. I used continuously the non-participatory-observation-listening method and the participatory-observation-dialogue with both structured and non-structured variables. The knowledge that I gained about the interaction patterns of the target group, i.e., the women, via these methods, was a decisive condition for being able to contribute to and assist in the development of the women.

Besides the main topics of cooperative management many new questions arose in their minds. My day-to-day dialogue with the women, i.e., listening, talking, observing, answering questions, asking questions, listening, talking, reflecting, listening, etc., formulated different subjects such as nutrition, hygiene, health care, child care, family planning and civics. The content was not a ready-made package, but was developed through an interchange of views and information between the women and me. I listened to their discussions and got information on what knowledge to fill in and answers to my direct questions supplied supplementary knowledge. When I asked why a pregnant woman had tied a cord around her body above the bosom, the women explained to me that it was to prevent the baby coming out through her mouth. Since you may vomit after eating and pregnancy and nausea are connected,
their conclusion was that the foetus in the stomach could also come out the wrong way. This explanation consequently gave me the information that they needed a simple lesson on the body system. Even worse was to have to prepare lessons on invisible phenomena like amoebas when discussing hygiene and health matters! Worms are easier to explain.

Materials and information for the subjects on request were often gathered from different NGOs, authorities, clinics etc. and adapted to the women’s level. For instance, to be able to answer their questions on family planning I managed to be received by the village dai (midwife), who informed or rather initiated me into some of her secrets about childbirth. She exposed some of her abortion methods and how by examining the eye of the woman she could tell how far the pregnancy was advanced.

The blackboard was frequently used and some booklets were compiled at the project to serve these lessons. Some of the discussions were recorded and afterwards transferred to my diary to enable me to participate and guide the discussions. These sessions opened many doors and the women became more aware of their everyday life. This kind of development education process must emanate from and be approved by the target group itself. It must be developed by the women themselves, not presented ready-made by an outsider, and must be taken step-by-step at their own pace. It is a kind of development spiral in which the reality is modified according to the knowledge achieved and the active reflection - movement of the action must be continuous and lively.

The women were preparing themselves for their new professional life. During the first half year of 1975 the ten women gradually recognized the need to be able to manage everything themselves. Their doubts about their capacity to handle actions like going to Dhaka with their jute items, bargaining about jute prices and other practical matters without at least the company of a man were deep and were discussed daily. Male protection is regarded as the basis of a tolerable life for rural women. When recruited, however, they were made aware that they had to do everything themselves - apnara shob njera korben. It was a condition for their membership of the women’s cooperative. There was to be no male involvement! I think my approach on this was both optimistic and authoritarian. Rozario (1992, p 117-18) discusses the problem of male interference in women’s jute cooperatives and their hampering effects on the process of becoming self-reliant.
There were days when ‘everything’ seemed to be ‘impossible’ for rural women in Bangladesh to carry out and I had some sleepless nights thinking about how to disarm this attitude amongst the women? The ‘mission impossible’ attitude should preferably not rankle.

The dialogue pedagogy seemed to be a fruitful way of finding out the background and stance of the target group. The basic knowledge guides the content of the curriculum and formulates the instruction. The organizational form of the activity and our continuous dialogue seemed to suit the women although it took time for some of them to comprehend this unusual way of proceeding. As their culture is built on a hierarchical system this method was unknown and alien.

Already at this stage of the project I noticed a change in some of them from being passive receivers to becoming active individuals raising questions; i.e., the difference between being given something and expressing demands or claims for something. Learning must be active to be effective.
In this chapter I shall let the women speak for themselves. After each history I have made some comments and reflections in order to clarify concepts that are probably unknown to Westerners and to provide some supplementary details which the women themselves have not been able to supply, i.e., an attempt to transfer their history to our culture. Each history has been approved by the woman concerned. Names are assumed, as was mentioned earlier. The text is translated directly from Bengali into English in the way village women speak. I have avoided a sophisticated, academic English and have on purpose written in a simple way.

1. The history of Shahanara

"I am about 27 years old and come from a neighbouring village. I am the fourth in a family of four sisters and two brothers. My father was a day-labourer. We were very poor but we were a very close family. My sisters, brothers and I visit each other from time to time. I liked my mother very much but she died when I was only 14. I went to school for three years, but when I was nine years old I was given away in marriage to a man who is about ten years older than me. The dowry was 250 taka and I got 50 taka from his family. My husband went to school for six years and he works as a day-labourer in the fields. We have four sons, aged twelve, eight, six and one year; for me two boys would have been enough, but my husband is very conservative in this respect. I have used the pill
occasionally, but we have had many arguments about family planning. The same with schooling. I wanted the children to go to school as that is the only way for them to get a better future, but due to economic problems and the social situation here, the boys have no difficulty in escaping from school. They prefer to play with their friends and sometimes they have to work in the fields as their father needs the money they can earn. He also believes that school is useless for those who work in the fields and he obviously doesn’t think that his sons will have more or different opportunities from those he has had. We have had many quarrels about this but I cannot convince him about my point of view. Without his knowing I try to save some of my income for my sons’ future! I do not tell him exactly how much I earn and give him perhaps two-thirds of it. Luckily I have a very good friend in my mother-in-law who supports me and always backs me up and I have needed that many times during these difficult years. She supported and encouraged me in my decision to join the jute cooperative and to go with Fatima and the project leader to the Jute Works in Dhaka in order to be trained in jute handicrafts. I hesitated and I was afraid of everything, as it was quite inconceivable that I should work outside my home, not to speak of leaving my village and going to the capital! I was all the time very conscious of my exposed position, I felt there was no room for a single mistake. To begin with, the social leaders said very bad things about our going to Dhaka and starting a cooperative here in the village. They threatened us with exclusion from village society. Our economic situation was, however, extremely bad at that time. The adults of our compound were eating only every second or third day and my mother-in-law strongly urged me to go. We did not have many alternatives.

I shall never forget the morning we left for Dhaka and the jute training! Fatima and I had been given two new saris each by the project and we were both feeling uncomfortable about how it would all end.

The project leaders came to fetch us and Fatima’s mother and my mother-in-law accompanied us to the railway station. More and more men and children gathered behind us as we walked to the station and we felt the threats in the air and many bad things were said to us. Fatima and I didn’t say anything to each other, we simply followed our project leaders. But I think both of us were concentrating on the decision we had made and we were now going to carry through. We had to manage, otherwise we were finished. When we came to the market place we had to turn off the road as women are not supposed to appear in that place and we walked along the railway track to the station. When the crowded
train came in and we got on I felt that I was leaving one life and starting out on a new one. It was the first time we had travelled by train and I was terrified. When we came to the nearest town where we changed to a bus, we were given a pair of sandals as our project leader told us that we needed them for travelling and living in Dhaka. She wanted to buy leather sandals, but as we had never worn shoes before our feet didn’t like the hard leather but preferred rubber. I felt very rich walking in sandals and in a new sari, and there were so many new things to look at in the street while we were waiting for the bus. When the bus for Dhaka came we got a seat just behind the driver, where we could see everything that happened around the bus. And there, Fatima and I saw ourselves in a mirror for the very first time! The mirror above the driver! At first our project leader couldn’t understand why we suddenly started to giggle and we couldn’t explain it properly. The trip to Dhaka took a whole day and it was dark when we arrived. When our project leader left us at the Jute Works Training Centre where we were going to stay for two months we felt quite lost.

During the time at the Centre we were taught not only jute handicrafts, but also about the cooperative system, what it is, how it functions, etc. It was very interesting to listen to the other women at the Centre and what they were talking about. They were from villages all over Bangladesh and until then I hadn’t thought of how many different people there are in my country. I didn’t know that there were also Christians and Buddhists as I had only met Muslims and Hindus before.

When we came back home to start the jute cooperative, both Fatima and I were very determined about how to run it. The project recruited eight more women for the cooperative and we started to teach them the handicrafts in the same way as we had been taught ourselves in Dhaka. Some of them learnt very quickly but some were not careful enough. Half of our working time we were trained in reading, writing and arithmetic and later on in book-keeping and the management of the cooperative. We had also lessons on how to prepare food, on clean drinking water, latrines, some common diseases, family planning, etc. Our project leader helped us very much to understand the work and tried to teach us that women are just as good workers as men. I think that it is owing to her inspiration that we are still working in a cooperative. During her time here there was very good order and discipline but our cooperative is lacking in that now and that is not good.
After some years at the project premises, where everybody had worked together, we moved out and decided to work in our homes instead. At first I didn’t like it at all as I was afraid that we should lose the feeling for our cooperative, but at the same time I was tired of all the quarrels among some of the women. The number of members increased to more than 50 women and so many women cannot work together in the same place! We have now split up into smaller groups and we meet only once a month when we decide who shall go to Dhaka with our products. We have been discussing alternative products like *birri* (local cigarette), bamboo work, handlooms, but we lack knowledge about these things as well as sufficient savings to start something new if the Jute Works stops giving us orders. I hope that by delivering well-made products on time they will continue to support us.

My engagement in the cooperative has not brought about any negative changes in my life. Economically and socially my situation has changed quite a lot and I am well aware of these circumstances. I am also very grateful to those who made this possible for me. Before I used to be nobody, today I am an independent woman and nobody jeers at me. We have shown that it is possible even for women like us."

**Comments:**

Shahanara is very aware of the change in her own life over time and she can give a detailed description of some episodes ten years back in time which shows the deep impression they made on her. I know that she and Fatima have discussed this first trip to Dhaka over and over again and what it all meant to them. She often talks about her change from “being nobody to becoming somebody”, as she puts it, for which the project leaders have acted as a catalyst in her opinion. “They brought the light”, she says, wanting the event to appear as almost supernatural. Her praise of the project leaders must also be seen in the light of the famine prevailing at that time (1974). That first step she took by going to Dhaka for training is, however, extremely admirable and shows her inner strength as a person. She wants a cooperative, not personal power.
2. The history of Fatima

"I am about 28 years old and I have one elder and one younger sister who are both married. I live in my parents' house. My father is dead but my mother is still living with us. She has continued to work for other people. We used to have only one small house but now we have two houses. But we don't own the land on which they are built. Before the project came here we did not have clean water, we had to take it from the river and our house was in a very bad state. My mother, my younger sister and I spent our days almost like beggars, going from house to house, asking for work and perhaps something to eat. We were eating different roots and leaves together with the chapati. I was married the first time when I was only 12 years old, but when my husband took another wife I divorced him and continued to go from house to house, working for other people. We had a very hard time and when I got to know about the project and their plans to start a jute cooperative for women I thought that was my chance to survive. I mean, I had nothing to lose. I remember that the project leaders asked me several times over some months if I was prepared to go to Dhaka for training and if I was aware of the risks. I knew that this was the thing I had to do, so I never hesitated, nor did my mother. I have never had cause to regret that step, although there have been some annoyances now and then. At the beginning the villagers didn't like our working outside our homes and they kept disturbing and threatening us as we walked to the project in the mornings for training.

I shall never forget that first morning we left for Dhaka! My mother who accompanied me to the railway station was afraid that she and my younger sister would be excluded from all kinds of work as a punishment for my disobeying the social leader. He came personally to our house the night before I left for Dhaka and forbade me to go. If I were to fail in this project the social leader would put me, my mother and my sister under a ban, and that would mean a future as a beggar. Yes, that day when I went from my village to Dhaka was terribly exciting, both from a negative as well as a positive point of view! During my time in Dhaka I remember being homesick but as I knew that I had to succeed, there was simply no going back.

There is a big difference now in our society. When they hear about our problems with the orders from the Jute Works in Dhaka they express their sorrow and try to suggest other things for us to produce. I don't remind them about their talk 10 years ago, but I feel that we have won
our case! I know that the Jute Works has also got problems with marketing and the fluctuating terms of trade on the world market. The markets in the countries to which they are selling seem to be saturated. I think they should have more products for the home market and not only for export. I shall, of course, try to stay on at the cooperative and run it for the future, but if they stop giving us orders I am afraid we may have to close. We have been discussing other types of handicrafts like bamboo work and handloom, but as we don’t know very much about the market situation of those products it’s difficult to start. In order to add to my income I have also been working for other people most of the time, but when I was ten years younger there were sometimes problems to get a job in a house as it’s not a good thing to have an unmarried young woman in the house. So my mother had to arrange another marriage for me when I was about 20 years old and paid 100 tk to my husband. He is about 35 years old now and works as a day-labourer. He came from Dinajpur to our district to get work and he has had no education. He is now living in my house and we have two children, one son, eight years old, and one daughter, seven years old. I have been using the pill as we don’t want any more children. My husband has considered sterilization. Two children are enough. My headache is that they don’t want to go to school, as the other children around here don’t go. They are more interested in playing than getting educated, but I know that education is the only way to make life better. Look at me! Before I used to be illiterate and just a woman who stayed in the house, knowing nothing about the world outside. Now I am literate, a worker and an earner and can give my opinion in my family on social facts and matters. I can travel anywhere in Bangladesh without help. It’s something I couldn’t even have dreamt of before! It’s a great change and a completely different life from what I led before and both the economic situation and the social status of my family have developed. I feel free and independent, and what more could I ask for? Yes, I know! To learn more useful things!”

**Comments:**

I remember our first meetings with Fatima on the path when she was on her way home from work in other people’s houses. She was very shy and almost sullen; she covered her face with her sari and turned away when answering our questions. As she was one of the very poorest girls in our population, we offered her the opportunity to go to Dhaka for jute
handicraft training. We tried to prepare her mentally for this change in her life by asking her every time we met her if she was still interested and aware of the consequences both negative and positive. This process went on for some months before it was possible to arrange the training in Dhaka and I have never seen such a determined attitude. Ami jabo! (I will go) was her constant answer to all our questions. Her way of disobeying the social leader of the village and the village system was quite comparable to a slave standing up to his master. It was an incredible experience to witness! To meet her today coming up to us with her sari down on her shoulder greeting us and radiating self-reliance is almost a dream for us too! To listen to her analysis of marketing and sales problems and all the new words she uses correctly causes me some problems as I don’t know these words in Bengali and I cannot believe I have got them right! During her training period in Dhaka she was homesick, as she has said, and according to the designer working there at that time, she sat every day working very hard, crying but whispering to herself all the time Ami shikbo! (I will learn), ami shikbo!

She also turned out to have artistic gifts and made extraordinarily attractive products. She was in fact the best pupil they had had up to then, and later on she designed a special product, which was given the name of her cooperative. She is talented in many ways. Some years later I met her by a chance at the office of the Jute Works in Dhaka. I didn’t see her at first, but I recognized her voice when I heard her engaged in an intensive conversation with the head of the organization about marketing and export problems.

I also remember when the project was visited by a Member of Parliament and his company and Fatima showed him the jute handicraft component and explained the rules and terms of a cooperative. The shy little Fatima informing an MP! She made a really deep impression on him which resulted in a change from a negative to a positive attitude towards the project. He then spoke at a mass meeting which encouraged a positive change among important groups in the thana. Another detail worth mentioning is that when literate herself she taught her husband to read and write too, a fact that says a lot about the mature characters of this couple living in a traditional society! Her change is remarkable and in my memory she will always represent the ami jabo, ami shikbo (I’ll go, I’ll learn) character.
3. The history of Rani

"I was born as the second of five sisters and two brothers. We lived in a village close to Natore where my father grew vegetables. My mother came from a village close to this one where I am living now and her family had a lower status than my father’s. I was on friendly terms with both my parents and also with my brothers, but not with my sisters. However, I got married when I was 17 to a man who had been married before and whose wife had died in a refugee camp during the liberation war, leaving him with a son.

My wedding cost about 7,000 taka of which 500 was paid in cash to my husband. He is about ten years older than me and has had eight years school education. At that time he worked as a day-labourer as he had no property of his own; now he serves as a peon in a Government office. He tried for some years to establish himself as a teashop-keeper at the local market here, but there were many problems, not with the poor people but with the rich ones. They wanted, for instance, to pay for the tea with a 100 taka note and when my husband couldn’t give change they said that they would pay later. They didn’t, of course.

We live in a small bamboo house and, since we could afford it, we have improved it with sungrass on the roof instead of sugarcane leaves. We also have a small shed for cooking and storage. During the first years of my marriage my mother-in-law lived with us. Our relationship was not bad, but she was always playing the key role in the domestic work. When I became pregnant and didn’t feel very well I thought it was good to have her taking care of my husband’s son who was then about five years old. But after I had my own children I didn’t want her in the house interfering in my upbringing of the children, and this caused other problems. When I got married I had already decided that I wanted only three children with some spacing, if that was possible to arrange. When my mother-in-law heard of this she was very negative and said that I had to count on having some dead children too and should not make myself childless. When I was employed by the jute cooperative, however, I discussed this with the project leader and she helped me to get the pill. Now I have my three children with about four years spacing between them and we are still using this family planning method with no problems. I have also taught many other women about this as I think it’s very important. You keep healthy and can do a better job, earn some money and bring up your children properly. Isn’t that the most important thing in your life?
The rise in our standard of living during these last ten years has also improved our food consumption. Now we eat rice three times a day, vegetables and chapati (bread) daily, fish and dhal (lentil) often four times a week and now we also have our own mango- and jackfruit trees, giving us fruit seasonally. This is a big difference from before when we lived on chapati and vegetable curry only.

I am happy being able to give my children better food and keep them healthy. We take our drinking water from our neighbour’s tubewell, which is a real improvement compared with the open well we used before. At that time we had a lot of stomach troubles.

As a child I went to school for four years but as I did not practise reading and writing I had forgotten everything by the time I started in the jute cooperative. I felt very happy when I got the opportunity to learn again. Before joining the cooperative I was asked to go to Dhaka for training in the manufacture of jute handicrafts. I was preparing myself for this for a long time and saw it as a way of survival. The situation at that time was so bad that I was simply forced to go out to work. Just a couple of months before we should go to Dhaka I learnt that I was pregnant. This was a catastrophe as I thought that I would be excluded from the project! The project leaders promised me, however, that I would become a member of the jute cooperative as soon as the training started here in the village, but they had to choose another woman to go to Dhaka instead of me.

The work in the jute cooperative has changed my whole life! Before I started there I was just obeying instructions from my husband or orders from any so-called ‘superior’ person. Now I am able to give my own opinion regarding the family and the cooperative. I can plan and manage my family as I have my own income; my husband comes home only at week-ends so I have to take most decisions myself anyway. Now I can also talk to anyone and travel anywhere alone in Bangladesh. Before all these things were impossible, even to think of. I doubted my ability to work with jute handicrafts, I knew nothing about cooperatives and their management and nothing about the world outside this village. I was very poor in all respects and life was just a hard struggle for food, shelter and clothing. All I knew was that, as a woman, I ought to work in the home. But, as I said earlier, it was a question of survival!

My husband agreed with my involvement in the cooperative, but there was a lot of talk in the society about our starting a cooperative, mainly about our characters (regarding sex). Now they are no longer saying bad things, the people have realized that it is better for the whole village if
the cooperative can continue its activities. I shall always remember our project leader’s words about the necessity of a good reputation and a good jute product if we were to survive as a cooperative. She always encouraged us in our training and we had lots of interesting discussions. It was very good to talk to her and learn from her, and since she could speak very good Bengali we did not need any interpreter. During these years we have, of course, had problems with the cooperative to get enough orders from the Jute Works in Dhaka. Sometimes we have been without orders for a long time. If we get orders regularly there are no problems, the cooperative is run by the members and we have monthly meetings. There have been quarrels about the meetings and I think we need to meet twice a month, but some women think that we should meet only when necessary. We have been discussing alternative types of work, e.g. a handloom cooperative, but marketing is the main problem. If the jute cooperative has to close in the future, we shall have to find something else to do. If there is no cooperative, I shall start poultry farming as I have to think of my children. My two daughters are already at school and my son will start his education in a few years time. At the start I can always help them by teaching them myself, but I will try to give them an education as far as possible and for that we need income. Despite all these problems I still feel satisfied with my lot.”

Comments:

When we met Rani for the first time she was approximately 17 years of age and newly married. Her situation was extremely poor and when she got to know about the planned project she was very keen to join it. To make sure that we should not forget her when recruiting women for the jute cooperative she always stood outside her house as we passed and greeted us. I shall never forget the despair I saw in her eyes the day she told me that she was pregnant and could not go to Dhaka for training. I also remember her happiness when I assured her of employment in the cooperative. She was very quick in learning to read and write and she took an active part in all sorts of discussions in the group. She often initiated proposals for topics to discuss and learn more about and was very determined on the subject of family planning. Very soon she asked me to help her with her ‘spacing plans’ and when she had taken the pill for some months she wanted us to arrange for the thana (local authority) lady family planning officer to visit the project and give information to

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the other women. She was very energetic and active from the very start and she has maintained that behaviour over the years. She can be considered as being a bit domineering in her way of arranging things in the group, but in spite of this she has been elected cashier of the cooperative. There are sometimes a lot of arguments among the members about management matters, but I guess they feel instinctively that their cooperative needs a woman with a flair for business if it is to survive. If she has some extra money herself she invests it in gold (jewellery) instead of in a bank account as she thinks gold is a safer value and it is simple to cash if necessary. Of course, she also appreciates the pure aesthetics of the jewellery!

Her aim in life is to give her children a good upbringing and education, but she is well aware of the necessity of the mother being well-informed too. Without information it is not possible for her to educate and help her children. Therefore she is also interested in starting ‘study-circles’ in the different member groups to keep up their abilities in reading and writing and to continue their training and development. Her own suggestions for subjects are health and child care, nutrition, budgeting and marketing! I think she has made quite clear to herself what is meant by development!

4. The history of Rokeya

"I am the eldest of three sisters and one brother and I still live in my father’s house. Our father died when we were children and our mother had to go to work as a day-labourer among the farmers. As her wage was very low, half that of a male day-labourer, my brother had to go out to work too when he was very young, so he has had no education. To bring more money into the house I was married when I was 14 and instead of moving to my husband’s house, he moved into ours. We could only pay about 100 taka as a dowry to my husband plus providing food of about the same value. He is about five years older than me and has had no education. We have two small houses and a small piece of land (0.75 bigha) where we have three mango trees, two coconut palms, one jackfruit tree and one lemon tree. In good years we can get some money from selling fruit from the trees. We could not afford to keep my younger sisters in school as we could not pay for books and clothes and some times we did not have enough food to eat every day."
Since I started as a member of the jute cooperative everything has completely changed. When I got the chance to join I had no idea what it would mean to us. Now all of us can eat every day, three times a day, and good food, i.e. rice, chapati, vegetables and dhal (lentils) every day and also milk as I have a cow now, fish and eggs a couple of times a week and fruits seasonally. We live close to a tube-well sunk by the project so we get clean drinking water and we are much healthier. Before we often had troubles with diarrhoea (amoebiasis) and felt always weak. When the project was sinking tube-wells in different places in the village we discussed it very much in the cooperative and why it’s important to have clean water and also about the need for latrines.

First of all, we had training in reading, writing and arithmetic. Although I had been four years in primary school as a child, I had forgotten everything and needed this. The project leader explained that it was necessary for us to learn these things if we were going to manage the cooperative ourselves. Sometimes we felt that she was very strict about the training, but now we know it was to our benefit. The quality control, the book-keeping, the buying and selling, all the details of the management should be carried out by the members themselves, i.e., by us, the women. At the beginning of the training I was rather doubtful as I had never thought of working outside my home and the village society was very much against it. People were always talking about our characters, but now everything has changed and they show us respect. Before I was only a woman and the wife of a man, but now I have a profession and can earn money like a man. In fact I earn more money than my husband and I feel proud of that! The cooperative has changed my life in all respects, i.e. economically, status-wise, health-wise, in the family situation. I cannot think of taking a single step backwards. I think that as women we can do a lot for society and for ourselves. Now I can enjoy my freedom and would be prepared to fight for it. Earlier this was out of the question.

As an independent cooperative we encounter problems, of course. The marketing of our products and the lack of orders have given us many problems and we are discussing how to try to start training in some other handicraft, but we don’t know what. I would like to try but there are many risks in starting new things. I have been thinking of a handloom cooperative or a biri (local cigarette) factory but I don’t know how to begin. There are also problems with some of the members in maintaining the discipline of the cooperative. They haven’t got the right feeling for our work, they take no responsibility and they are not prepared.
to take any risks. Since I bought a sewing-machine from the project I can earn my own living, but that doesn’t help the cooperative and I am thinking of our future and that of our children. I want to give my children a good education as it’s very important for your whole life. I have employed a private tutor for them and at the same time my son is studying at the Government school, but the classes there are too big and the children don’t learn very much. My son is ten years old and is in grade four and I think he needs extra lessons in the evening. My daughter is only four years old, so she hasn’t started school yet but she joins my son when the tutor is teaching him and she already knows the letters and figures. To be able to give my children a good education and all other things like clothes and food, I cannot afford to have any more children. I am taking the pill and both my husband and I think it’s a good way of planning the family. I think it’s extremely good to have the ability to choose the number of children. The training and work with the cooperative during these years have given us new experiences and changed our lives, but this also gives us a sense of responsibility for our society that we have to meet.”

Comments:

When Rokeya started work with the jute cooperative she was very doubtful about her own ability both to learn a handicraft and to run a cooperative. She was particularly concerned about the suitability of women from her social stratum starting and running a self-help independent cooperative. Her only standard of reference was the kind of work her mother did, i.e., humbling herself before the landowners and possibly getting one taka and a chapati as payment for a day’s disregarded work. Perhaps she had seen a female teacher, but she came from another social stratum.

Her story also highlights the necessity of continuous literacy training. If you have learnt to read and write, it does not mean that you will keep that ability for the rest of your life without training. She is very keen to give her own children a good education, but she knows that the Government school is insufficient and she is therefore investing in the employment of a private tutor. She thinks that is the best contribution within her means that she can make to her children’s upbringing. It would be very interesting to discuss the contents of the primary school teaching with her as she has reached the level where she can question the present curriculum. She would also be prepared to join ‘study circles’
on enterprise and management, the credit system and keeping accounts. The ‘soil’ is now prepared for the next step in the women’s development. There have been lots of discussions about risk-taking and obtaining credit and some of them are prepared to take that step, but they need somebody or something to act as an initiator, providing both direction and help. Rokeya is quite mature and realizes the responsibility factor which comes with gaining education and knowledge. She has increased her vocabulary considerably and seems to be familiar with its use for her new concepts. For example, she was explaining to me the underlying reasons for her amoebiasis problems and what kind of medicine she ought to take. She was also familiar with the ghur-lobon method (sugar-salt) as a treatment for dehydration problems. She expresses confidence, and at the same time some impatience, with her progress.

5. The history of Sharoti

“I come from a village close to the border with India and I am the youngest of five sisters and three brothers. My father and brothers were day-labourers and we had also two bighas of land where we grew sugar-cane. As we were very poor there was no surplus money and none of us could go to school. During the liberation war my mother and unmarried sisters and I were in a refugee camp in India. My father stayed at home to take care of our land and my brothers served as soldiers in the war. Two of them were killed, and when we came back home after the war we found that our father had been killed by villagers who had taken our land, our house, and all our possessions. For a while we lived with one of my married sisters, but then my surviving brother took my mother and my two unmarried sisters back to India and settled there with some relatives. They are now married and will stay there. My mother is now dead. My eldest sister and her husband arranged my marriage very soon after the war and since then I have been living in this village. I was then about 13-14 years old and my husband was about ten years older. He is a day-labourer and has had two years in school. He has only one younger brother and one sister; his other brothers and sisters are dead. His parents are still alive and are living with us and helping us. We have now got back two bighas of the land which was lent out before. We have some jackfruit trees and banana palms too, which provide some extra income when it’s a good year.
When I joined the jute cooperative ten years ago I had never thought of having a job outside my home and earning my own money like a man. My mother-in-law approved of it as long as I also did my share of the housework. They needed money at that time as they were planning their only daughter's marriage. During the first year in the cooperative I learnt to read and write and we also had lessons about many other things. Before I didn't know anything about things outside my village, but now I can travel alone and I have been to Dhaka and seen a lot of rich people with nice clothes and jewellery. I have seen women going out to shop, which is something we cannot do here in the village. But when we are in Dhaka with our products at least we have the possibility of looking at all the things for sale in the shops, although we cannot buy. When we return home we meet the whole cooperative and tell each other about what we have seen. Some of the old women in the village who have never been anywhere don't believe what we are saying. I think I have been very lucky to become a member of our cooperative and to learn all these things and feel independent. I give most of my money to my husband, but some I save for my children. I have three children, one son and two daughters, seven, five and two years old, and I want them to study for a better future. We don't know very much about the future, of course, but if they are educated I think they will manage to survive whatever happens. To be able to give them some schooling we have planned our family and now we will not have any more children. I have been 'operated on' (sterilized). I shall try to teach my daughters jute handicrafts so that they can earn some money of their own. I also hope, of course, that we shall be able to continue our cooperative as we need the money. I like to have some other activity and to meet the other members of the cooperative."

Comments:

Today Sharoti seems to be very calm and confident about the benefits of education. She is concentrating on a better future for her children and that is easy to understand when one recalls her own childhood. When we met for the first time in 1974 she was a rather thin and unhealthy young woman, very unsure of herself and did not seem to believe in anything at all. She gave the impression of being nervous and lacking concentration, and experienced some difficulty in learning. Her life seems to have improved a lot, however, and she is optimistic in her way of talking. Her narrative reveals the process of change in her personal development.
What happened to Sharoti and her family during the liberation war was quite common. They are Hindus and while many were in refugee camps in India, rich Muslims in their villages took over their property and sometimes even murdered any Hindus who stayed at home to protect their land and houses.

6. The history of Kalti

“I am the fourth of four sisters and five brothers. I have never been to school, as there was no money for that. My father was a day-labourer and also had three bighas of land together with his two brothers on which they grew paddy, jute and maize, sharing the harvest between them. We also had some trees like jackfruit, mango, lichee and coconut palms which gave us some extra seasonal income. Now my father is dead and my brothers and ‘cousin-brothers’ (male cousins) are cultivating the land. My brothers have been quarrelling about how to share the land and the income from the trees and they are not very good friends. My mother is living with one of my brothers and I visit them now and then.

Ten years ago I got the opportunity to join the women’s jute cooperative. I was about 16 years old and still unmarried. My mother didn’t like my working outside the home but my father appreciated every extra paisa I could bring into the house. I was also very happy to get this chance to learn a handicraft and also some reading and writing. I hoped to be able to earn some money for my dowry and my father thought it would be easier to find a husband for me if I could contribute to our maintenance. Some of our neighbours didn’t like me going out and they jeered at me but I didn’t listen to them. I think their women were envious of my freedom and therefore spread lies and rumours. I was not afraid of them, but felt stronger when several of us walked home together from the training in the afternoons.

After some years my parents chose a husband for me and I was married off. Most of my savings went for my dowry. My husband is about 10-15 years older than me and has a small shop at the market in the nearest town to my village. He sells spices. We live in a small house together with his mother, close to the market. She decides about everything in the house and at first I thought it would be very difficult to get used to this life, to leave my freedom and my peaceful village life and come to this noisy and dirty place. I also had to leave the jute cooperative and I miss
them very much. I try to see some of them when I am visiting my mother. I make some simple jute products and give them to my husband to sell in his shop but the money he gets is taken by my mother-in-law. She always pushes me to make these things, but at the same time I also have to do everything in the house like the cooking, washing and cleaning so I can never rest. I have given birth with great difficulty to three children but two of them died immediately and one lived for only a couple of months. I feel very sorry about this as I must give my husband one son at least. My mother-in-law scolds me for the death of our children but I don’t know why they died. Now I am just hoping for another child and that it will survive. While waiting for that, I am working all the time.”

Comments:

Obviously some parents find the odds in the marriage market considera- bly improved regarding their daughters, if they also bring some income-generating ability with the dowry. Also husbands and mothers-in-law who are business-minded can see this quite clearly. Kalti has been un- lucky with her children, however, and has a heavy burden to carry until she manages to give birth to a son. As she and her husband are Hindus he cannot take a second wife to solve the problem, nor can he divorce her. If she does not die, (when he could remarry) or have a son before she is too old, it is likely that they will adopt a child (boy) if they can afford it.

7. The history of Shahera

“I am the eldest of three sisters and two brothers and I think I am about 28 years old now. I live with my parents, and my father and brothers are earning their living as day-labourers while my mother and I have been working for food in other people’s houses. We are landless and poor, we have only two coconut palms and most years it has been a daily struggle for food, at least for the youngest. Before the project we had no good drinking water, just an open well belonging to our neighbour, and we had often stomach problems and other diseases like fevers and colds. When the project came to our village they sank a tubewell in our area from which we could take our water, and this has been good for our
health. Through the project my youngest brother and sister also received several years of schooling, as everything like books, pencils, etc., was free of charge. They didn’t have to wear special clothes and they got one meal a day at school, which was good for them. I was also recruited by the project to be trained and become a member of the jute cooperative. I was very grateful for the opportunity to learn something I could use to earn my own living. I am not very skilful, however, and still cannot make the more complicated products. I make simple things and therefore don’t earn very much. During the first year in the cooperative I also tried to learn to read and write as this is very useful. You don’t get cheated so easily when you can read. We also learnt many other things during that period about how to keep food, body and home clean and about child care, and we had a lot of discussion about the good and bad things in our society. I miss that time very much.

During these last ten years I have also been married twice, but both times I have been abandoned by my husbands, who have taken new wives because they didn’t like me. The first one came and wanted to marry me, and after some time I realized that he had thought that I earned much more money from the jute handicrafts. When he found out that he couldn’t live off my income alone he became angry and abandoned me. I think it was a good thing for me as he was no good.

The second one told me that I am much too stupid. He left me with one daughter and I had to go back to my parents’ house. Now I live in my neighbour’s house working as a maid and I hope they will keep me on as it’s my way of survival. Then I don’t have to be a burden to my parents and brothers. I think this is a very good solution for me and my daughter, otherwise I would end up as a beggar. You know, a woman like me does not have very much value, abandoned twice and with one daughter to support. I don’t think I want another husband either, I have had enough. I shall manage my life like this. My daughter is brought up together with the other children of the house, and I hope she will have a better future.”

Comments:

Shahera was always a very kind, cheerful girl and very eager to learn both this new handicraft and reading and writing. She is not very clever, however, so everything was quite difficult for her to learn. As she was about 16-17 years old the first time we met her and still not married, we
wondered why. She has been unlucky as regards husbands and also by having no son to take care of her later on, but she seems to have made up her mind to manage her daughter’s and her own way of life by her own efforts.

8. The history of Hasina

“I come from a very poor family of eight children, six girls and two boys and I am number five. Both our parents worked as day-labourers all the time and all the children have worked for food outside the home from an early age. None of us has had any school education. We lived in a very small house and our only property was two small mango trees and one jackfruit tree. We took our water from an open well some 200 yards away and lived on chapati and vegetables once a day only. We also had problems with our father who was mentally disturbed; later he became a beggar, as he had no job and nobody wanted to employ him. My brothers didn’t take care of him either and I do not have good relations with any of them. My mother and I are good friends and we live together in her house along with my ten years old daughter. She takes care of most of the money we earn.

I have been married twice but now I am divorced. The first time I was married I was only about ten years old and the marriage cost about 700 taka. He was a day-labourer from a neighbouring village, about 30 years old and he had had four to five years in school. However, that husband didn’t like me and thought I was not beautiful enough, so he divorced me. As a divorced girl I was then in a very bad situation, I had no value at all. Because of our social situation I had to remarry when I was about 12 years old, this time to a man from an other union (administrative unit), who had a small business. He was about 45 years old, had no education and was already married to a woman by whom he had seven children, some of them about my age. I was treated as a maid-servant in the house, both by my husband and by his other wife and their children. He also beat me. After I gave birth to a baby this continued so I decided to leave him.

I and the baby left and returned home. I was then about 15 years old, and I determined that I would never remarry but rather live alone with my daughter and try to earn my own living. Since then I have been
working most of the time as a servant in a rich house in our neighbouring village. I get my food plus a small income and I have been healthy during these last few years.

When I was recruited by the project as a member of the jute cooperative I learnt many new things. I can read and write simple texts and I know some simple arithmetic. This means a great deal to me as I can read a receipt or an instruction for myself and not be cheated. I earn my own living and am not dependent any more. As a member of the cooperative, I participate in discussions with the other women and we learn a lot from this. We can talk freely and I think we know what freedom is now! We meet once a month, but I would like to meet more often. I think we need it.

The village people were very negative about our cooperative before, saying many bad words, but now they support us and encourage our work. That is a good thing. When we have problems in getting enough orders and we are discussing other handicrafts like handlooms, carpets, etc., the villagers put forward suggestions for alternatives. Yes, we really have their support now. As I have my daughter’s future to think of too, I have to earn enough money to be able to give her a good marriage and a better future. So sometimes I feel worried about the future of our cooperative and I think we need more active discussion on how to solve our problems. We have to develop our activities in one way or another but for the moment we don’t know how.”

Comments:

Hasina has a rather sad background, but as she is a strong person she has not given up but has survived all her misfortunes. She is a rather shy, silent person and has certain difficulties in explaining and expressing herself. Under the surface, however, she is very firm in her conviction that she will manage her own living and give her daughter a better future. Coming from her social group, it’s a strong way of choosing her modus vivendi, but she will always fight for her independence.

During the first month of jute handicraft training she turned out to be the one who made the most uniform and the best jute plaits, which is essential for the quality of the end product. She was also the one who did it quickest without any loss of quality, when we were doing time studies of each part of the production process. According to other members of the cooperative she has continued in that position, by insisting that
the others keep up the high quality, which she has always achieved herself. This is very valuable to the whole cooperative and to their reputation with the Jute Works in Dhaka. The more qualitatively reliable their products and deliveries, the more orders are likely to be placed with them. From the outset the members had to realize that they were their own quality controllers; this was a difficult step for many of the women who had never experienced this position before. Some of them were inclined to ask me if their product was good enough instead of trusting their own judgement. This is an example of the process of personal change.

9. The history of Farida

“I am the eldest of four daughters and three sons and my family is landless and very poor. There were many hard years during my childhood with so many children and only my father’s small, irregular wage. We had almost no food, only vegetables, roots, and leaves and no clean drinking water, and we suffered from a lot of stomach problems. One of my younger brothers went to school for two years, but more than that we couldn’t afford. My eldest brother left home for the nearest town to look for a job. I was married off the first time when I was about 13 years old to a policeman from our neighbouring village. During the liberation war he abandoned me and went to Dhaka and I didn’t see him for some years. I went back to my parents’ house as I had no child and I couldn’t stay with my father- and mother-in-law.

When the project came to our village, many things changed in my family. One of my younger sisters and one of my younger brothers were able to go to the project’s school where they received food every day and learnt many things they don’t learn in the Government school. I was recruited to the jute cooperative for women, and I felt happy about that as I saw a chance to earn my own living instead of being a burden to my father. My mother was very positive about this work and didn’t hesitate at all, although it meant that I was going outside my home. At that time a woman beggar was staying at our house with her daughter, she was not related but she had no shelter of her own. My mother was afraid that I would end up in the same situation. I was also happy to learn not only the handicrafts but also everything else, reading, writing, arithmetic, book-keeping and all these lessons or discussions we had about many useful things in our situation. When we started I didn’t think it would be
possible for women like us to manage anything like that on our own. But both the project leaders and the two women who had been trained in Dhaka were very involved and believed in us and in the cooperative idea. I shall never forget the first order we obtained and how happy we all were when all our products were accepted by the Jute Works with no rejects. Our first money was shared among us and I felt very rich!

After some time my husband returned to my home and wanted to stay, but as I understood that he just wanted my money I threw him out. That kind of husband is nothing to have and I could earn my own living. I didn’t need a husband at all and I wanted to keep my freedom. I tried to teach the jute handicrafts to my mother and sisters too, so that they could help me with some parts at least, and I was happy with my new position. However, after some years my father found a new husband for me and I had to accept this. He was also a policeman and had lost his first wife during the liberation war. He had two children and needed a wife to take care of his family. Soon after the marriage he was transferred to Rangpur, a town in the North, far from home and I had to go with him. Since then I have been living there. Now I have also two sons of my own and I think that is enough. I make some jute products, but only for my own use, not for sale and I miss my independence. My husband is a good man and I am not suffering at all, but if I had a daughter I would teach her about freedom and try to give her a good education.”

Comments:

Farida’s mother is a woman with a will of her own who is not afraid of anything, and her eldest daughter has inherited something of this. I am rather surprised that Farida allowed herself to be married off again as she had already acquired the taste for freedom and independence.

10. The history of Asia

“I was born in a village close to the nearest small town from here. I was the youngest of one brother and four sisters and my father was a farmer who died when I was only five months old. My mother came from a neighbouring village and she and I had and still have a very close relationship. We are very good friends. I went to school for a couple of years, but as there was no possibility of practising what I learned, noth-
ing to read, no paper, pencil, etc., I forgot most of it. When I was 12 years old I was married to a man who lived in a village some miles away. The marriage cost approximately 2,000 taka and my husband got 2,500 taka in cash. It was a rather high dowry and my relationship with my brother is not very good. My husband is about five to six years older than me and he has had no education at all. He works as a day-labourer; he has his own plough and he sells his ploughing services to other farmers. We live at my late father’s-in-law compound with my mother-in-law and my sister-in-law and her children. Her husband died of gangrene in 1975 leaving her with three children. We have a small one-roomed house and my mother- and sister-in-law have another house. There is one shared shed for cooking. We also have two bighas of land where we grow sugarcane which produces one crop per year. My late father-in-law worked as a cook for the British during the colonial times and knew many dishes we don’t use here. He worked for a short period at the project, until they got another cook.

After the war the situation was very bad here. There were years of bad crops, floods and diseases. We took our drinking water from the open well of our neighbour and that was not good. We had a lot of stomach problems. I didn’t know at that time about the necessity of clean drinking water and about how to wash one’s hands and the vegetables before preparing food. We lived off chapati and vegetables only; other foodstuffs were mostly beyond our reach as there was no money and very few things were available in the market. The situation today is much better. A tubewell, sunk by the project, gives us good drinking water. Now we can eat rice for dinner every day and chapati with vegetables, eggs almost every day and as I have a cow we get milk daily and fruits according to the season. The clean drinking water and the better food have made the family much healthier. I spend my own income on food and clothes and save in a bank account for my children’s education.

We have two sons and one daughter and that’s enough. The daughter is ten years old and goes to school, one son is seven and the youngest is four years old. The elder one should go to school but as his friends don’t, it’s difficult to get him to go. School is very important for the children’s future. I want them to study as far as possible and therefore it’s also important for me to continue my work and earn some money to save for their education. After the last son was born I was sterilized as we cannot afford any more children; with only three we can give them a better life.
Yes, all this has become a reality since I was given the chance to become a member of the jute cooperative. Before that I was only a wife who did the housework. To work outside the compound was only a dream and because of our poverty I didn’t believe that things would change for me. I was also very shy and unable to speak to other men and I didn’t know anything about our country or people outside this area. Now I can read and write, I have a profession which provides me with my own income, and with power and knowledge which are to the benefit of my family. I can manage my own life. I can take decisions. The biggest change in my life is my freedom and power in society and in the family. I cannot see anything negative in this but only positive things.

When the jute cooperative started there was a lot of negative talk in the village. The men at the market were discussing the negative consequences there would be if their women were sent to Dhaka for training and business in jute handicrafts. They said that the women would become bad women and would also be cheated by rickshaw-wallahs and other men. They had heard many bad things about the women in the capital. But nowadays we experience no hindrances from the village people, no jeering at the women. We have demonstrated that it’s a benefit for the whole village to get some extra income and we have not become bad!

At the start we were only ten women and we were trained at the project. We had a strict daily schedule in jute handicrafts and reading, writing and arithmetic. The project leaders told us that we must learn everything ourselves about how to manage a jute cooperative, i.e., not only how to make saleable products but also how to travel to Dhaka and buy raw materials and how to sell our goods, bargain about prices, negotiate with the Jute Works about orders, do our own book-keeping, etc. They told us that we should never employ a man to take care of any part of the cooperative because otherwise we would never become independent. I remember thinking that I would never be able to travel anywhere or do my own book-keeping! There were many words I didn’t understand at all and when we discussed our doubts about our future as an independent cooperative the project leaders always said ‘you will manage it, there are other women’s groups in other villages who have managed and you are as strong as they are!’ During that first year we had also many discussions about other things like the necessity of clean water, about preparing food, and family planning. We talked about how to feed children and why they die so early. Yes, there were many good discussions and we learnt a lot of things about our society. After some
time we recruited more women as we got more orders from the Jute Works in Dhaka and thought we needed more trained women. After some time we also moved out of the project premises and worked at home and divided ourselves into smaller groups. I think, however, we need some discipline and discussions in the groups. Nowadays we meet only once a month to collect the products for sale and to decide who shall go to Dhaka. Sometimes there are no orders so we are out of work, and we are always discussing what we ought to do, whether we should embark on another handicraft to make up for the lack of work with jute. We have also been talking about opening a shop at our nearest market and trying to sell our jute products directly locally but there are many things to arrange and I don’t know if we will manage it. We still don’t have enough knowledge!"

Comments:

Ten years ago Asia was a young woman (approximately 17-18), without any self-confidence at all. She was very shy and submissive and didn’t speak much; if a man was present she was completely silent. Her talent regarding jute handicraft was average and with regard to the literacy training she learnt no quicker than the women who had never been taught before. During discussions on different selected topics like hygiene, nutrition, etc., she did not distinguish herself in any way. She was simply the kind of student about whom you cannot say very much. Her attitude to family planning was undecided at that time, but she was not totally negative since she helped a neighbour’s wife to get the pill as well as her sister-in-law who had three children already and whose husband was ill. Asia came to me privately one day after training hours to ask about this method of contraception since she knew that one of the women in the cooperative had already started to take the pill. We had also been discussing family planning in the group, the reasons for it and the different methods. Our discussions at that time and continued discussions over the years resulted in her decision to be sterilized after having given birth to three children. According to her story she is seriously concerned about her opportunities to give her children as good a future as possible, which means having only the number of children she and her husband can afford and a positive market for their jute handicraft products to give her the much needed income. This new way of living also gives her the irreplaceable feeling of having alternatives and a sense of freedom, which
was quite unattainable for her ten years ago. She is well aware of this change and is also capable of expressing these feelings.

Asia died a few years after this last interview.
CHAPTER 8

Learning through the cooperative: a complex experience

In this thesis I have chosen to describe what happened in a non formal educational project among the poorest women in a Bangladeshi village, by telling the life histories of the first ten women who joined the project. I have found it very important to listen to what they had to say. Their voices have spoken through an immense number of informal conversations during all the years the project has been running, but also through letters, records and notes of various kinds. It has not been an easy task to compile these life histories. However, I think it is of the utmost importance to give the women a voice of their own. Many female researchers have emphasized this, but most studies concerning women and education adopting this approach have focused on Western women. In my opinion it is equally important that poor women in the Third World should express themselves whenever possible (Cf. Viezzer 1977, Middleton 1993).

Let us now take a further look at the ten life histories. What do they tell us? What is significant in the ten histories? Did the cooperative cause changes in the women’s situation in the village? In what way? Was their situation with regard to paid work changed? How did it influence their identity? Was their family pattern changed? How did they combine paid work and domestic work? How did their attitude towards family planning change?

Since this thesis deals with an educational project - a non formal education project - it is interesting to find out the women’s attitude to education; not only their own, but also the education of their children and maybe of their husbands? We can also look for changes in their attitudes towards life and society.
There are plenty of questions that could be raised. However, I have compiled the account of the women’s experiences along some themes which seemed to be of common interest. In this stage of the work I have used knowledge drawn from all my earlier experiences of work in developing countries; from this particular project as well as from other projects, i.e., ‘the luggage’ from this and other journeys around the world. I have also used what I have learnt from my reading about development education, women’s education and qualitative research. There are facts that the women confided to me which are not revealed in the histories. This knowledge about them is, however, reflected in the interpretation.

In analysing the ten histories I have worked vertically as well as horizontally. I started to search for dominant categories in each history and compared the findings of all ten histories searching for common themes (Bron-Wojciechowska, 1988). I have chosen to discuss the women’s experiences in relation to production, reproduction and education.

There is also a time dimension in their histories. The process described has been going on for 18 years. I will summarize the situation when the women entered the project and also describe what happened during their long journey from being nobody to becoming somebody.

**Women’s Living Conditions**

The general situation in Bangladesh as well as in this particular village where the project took place has already been described in Chapters 1-3. However, it is worthwhile to remind the reader that there was a widespread and severe famine in 1974, when the project started. Everywhere in the country people were starving to death. The projects’ coordinators were also aware of the lack of food; for some time we had only potatoes and onions to eat. Many of the villagers had nothing to eat and we saw daily people slowly dying with an unforgettable expression in their eyes.

Shahanara told us that in her family the grown-ups ate only every second or third day. Two of the women who joined the cooperative were beggars. The aim of this project was to start an income-generating activity to give some women training in skills, enabling them to earn money and to buy food for themselves and their families.
What was then the *family pattern* like when we started?

Before we look at our women, let us rehearse the situation for a normal, rural Bangladeshi family: It is an extended family with the grandparents, the eldest son with his wife and children and sometimes also unmarried sons, brothers, and sisters sharing a household/bari. The average age for girls to get married is about 12-13 and boys are often around 20. Some men are not married until they are 30-35 and the age difference between husband and wife may thus be significant.

The mother-in-law is the head of the female part of the household. It is when a woman gets a daughter-in-law in the house that she can finally delegate all heavy domestic tasks and take up a better position. A young girl coming to a new home may be received as a daughter of the house or be treated as a slave. Her working capacity with regard to domestic duties is judged and valued.

The status of the daughter-in-law is determined by her ability to give birth to sons. This is regarded as an entirely female responsibility and the necessity to give birth to a son is of interest to the whole extended family. The woman is blamed if there are no sons and she has to continue having children until a son is born. Many sons are a sign of happiness and prosperity and security in old age.

A ‘Lady’ Family Planning Officer was installed in the *Thana* office and some contraceptives such as the pill were provided free of charge at this time. Knowledge about this among villagers was nil, however, according to the socio-economic study performed in 1974. Access to family planning facilities was thus beyond the reach of the poorest villagers.

Let us now look at the family situation of ‘our women’.

Table 8 summarizes the women’s family pattern and data on reproduction.

If we look at column 4 we can note that all of them come from big families. 6-8 children was normal and this fact means that they know the problems of feeding this size of family. The year of war and the year of famine certainly did focus the problem. Columns 5-7 show that all of them except one, Kalti, were married or had been married; two, Fatima and Hasina had left their husbands, and one, Farida was abandoned. Shahanara was only 9 and six of the women were between 10 and 14 years old when they got married. Six of them lived with their own parents or their mother and three had one child each, viz., Shahanara, Hasina and Asia. When joining the cooperative they were approximately 17-19 years old.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of woman</th>
<th>Age 1983</th>
<th>Years of education</th>
<th>Sisters Brothers Own no.</th>
<th>Marital status</th>
<th>No of marriages</th>
<th>Age at marriage</th>
<th>No of children</th>
<th>Family Planning</th>
<th>Husband's ed. Education</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Shahanara</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4 sisters 2 brothers No 4</td>
<td>married</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>4 sons</td>
<td>pill</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fatima</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3 sisters No 2</td>
<td>divorced</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>1 son 1 daughter</td>
<td>pill</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rani</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5 sisters 2 brothers No 2</td>
<td>married</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>2 daughters 1 stepson</td>
<td>pill</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rokeya</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3 sisters 1 brother No 1</td>
<td>married</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>1 son 1 daughter</td>
<td>pill</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sharoti</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5 sisters 3 brothers No 8</td>
<td>married</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>2 daughters</td>
<td>sterilized</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kalti</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4 sisters 5 brothers No 4</td>
<td>unmarried</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>3 (dead)</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shahera</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3 sisters 2 brothers No 1</td>
<td>divorced</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hasina</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6 sisters 2 brothers No 5</td>
<td>divorced</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Farida</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4 sisters 3 brothers No 1</td>
<td>abandoned</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>pill</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asia</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4 sisters 1 brother No 5</td>
<td>married</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>2 sons 1 daughter</td>
<td>sterilized</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 6: Personal data of the women
How much *schooling* had our women had?

They came from illiterate families. Six of them had never been to school, four had been enrolled for a couple of years but due to lack of reading practice had forgotten everything (Column 3). Their husbands were also poorly educated (Column 10).

The first activities the women encountered when joining the cooperative were the skills training and literacy training that would enable them to run their cooperative. Book-keeping and the planning of jute consumption for production were other important subjects.

As the project developed, more subjects were added as a result of our continuous dialogue, as described in Chapter 6.

Listening to the women’s discussions gave me ideas for new topics. Rani suggested, for instance, that family planning should be included in their training. This was not a planned subject but at the request of the women it became an important component of their education as it also led to questions about child- and health-care, nutrition, hygiene, etc. that are all interacting. Thus the education was successively extended according to their requests. They perceived their opportunity to put forward suggestions on the content of their education and that the project responded positively.

**Motives for Joining the Cooperative**

The women’s immediate motives for joining the cooperative were purely material. The project came into their lives like a straw to clutch at when they were starving and they saw the chance to learn some skills that would give them money to buy food. The poverty-factor, as Chen (1983) calls it, is a very strong factor that overrules all religious norms and traditions in extreme situations. The same applies to the custom of purdah. ‘Purdah does not feed us’ or ‘The pain of hunger pushed away their veil’ (ibid.). Those working for wealthier families and being paid in kind, e.g., one *chapati* per day, saw the cooperative as an obvious improvement in their economic situation. Fatima says simply that ‘she had nothing to lose’.

All the women were aware of constraints and negative attitudes on the part of the villagers towards their initiative in joining a crafts cooperative, which meant working outside their homes. They can all testify to various kinds of threats to which they were exposed. Most of
the accusations had a sexual allusion regarding the sinful urban life the women would encounter in Dhaka. Asia recalls in her story the negative opinions at the market about the consequences there would be to letting women go to Dhaka and how they would be cheated. She talks about their being jeered at as they walked from their homes to the project premises. Both Shahanara and Fatima recall their first journey to Dhaka, the threats from the village leaders if they went and their turning off the road through the market women were not supposed to be seen there and having to walk along the railway track instead.

The women have shown great determination and have risked being disgraced (*lodija*) which would bring serious damage to the honour of their families (cf. Rozario 1992).

**The Women’s Vocational Training**

The women learnt a professional skill. Their motivation to learn was extremely strong which resulted in a halving of the training time before the cooperative was able to deliver acceptable goods to the Jute Works in Dhaka. The calculated time had been at least five to six months of training and they did it in three months.

When they had obtained their first income and, thus their stomachs were filled, a new phase of mental development could be observed. They had developed a new *professional identity*. Before they had only the traditional functions of wife and mother in their repertoire. Now they had gained an articulated consciousness of their human dignity and a taste for freedom and alternative opportunities. They talked a lot about freedom and independence, which to them were new concepts and experiences. They had acquired a bargaining position in their marriage and in their society, they had learnt to question and argue and also that there is a choice. With this new identity they felt free to argue with their husband. As examples of what they appreciate Shahanara and Asia mentioned that they are listened to and they have a voice both in the family and in society. Instead of giving their income to their husbands the women save the surplus for the education of their children. Farida regrets her loss of freedom by getting remarried to a policeman, which meant that she had to go with him to another district. She has gained materially but she misses the freedom she experienced with the cooperative. Kalti makes the same observation of lack of freedom in her married life in town. These opinions are interesting expressions in a
culture where the most important thing for a woman is to get married and produce sons. The courage Fatima showed in her convincing speech to the MP on his visit to the cooperative was incredible.

The process of development takes place both on individual as well as social levels. Being a member of a cooperative, belonging to a group, also gave them another new experience. Normally this kind of women do not work outside their homes and not in cooperation with others. They learnt the difference between being alone with a problem and being a group, a collective, sharing the problem. They recognized the function and the power of the collective in society. Many of them say that ‘they feel safer’ when they can walk home through the village together and feel the protection of the group. The ‘veil’ in the sense of protection has been replaced by the group.

Already on her training period in Dhaka, Shahanara discovered the comfort of listening and talking to other women about common problems. The positive feeling of discussing common business particularly helped the shy and leased outspoken characters among them. They learnt that cooperation can turn isolated individuals into a functioning group and that together they can reach a common goal; an effect of development education which is discussed in Chapter 4.

The development process also led to the ability to evaluate their own skills. They learnt that the quality factor was important for acceptance by the Jute Works and by the villagers. They learnt that they could trust their own judgement and did not have to ask ‘somebody else’. An element of professional pride was slowly developed.

This kind of development was also in line with the ambitions of the Jute Works, which aimed at humanistic skills, i.e. enhancing women’s social cohesion, and critical awareness, together with increased productivity and income.

The skills developed differently in the group. Some learnt faster than others, some were more talented and a kind of role-casting developed. Hasina became the quality-controller of the products. She had fully understood the necessity of quality if they were to remain on the order-books of the Jute Works and thereby maintain their source of income. She was a very skilful and fast worker herself and could therefore make demands of the others.

Shahanara is a kind of and represents the responsible type. She voices her worries about the future of the cooperative. Her reactions indicate the responsibility of maintaining the quality standards both of the jute-items and of the behaviour of members of the cooperative. She points
out that bad news travels fast; as fast as a cyclone; a well-known concept in Bangladesh. She is firm in her conviction that they should never let anyone ever get a hold on any of them.

Fatima who may be regarded as the ideologist of the group had already comprehended the cooperative ideology while she was on the training course in Dhaka. She saw it as her duty to convey this insight to the group and keep it alive. She advocated the ideals of shared income and losses. Disagreements due to different skills and speed of working were sometimes reasons for heated discussions in the group. Her conviction regarding the strength of a cooperative usually calmed them down. She understood that the move from their homes into public life was not unconditional. She recognized the connection between high standards of products and the high reputation of members as the conditions for their continuing as free and independent women. Her description of the changes from negative to positive attitudes when the cooperative members had demonstrated their high reputation with the Jute Works in Dhaka, thus putting the village on the map, illustrates her new insight.

Rani was elected cashier of the cooperative. She uses the English word herself and is obviously proud of her position. She has a flair for business combined with a strong will of her own. The other members are aware of her good and bad characteristics and have decided that it is an asset to the cooperative to give her this position. She likes to invest her surplus in gold and looks very proud in her big ear-rings. Rani does not seem to care that her appearance might provoke other villagers who do not agree about the human rights of this category of women.

The new professional life gave rise to new demands on the mobility of the women and on the time at their disposal. They realized the advantage of a home-based industry that eased their domestic duties. They had to reorganize their working day. In families with many working hands, this was of course easier. In Bangladesh, as in other countries, paid work means being visible and counted, and unpaid work means being invisible and not counted. As studies in other parts of the country have found (Abdullah & Zeidenstein 1982 and Chen, 1983), at Shantipur one can also identify all work procedures and the division of the male and female contributions. In agriculture, e.g., men deal with harvesting and marketing activities and women usually with the processing activities at home. Most work is interdependent and male and female work is complementary. However, the visible work is done by men and the invisible by women.
Family Pattern

Referring to Table 8, columns 5-7, we can note that Fatima herself chose to remarry the day she found a suitable husband; a man mature enough to fulfil her demands and who was able to stand up to criticism from more traditional villagers. Kalti’s father thought that his daughter would fetch a higher price in the marriage market if she was taught a professional skill. After a couple of years with the cooperative, she was also married to a businessman in the nearest town.

Farida had been married to a policeman who abandoned her during the war. When she became an income-earner he came back to her but she rejected him as she preferred her freedom and the new identity gained by her membership in the cooperative. Her father found a new policeman for her some years later, however, as mentioned above.

Shahera was approached twice during her first years with the cooperative by men who saw in her a wife with money. Both left her, one ‘because you are stupid’ and the other with a baby daughter. Both for her and for Hasina having a husband is a closed chapter in their lives.

Hasina’s first husband told her that she was not beautiful enough and divorced her. Her second husband and his family treated her badly and she left them with her daughter. She has discovered that there is no need of a husband. *Amar shami dorkar nai*, she says (I don’t need a husband).

During the first ten years of the cooperative Shahanara had three more sons (column 8) and Fatima had one son and one daughter. Rani had one son and two daughters; her husband was a widower and had already one son when he married her. Rokeya had one son and one daughter, Sharoti one son and two daughters and Kalti gave birth to three children, but they died. Shahera had a daughter as mentioned above, Farida had two sons; her new husband was a widower with two sons already and Asia had another son and a daughter.

The low birth rate, 1-3 children/woman, should be noted here and compared with the average in the 1970s of about seven children per woman, (WPP, 1993) and with their own backgrounds.

Shahanara, Sharoti and Asia are examples of women with a good relationship with their mother-in-law. Shahanara’s mother-in-law was actually the one who persuaded and pushed Shahanara to join the cooperative and who took care of her first grandson during the training
period in Dhaka. She was the guarantor for Shahanara’s initial step forward. She backed up her daughter-in-law and turned against her eldest son, Shahanara’s husband.

Fatima, Hasina and Rokeya were somewhat unusual in rural society by living with their own mothers. Rokeya’s husband moved into his wife’s house as did Fatima’s second husband. This is rather uncommon and demands a mature character of such men.

There are certainly differences among mothers-in-law and lots of myths are rampant. In this study it is only Rani and Kalti who have the classic strained relations with their mother-in-law. Rani’s mother-in-law sticks her nose into all kinds of business like food preparation and bringing up the children. She acts in accordance with tradition and the current value pattern and is faced with a daughter-in-law who is in a state of transition. The more Rani learns in the cooperative training sessions the more independent a daughter-in-law she becomes and thereby she pushes away her old-fashioned mother-in-law. This demonstrates a typical clash between two value patterns - a phenomenon which is not unknown in any culture. Rani was able to face this clash and win the battle, very much thanks to the strength she had gained from the cooperative training.

Kalti encounters a mother-in-law who expects a daughter-in-law to bring money into the house through her handicraft and at the same time take care of all domestic tasks and, of course, to give birth to a couple of sons as security for their old age. After three dead babies a weak and exhausted Kalti is completely useless in the eyes of her mother-in-law. She has no value, according to the traditional view of women, as wives and mothers.

It is important to note this diversity of individuals within a small population coming from a homogeneous stratum.

How did membership of the cooperative affect the women’s attitude to marriage, family life, the wife-mother function? Their discussions show among other things their need to control their fertility. Both Hasina and Shahera have discovered that a husband is not necessary when you have got a child, your own profession and an income. They have expanded their functions in society.

Rani had reflected already before she joined the cooperative on the possibility of deciding herself about the number and spacing of children. She may have heard about this concept while she was in refugee camp in India during the liberation war. The project became her opening to close! (bondho kora = to close; to use contraceptives). She approached
me privately the first time, out of earshot of the others, when she wanted information on family planning. She accepted the oral pill as a good solution for her. After some time Asia came and asked for the same pill, not for herself, but for her sister-in-law. The pros and cons of family planning became a regular topic among the women. Rani declared energetically that there was an advantage in being able to choose the number and spacing of children. Although it was not my original idea for their training, the invitation to bring this theme onto our agenda was accepted.

The visit of the Thana ‘Lady’ Family Planning Officer to the cooperative, informing the women about available contraceptives, was important according to their histories. When it became clear to the women that some methods were free of charge and that family planning was approved by central authorities, they had got the support they needed and the use of the oral pill became a fact. The birth rate was reduced considerably, which is an amazing effect, considering that the decline was achieved in the early 1980s. The national average fertility rate in the 1970s was about seven children per woman and in the 1990s it is estimated to five per woman (WPP 1993, Cleland et al 1994). Our socio-economic study of 1974 showed that nobody in the village had adopted any family planning method at that time. Many of the poor women expressed, however, their desire not to have more children. The knowledge of methods was nil.

Only Shahanara was in conflict with her husband on this subject resulting in four sons. In agreement with their husbands five of the women took the pill, two of them became sterilized (tubectomy) and in two cases family planning did not apply. See Table 8, column 9.

The mothers-in-law of Rani and Kalti represent the category who are governed in their actions by their fear of being left alone without support in their old ages and who would not endorse any kind of decree on family planning. They would not accept Fatima’s reasoning that you should have the number of children you can afford, i.e., that you can feed, dress and educate! The view of the mothers-in-law supports the findings of Cain (1981) who points out the need for high fertility in India and Bangladesh and the ‘reproductive failure’ and thereby the threat to older people, conspicuously the poor and women, of having no sons. This view is, however, not supported by the women in my study.
The effect of including the family planning topic in the training is striking and far beyond my original aims for the cooperative. It is a result of our dialogue in which the women requested for information. They showed an awareness of methods and their consequences that was unusual at that time in the country. The results of my study show the alternative in which the women concerned decide when the soil is prepared and when to adopt the methods offered. Their own experiences and needs decide.

Family planning programmes may be criticized, but they have a liberating function for women as they become aware of their bodies and their control systems. The importance of deciding herself was emphasized by several of the women. The opinion that the use of contraceptives would lead to a promiscuous life, especially when members went to Dhaka on business, was obviously never a question that arose in the group of women. They do not link this opinion to the initial problems of the abuse thrown after them as they walked through the village. The promiscuous urban life seems to be a fiction of the male imagination, very far from the experience of these rural women. This male imagination influences the strategy of family planning programmes.

The women’s histories show how important it is to integrate information on family planning in the training and that it is quite possible to reach desirable goals. Based on these experiences I can also support the criticism of the usual top-down policies on family planning programmes in China and Vietnam for instance, where the government authorities restrict the number of children per family to one or two respectively (Johansson et al 1994).

Not until the Cairo population conference in 1994, were family planning and access to contraceptive services declared part of human rights. This shift in policy emphasis does not reach the poorest populations but serves as an endorsement for those working for human rights. The weak support from the male members of society is, however, a barrier that needs to be broken down by improved information programmes reaching the whole population.
Education

From the original position of entering the training from purely material motives, the women gradually realized the importance of education. They saw that they had to widen their horizons and they took a positive approach all the time.

The initial hesitation of these village women towards the value of their knowledge was strong. They learnt that they might have a claim on education, its content etc., that is, in this case on me and on the project and I responded to their expressed demands. Through the women’s own experience of changing from being illiterate to becoming literate, from all the phases they went through in stepping out into the visible world and from all the new demands they felt, they realized what kind of education they needed. To become literate in order to help their children was a prime drive. Rani has formulated this as a comprehensive view: With her own literacy and know-how, income, better economic situation, she was in a position to give her children a better life. Her opinion also supports findings in the UNICEF-studies mentioned in Chapter 4.

Fatima’s second husband was illiterate when they married but she taught him to read and write. They both show an extraordinary maturity which is worth noting. He has the courage to receive this assistance from his wife in the environment of a traditional patriarchy. This demands both self-esteem and a humble spirit.

The women’s opinion needs to be compared with the opinion common in their environment, expressed for instance by Shahanara’s husband. He had had six years of schooling, but had not managed to move one step ahead from his position as a day-labourer. His negative comment on Shahanara’s ambitions for their children was: ‘School is useless for us working in the fields, it is better they contribute to our economic situation’.

Rani’s husband with his nine years of schooling is a good example of men with some education, but coming from the wrong stratum and religious affiliation and lacking the right connections. Rani tells us about his failure as a teashop keeper (cha-dokhan), how the rich refuse to pay for the tea and later deliberately humiliate him.

As they had reached the stage of demanding an education relevant for them they were also able to express criticism of the government provided school system in the country. Rokeya employed a tutor for her children to give them extra training as she criticised the over-large classes and
the lack of relevant subjects. This ability to reflect on and evaluate the system of education indicates a great step forward in their mental development process.

Last time I met the women (1991) we had lengthy discussions on the government school education described in Chapter 2, and its preservation of the status quo. They dared to express criticism of the rich men’s sons and their lazy, careless loafing in their white shirts. Their comments are an interesting illustration of what Dore (1976) calls the white-collar dilemma and the strong criticism Paulston (1976) addressed towards education and its reproduction of differences in society.

**Effects of the Process of Learning**

What do the women tell us about education? They express a strong belief in education, but they demand an education relevant to their situation. Skills training is not enough. It must be integrated into training for all functions of their lives. Studies have shown that literacy and skills training alone, are insufficient to promote development and full participation in political and economic life. (Lind & Johnston, 1989). The project discussed in this thesis allowed the women to acquire the tools essential for their increased participation in socio-economic development and to experience democracy in their cooperative. All subjects relevant to the context concerned need to be included; i.e., an awareness of a contextualized education. What is relevant and adequate they gradually realized during their journey from a ‘protected’ purdah position into the public world. They have reached the level where they are able to identify the **kind of content** they need to manage their various functions as wives - mothers - professional income earners. This is in line with Martin’s (1985) claims for women’s education and supports the criticism of the narrow and traditional policy of education for women observed by Kelly (1989) and Stromqvist (1989a).

Education has to meet the needs of the woman’s total life situation. This corresponds to what researchers of education in the West have emphasized (cf., e.g. Martin, 1985, Elgqvist-Saltzman, 1991, 1992, Bjerén & Elgqvist-Saltzman, 1994). The various roles of a woman during her lifetime, the needs and consequences regarding education have not been studied sufficiently in educational research.

Education researchers all over the world agree in their criticism of prevailing educational practices.
The concept of identity, how important is that? In Bangladesh your identity is defined by birth. The first questions are: “Where do you come from?” and “Who is your father?” Your answer conveys your origin and will locate and place you correctly in the hierarchy of society. Identity in the West has developed into being your profession, being visible and being counted. This Western view of the concept has coloured all financial and technical assistance from the West. Consequently it also influences recipient countries’ judgement of their own development. The women also seem to be coloured by this new concept of identity and refer to themselves as professionals in addition to their roles as wives and mothers. At least for these lowest strata of society it seems to be possible to change identity a little. Boserup (1970), Rogers (1980) and Rendel (1981) all point out the counterproductive strategies and the growing opposition on the part of males to women’s changing roles, their independence and their advancement. It is therefore very important to monitor for the effects of all kinds of development efforts.

Economic emancipation does not necessarily lead to immediate change, but it is a prerequisite to expanding the women’s influence on decisions made in their families and in society. An articulated knowledge is another asset in decision making and the women in the cooperative have demonstrated their readiness to take on this responsibility and to use their voice.

Belenky’s study of women’s ways of knowing showed that women prefer a cooperative approach rather than a competitive approach. The importance for the women to learn about the value of their own knowledge and experience and to be recognized was observed. (Belenky, 1986).

Belenky et al. point to the tendency with women ‘to avoid what they perceive to be a shortcoming in many men - the tendency to compartmentalize thought and feeling, home and work, self and other. In women there is an impetus to try to deal with life, internal and external, in all its complexity. They want to develop a voice of their own to communicate to others their understanding of life’s complexity.’ Is it not true that too many men stop at the stage of ‘compartmentalization’? They see society in sections and boxes, independent of each other and do not see the interdependence and the complexity. Refer for instance to visible and invisible lives and the resulting statistics and planning and the lack of a male approach to family planning strategies with the consequences discussed above. I would argue that women provide the missing brains, skill and commitment. Maybe the women in this study have shown their real identity, i.e., as the hub of the wheel in the development process?
CHAPTER 9

Reflections: the journey had no end

What can and should be a target for development education in the environment surrounding the poor rural women?

Shortcomings in development aid programmes were discussed already in the 1960s. Criticism was directed towards the destructive parts of the aid programmes which showed little considerations to the prevailing cultural values. Ready-made package solutions and lack of knowledge about needs of target groups were severe weaknesses of development planners and decision-makers.

Top-down management of development programmes in developing countries results in a waste of resources. A great deal of financial and technical aid has been caught in the network built up by the elite at different levels in the aid receiving countries. In its publication The Net, BRAC (1980) has described the power structure of the elite in ten villages in Bangladesh. An elite network was built up which gained access to and control of practically all available as well as new incoming resources in the communities. Aid money given by donor countries to enhance democracy and eradicate poverty amongst the disadvantaged did not reach the target population.

What can be done about this situation?

Freire’s appearance on the scene of development work in the shift of the 1960s and 70s was an impulse needed at a time when development workers were looking for alternatives methods to reach the increasing number
of poor people in the Third World. Many NGO’s adopted his theories on awareness raising of people at grassroots level. To open a dialogue with people concerned was an important message at the time and seemed to be appropriate. BRAC and Grameen Bank, two Bangladeshi NGOs, were inspired by Freire’s ideas and methods and converted them into the Bangladeshi context.

The development programme at Shantipur village consisted of four projects of which I have described one in this thesis, viz., the Women’s Jute Handicraft Cooperative. However, all projects started in the village were based on the important concepts of development education, consciousness raising and, participation of the villagers. As ‘help for self-help’ was a motto of this development effort, opening a dialogue with our target group was an obvious choice of approach, an approach that has many advantages and some limitations. I shall mention a few.

The dialogue approach will involve the target groups in the development efforts from the very beginning and can direct them according to the perceived importance of the needs of the population. Active participation of local people will lead to a positive attitude towards change.

Opening a genuine dialogue is a time consuming affair and demands a great deal of interest and knowledge from the development worker/ action the researcher who chooses this approach. He/she must be prepared to live in an unfamiliar environment, learn the local language and adjust to other traditions and customs than he/she is used to in order to become ‘en rapport’ with the target group as well as with appropriate authorities. As an action researcher he/she must be involved, and at the same time keep a certain distance to the area under study.

Sensitivity to cultural and linguistic contexts is a major key to achieve the desired development goals in a rural environment. Equally important is to inspire people to play an active role in improving their situation, to show them a way out of poverty, and to recognize the opportunities available also in a society with a structure which appears to be impossible to change. The Women’s Jute Cooperative became quite dominant in the village, although the other programme components interacted. The holistic approach we introduced was an important factor governing the programme. This is also demonstrated regarding the training of the women. The women decided the pace and the topics to be covered. This was important in their training in critical thinking and social awareness as well as in the management of the cooperative. The integrative education covering all necessary sections of life as mother, income earner and
responsible citizen was needed. As observed in the literature on women education neither traditional women oriented education or production oriented education have been successful in upgrading life quality for the concerned women. Development education for the women of this study has been an interactive process involving their individual as well as their social aspects of life. This process is in line with Burns’ definition of development education (Burns, 1980).

The histories told by the women pointed out that the most obvious change and benefit were observed at the individual level. However, there were also social effects. The new position of the women in their families was based on their income-generating activity, which gave them economic power and increased standard of living. At the same time they achieved an articulated knowledge including their ability to control their fertility. The status as bread earners made them visible and worthwhile listening to in their family and their society. They had gained a new kind of respect in the village. The cooperative run by the women had put the village Shantipur on the map and this fact could not be denied.

An evaluation of the Shantipur programme which was carried out in the early 1980s. initiated and financed by SIDA, showed that the average rate of literacy was higher than in surrounding villages, that health standards had improved, that villagers had more positive attitudes towards change and innovations. Another effect that was observed was that the horizon of the villagers was widened, they were more prepared to take risks than neighbouring villagers. As mentioned before the birth rate of the cooperative women was far below national average. Former pupils of the programme school had become petty traders, secretaries or office clerks rather than day-labourers.

The quantitative results can not be denied as they can easily be measured and observed. The qualitative results can not be measured that easy. In this thesis I have let the women talk and report the results. One can raise the question whether the positive reaction from the women is biased, due to their wish to please the project leader? Chen’s (1983) evaluation study of the BRAC’s programme concerning women of the same social strata, during the same period as I worked there, can be considered as a validation also of my results. She worked in the Northeast of Bangladesh and I worked in the Northwest. Although unaware of each other we got the same results and the same response from the women concerned. We used similar data collection methodology, for example participant observation, field diaries, etc. In her study of more than 250 cooperative groups and about 6,000 organized women, she has found
similar diversity of individuals as I have found in my small population. Her study points out poverty as one of the main factors to break religious and traditional rules in extreme situations. The transitions achieved by the women trained in the BRAC-programme has been called a ‘quiet revolution’ and indicate convincingly the possibility to activate people in a constructive way. In my study the women show great mental strength by managing the cooperative alone in a traditional surrounding. The project that came to their village and the applied development education approach became the key to open up and to help them develop this potential.

Small development programmes like the one implemented at Shantipur may contribute to the general development efforts of the country, but only in small scale and in limited areas. The strength of small efficient NGOs lays in the quality of the programmes and the development of individuals where they operate. There are exceptions like Grameen Bank which started as a very small project in the vicinity of Chittagong and is now by instructions from the government, spread all over the country. It has also been financed by among others the Swedish Government. BRAC works in the whole country and is nowadays supported by the Bangladeshi government. In quantity and in short-range terms, these two Bangladeshi NGOs seem to contribute more to the development of Bangladesh than do small NGOs. The quality and the long lasting effects of the development efforts have, however, declined as they grew big.

Small scale projects play an important role in the development of society and man. As a researcher and development worker it is of paramount importance to learn which are the keys to development and to use them in an appropriate way in the communication with people; to listen to and support people and their efforts; to interpret their intentions, not to patronize them; to share knowledge of development, not to impose it; to participate, not to dictate. If you do not know the language of the target group it is difficult to communicate; it is difficult both to learn and to teach. The role language knowledge plays in work with illiterate has not been emphasized enough. An action researcher cannot communicate with the targets of research unless he/she uses their own language.

Development education has a start but never an end; it starts with the individual, with the target group, but it can only start when people are willing and prepared to take fate in their own hands, step out, and leave the imprisonment and boundaries of mind and try new approaches in order to change their life situation. The people of Shantipur, especially
the women in the jute cooperative, did take that step. As a researcher I observed them, as project leader and fellow human-being I encouraged them, listened to them, communicated with them, but I did not do the job for them. When they recognized success they became overwhelmingly positive; they believe in their future, maybe more than I do.

The experiences and knowledge I have gained during the years at Shantipur and Bangladesh are a valuable contribution to my luggage. The journey started on the island of my childhood and in the pedagogical environment and has no end. I shall move on with improved luggage!
Epilogue

Return to the Village

My most recent visit to the village area, where so many changes have taken place, was made during New Year 1991. As it was almost 18 years ago since I had first entered this culture there were certainly lots of details that struck me at once; both negatively and positively. There were some improvements in the infrastructure, but there were also changes on another level that took some time to discover and identify.

The road from the nearest town to the village is now tarred. The small bridges crossing the streams have been repaired and it is possible to drive there by car. The whole area has a connection by bus to the nearest towns and even a direct line to the capital, in place of the unreliable train connection we experienced during our field work. There are a lot of new houses, some of them even built with bricks. Many bicycles, rickshaws and motor cycles are using the road, as well as my old favourites, the black water buffaloes. They are without doubt the most stable and imperturbable draught animals I have ever seen and this new traffic does not seem to disturb them.

In spite of the changes, I felt at home when I saw the grey trunk of the old shimuli-tree (kapok) standing there on the bend of the road. During the flowering season it is an attractive tree with flaming red flowers on bare grey twigs and branches. After the flowering season the kapok is gathered and used as a filling for pillows. The very old banyan tree with its aerial roots that grow down into the soil, forming additional trunks, covers a wide area that is regarded as a holy place. It is like meeting old friends again and gives me a reassuring feeling.
When I got close to the entrance to "my" village where the road turns 90° to the left instead of following the river, a tributary of the Padma, I found that a local _hat_ (market place) had developed. The place is called _more_ (the bend). Before there was only a small _dokhan_ (shop) selling everyday things like cooking-oil, kerosene, spices, matches, cigarettes. With surprise and satisfaction I found it possible to stroll among the _dokhans_ without creating a sensation. I passed almost unnoticed. Before, a stranger was always surrounded by lots of people, who came so close that you could see nothing but feet and bodies, unless you were two meters tall! This meant that there was no sense in paying a visit to a local market.

Here I met some of the former school boys, who had been trained at the project. Now they were established as petty traders at the local _hat_ and looked very proud as they offered me the customary cup of tea. They were eager to show me all the new facilities which the electrification had enabled them to use, e.g., an ice-cream machine!, a refrigerator in the new clinic, electric light in the _dokhans_ instead of the usual kerosene lamp, etc. The normal mutual questioning gave me information on the changes that had taken place in the neighbourhood and what had happened to everybody, e.g., marriages, deaths, births, etc. It was impossible to ignore the traditional custom of being invited to everyone's house and my visit to the village had to take some time. On my walk through the village I finally ended up at Shahanara’s compound, where "my" women, i.e., the women whose stories I have told in this book, were soon gathered round me. The usual palmleaf mat to sit on was no longer suitable. Instead they offered me a chair. They said that I had aged and needed a chair to sit on. I accepted their hospitality and the openness of their approach, as a compliment and felt quite at home. All of them were eager to tell their _didi_ (eldest sister), i.e., me the latest news. 17 years had passed since we started the cooperative with 10 women and they tried to sum up those years. Now about 54 women were working as active members. They giggled when they remembered how afraid they had been of everything; how they had told me that my suggestions were impossible; the jeering after them when they passed the bazaar; all the initial troubles...
The Continuation of the Cooperative

The women’s cooperative stayed at the project premises for about five years before they moved out and worked from home. During that first period they worked together as one group and this was a positive experience.

More members were recruited during those years as they obtained more orders from the Jute Works, and this meant that they could train more women and still maintain the quality of their products. Hasina and Rani kept up the quality control and the speed.

With the increased number of members the number of arguments also increased and some problems with working discipline. *Hingsha* (envy) and competition set in and they talked about splitting up into smaller groups and working at home.

Problems with child care while the mothers were training and at work were dealt with in different ways. For a period a day crèche at the project premises was run by the cooperative, but this was not successful as the mothers could not relax from the care of their children and this hampered their concentration and learning capacity. Those with children and no one to take care of them at home found it easier therefore to take their jute work home and keep it as a home-based industry. This matter of child care consequently contributed to the splitting up into subgroups and moving out from the project premises.

The question of how much of the income to share among the members and how much to save on their cooperative account gave rise to sometimes heated discussions. Due to individual differences in skill and duration of membership, there were also arguments about the individual proportions of the income. With the number of members close on fifty, they tried to reorganize activities, to split the group up into five subgroups, where each group divided the work among them. The subgroups tried out different systems of manufacturing the items, e.g., to let each member make only one part of the complete item, and combining these tasks in different ways. Others preferred to complete each item individually. They agreed that each of them would be responsible for her own products, i.e., if they were rejected by the Jute Works she would stand the loss.

This is a lapse from cooperative ideology and was disapproved of by the first picked troop of the cooperative.
When they had moved the activities back home, some of the women also trained their family members to participate in the production. This meant that ten years after the start of the cooperative the number of members was around fifty, divided into five subgroups, but in practice more hands were dealing with the actual manufacture.

A chairman and a cashier were elected for the cooperative and regular meetings were held when the collection of items from each subgroup was checked, and the decisions on who was to go to Dhaka with the items, how the income was to be shared out, etc., were on the agenda. They even quarrelled about who was to go next time, especially during the jhogra (quarrel) time, (the hot period in March-April) as they say with a giggle.

As mentioned earlier the Jute Works concentrates on exports where the markets are limited and unreliable, with strong competition from other countries (e.g. the Philippines, Thailand, Sri Lanka) and therefore the orders from the Jute Works have ceased for periods. The cooperative members were obliged to consider alternative sources of income and crafts that were in demand on the local market. Lack of knowledge and savings have been an obstacle, although the discussions have taken place, which is an obvious step forward from the stage of resignation and self-effacement.

Today they manage everything themselves, the buying and selling, the banking, going to Dhaka without a male escort. They are familiar with the system now, they have learnt the lesson of never signing a document without knowing its content.

The infrastructural improvements in the area, with a direct bus service to Dhaka for example, is certainly simplifying their travelling with goods.

Payment for the items by the Jute Works is still low, but the income from the jute cooperative is a much appreciated supplement to other activities to support their families, as it means much needed ready cash. In the 1970s a day-labourer earned about three thaka/day and the women about the same. Arguments within families were rather about how to use the "surplus". Shahanara talks a great deal about material improvements in her life through the cooperative, i.e., having a job, money, clothes, food, etc.
The women’s main interest in general was in helping their children to a better life and for this they needed the relevant education and a source of income. Many of them talk about education as the solution to many problems, and family planning is linked to the desire for a better future for their children.

Rani expresses this reasoning quite clearly when she talks about her ambitions. She is pleased with the know-how to be able to choose the number of children they want to have, to be able to stop diarrhoea with the *ghur-lobon* (sugar-salt) method, to give her children some education.

Unlike the first group, the members admitted to the cooperative later on were not exposed to the same intense literacy training and to participation in the information that aimed at preparing them for their new life. This task was transferred to their own responsibility and the result was some inequality among the subgroups. Shahanara in particular, complains about the lack of discipline in certain groups and worries about the future of the cooperative.

Fatima, who knows the cooperative ideology, is discontented with the fact that only the first two groups recruited were given the necessary literacy training and later on too many new members were employed for a short period, who did not understand the message, but joined only for the money. She clearly sees this as a drawback for the cooperative and her discontent most probably also impute some of the blame to herself.

However, the women cannot identify any significant drawbacks from joining the cooperative. This may also be seen as lack of practise of analysing and fatalism. They have obtained strength through knowledge and are now willing to take more risks. In spite of the problems they face, they often talk about the security and confidence they feel, thanks to their profession, their mobility, their self-reliance; concepts that were quite new to them. Once you have encountered that, it cannot be wiped out. They have learnt that literacy is power, and illiteracy the opposite.

When discussing their future, it is as uncertain as ever and their perspectives seem to be short, but they radiate self-confidence! Undoubtedly this jute cooperative activity has instilled in them the sense of human dignity and hope for future. They may at the same time be criticised for being naive and unrealistic, not willing to see or to discuss any problems.

As a spokeswoman of the cooperative Fatima has declined the invitation from the BRDB to the cooperative to join their organization, which is a sign of strength and of their firm determination to stand on their
own feet without any interference. In this context she also indicates her pride at their "clean" cooperative, without the corruption that is common in other organizations. This topic is obviously discussed among the women both when they are in Dhaka and at home. The women tell me that freedom and independence are more important than joining corruption!

The women’s jute cooperative had come to the village acting as a catalyst and upsetting the prevailing village structure. When listening to the women I reflect on how to reactivate them and to stimulate their standard of attainment. Encourage the study circles? As I can see their lack of realism or unwillingness to discuss the future of the cooperative I feel the need to intervene again. I feel pleased to hear them, but at the same time worried as I fear that they are balancing on an edge. Can they keep their balance? Are they strong enough?

Is this type of development process among these rural women tolerated just because of the distress of the country? What would happen if conditions improved? Will this "visible" work of the women become unnecessary then? Where is the threshold of tolerance of rural society (men) in the face of these strivings for liberation and development on the part of the women? As Byrne (1984 p 51) observes it is counterproductive to design educational plans and curricula too far distanced from the community attitudes in which they must be set’.

My metaphorical message to the women would be: "I prefer a rope, where nothing will happen if one thread breaks, to a chain which is no stronger than its weakest link!"
Footnotes

1. Cf. Stratton-Porter’s (1918) view on out-door, informal training.
2. See also Paulston, 1992, and his description of interpretative and radical interpretative perspectives, respectively.
4. Cf. for instance the Freedom From Hunger Campaign, Sri Lanka, without creating mass production or introducing advanced technology.
5. Cf. also Fuglesang & Chandler’s (1986) discussion on participation as process.
8. The concept of literacy used in various censuses conducted in Bangladesh has not been uniform. the 1961 census defined a person as literate if he/she could read any language with understanding, the 1974 census defined literacy as the ability to both read and write in any language, while in the 1981 census a person was treated as literate if he/she could write a letter in any language. Source: Population Census, 1981, BBS, 1989.
9. See Footnote 7!
10. See Footnote 7!
11. See Footnote 7!
13. See also Duncan & Löfstedt (1982) and their evaluation of three Swedish Non-Governmental Programmes in rural Bangladesh.
14. The spelling was changed from Dacca to Dhaka in 1982.
15. In Bengali, the same word is used for ‘yesterday’ and ‘tomorrow’ and which is applicable can only be understood from the whole sentence.
16. A day-labourer is employed and paid by the day. In the rural areas they work mainly in farming-related activities. At Shantipur a male
Day-labourer was paid 2 taka per day, plus 2 chapatties, a female
day-labourer 1 taka per day, plus 1-2 chapatties. Taka (Tk) = monetary
unit; 1 Tk = 100 paisa; 15 Tk equal to 1 US$ in the 1970s.

17. Taka (Tk) = monetary unit; 1 Tk = 100 paisa; 15 Tk equal to 1 US$
in the 1970s.

18. Feldman & McCarthy, 1984, p. 1214 on chula (stove) membership,
nuclear and extended family system.

19. Cf. von Wright's (1994) criticism of the technological dominance in
the Western cultures, where technique replaces human beings.

20. Freire points out a flagrant example of this referred in Bodan &

21. Akhtar & Johanson (1982) used an educated, local woman to evalu-
ate the language of the teacher and thereby assist her in making the
illiterate women in the villages comprehend the message in a nutri-
tion training programme.

22. Themes of the interview: check of the socio-economic data, com-
paring survey 1974, changes: membership in the cooperative, pros
and cons; description of her own changes due to a new life, positive-
negative impact; villagers’ attitudes; usefulness, her own/children’s
future, means of influence.

23. Cf. Akhtar & Johanson’s (1982) analysis of remembrance and com-
prehension among illiterate women in Bangladesh.

24. Gerard et al., 1977, and personal observation and communication
with Sister Francis of the Sisters of the Holy Cross, V. Jaydee, the
Director, and L. Brooke, the Design Consultant of the Jute Works.

25. Due to an overload of work the Jute Works could not give coopera-
tive training during the first period, only skills training in handi-
craft. The NGOs which sent the women had to take care of the coop-
erative training, literacy, etc.

26. Discon (1978) has also noticed this ambiguity in her review of Rural
Women at Work.

27. See Rozario’s discussion on purdah and female sexuality (1992)
Chapter 6.

28. See Hancock (1993), Yunus (1990, notes from conference in Dha-
ka). Cf. study by Westergaard for instance, referred to in Chapter 4.

29. Cf. Belenky et al (1986) discussion on midwife- and banking-teach-
er.

30. In Bengali the villagers said ‘to sink a tube-well’ and also translated
this way into English. Clearly the tube-well was not ‘sunk’. Using a
vacuum a hole was drilled approx. 35 feet to the ground water level
and the pipes and filters were lowered into it. I have chosen to use the literal translation 'sunk' instead of the more accurate word 'drilled'.
Abbreviation list

BARD - Bangladesh Academy for Rural Development
BIDS - Bangladesh Institute for Development Studies
BRAC - Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee
BRDB - Bangladesh Rural Development Board
BWRWF - Bangladesh Women’s Rehabilitation and Welfare Foundation
CARE - Committee for Assistance and Relief Everywhere
CO - Circle Officer
CONCERN - International Union for Child Welfare (Irish)
CORR - Christian Organization for Relief and Rehabilitation
DC - District Commissioner
FFHC - Freedom From Hunger Campaign
IRDP - Integrated Rural Development Programmes
MCC - Mennonite Central Committee
NGO - Non Government Organization
OXFAM - Founded in Oxford in 1942 with the aim: 'Working for a Fairer World'
SDO - Sub Divisional Officer
SIDA - Swedish International Development Authority
UBV - Utbildning för Biståndsverksamhet (Training for Development Work)
UN - United Nations
UNESCO - United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNICEF - United Nations Children’s Fund
UP - Union Parishad
WEED - Women, Education and Equality in Development
Glossary

*amar shami dorka nai*  I need no husband  
*ami jabo*  I shall/will go  
*ami shikho*  I shall/will learn  
*Apnaderke dekhte chan*  They want to see you; in reality to look at!  

**Bangla**  
*bari*  home; compound, household; consists of one or several related families  
*bideshi*  stranger; foreigner  
*bigha*  land area equal to one third of an acre  
*bondho kora*  close, use contraceptives  
*biri*  local cigarette  
*boro lok*  rich people; influential people  
*cha dokhan*  tea-shop  
*chapati*  round unleavened bread made from brown flour  
*chula*  stove, fire-place, hearth  
*dekha*  to look, to see  
*desh*  country  
*deshi*  countryman  
*dhal*  lentils  
*dheki*  wooden paddy-husking tool  
*didi*  eldest sister  
*dokhan*  kiosk, shop-stall  
*gaz*  tree, grass, herb  
*ghat*  jetty, stairs leading up from the river  
*ghur-lobon*  sugar-salt (a method to stop diarrhoea)  
*hat*  bazaar, village market, petty trade market place  
*hingsha*  jealousy; envy  
*jhogra*  quarrel  
*karma*  destiny; fate  
*khash land*  land owned by the government  
*khitchuri*  gruel made from potatoes/rice and lentils  
*lodjia*  shame  
*Mem-Shahib*  Madam; white woman
mohila
Mohila Samity
mor
more
Mukhti Bahini
paisa
parishad
peon
pucca
purdah
Rakhi Bahini
samaj
seer
shanti
shimuli gaz
Sonar Bangla
tai na ki?
Taka (Tk)
thana
tom-tom

woman
women cooperative
bend, curve
on the bend
freedom fighters; guerilla soldiers
monetary unit (100 paisa = 1 taka)
local authorities
office orderly
concrete; hard; made of bricks or cement
women seclusion
a militiaman
village leaders; Village Bench
weight; equal to two pounds (lb.)
peace
kapok tree
Golden Bengal
is it not? right?
monetary unit; 1Tk = 100 paisa; 15 Tk
equal to 1 US$ in the 1970s
administrative unit; police station
a cart, drawn by small horses
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