

A new research culture for the marginalised in Bangladesh

Minorities have never had an easy time in Bangladesh. Since October 2001, when a four-party coalition with strong Islamist influence came to power, minority conditions have worsened. But some small disadvantaged groups, such as cobblers, pig farmers and river gypsies, have begun to organise themselves thanks to a new research approach to development.

Jos van Beurden

Bangladesh's population of 140 million is 88% Muslim. Hindus, at 10%, are the largest minority, while Buddhists and Christians each account for less than 0.5%. Most of the country's 1.8 million tribal people, divided among 40 tribes, adhere to religions other than Islam. Since the 2001 elections, as the independent human rights organisation *Ain o Salish Kendra* reports, Hindu families have been chased off their land and liberal Ahmadiya Muslims have been evicted and their mosques attacked. The perpetrators are close to fundamentalists and enjoy the support, explicit or implicit, of the major political parties. In several cases everyone is aware of their identities but the authorities make no attempt to apprehend them.

In 2001, a group of Bangladeshi academics and development practitioners responded to the country's overall deteriorating climate and to the lack of interest among well-known NGOs in poor and marginalised peoples. They established a research support organisation called Research Initiatives, Bangladesh (RIB), to promote a people-centred qualitative approach to development. Staffed by both volunteers and professionals and partially funded by Dutch Foreign Affairs, RIB focuses on the poor and the marginalised, in the words of RIB Chairman Shamsul Bari, to 'humanise the poverty discourse'.

The gonogobeshok: a new kind of researcher

RIB uses a method it calls Participatory Action Research. PAR is based on two principles. The first is that development and poverty alleviation efforts must be founded on knowledge – no new development activity is undertaken without preliminary research. The second is that this research must tap the knowledge of the poor and marginalised for interventions aimed at their advancement. This is a relatively new approach for Bangladesh, where researchers need a wider range of skills than their predecessors. They have to be able to create a conducive environment for dialogue with a community and to patiently encourage the poor to recognise the knowledge they possess and to use it to find their own solutions.

So far RIB has helped sensitize some 500 researchers to the requirements of conducting research based on people's participation, and many projects have been completed using PAR's research principles. Its primary method requires the researcher and his assistants to assign a group of local volunteers the task of involving the community in identifying obstacles to development and possible solutions. As a result, ordinary people become 'people researchers' or *gonogobeshoks*. According to RIB's 2004-2005 Annual Report, 'a

large number of people, counting into the thousands, have become people researchers'. *Gonogobeshoks*, by discussing subjects for community action, have already initiated financial savings groups and diminished gambling and fighting. Some have been making collective presentations to authorities, such as in the city of Jessore, where a group of marginalised cobblers requested, and received, authorisation to set up roadside sales outlets.

RIB often supports the research activities of local NGOs to ensure that research leads to development activities. In November 2005, I visited ten RIB-supported research projects. One was the Grambangla Unnayan Committee (GUC), a small local NGO that since 1999 has taken up the cause of the Bede, or river gypsies. Its director, A. K. Maksud, is by training an anthropologist, while many of his GUC researcher-colleagues are development practitioners. RIB offers them training, supervision and holds regular seminars on PAR issues. GUC's research on the Bede turned out to be a good example of the RIB approach.

River gypsies: refugees in their own country

The Bede themselves estimate their total population to be 1.2 million. Official estimates put their number at around half a million, as the government does not recognise those without fixed addresses and many Bede live on boats that ply the country's rivers. Bede livelihoods vary: small business enterprise, selling talismans for preventing snake bites, snakebite treatment, snake charming and trading, and offering spiritual healing services and traditional medicines. Bede female and male healers serve millions of people for whom mainstream health care is too far away or too expensive.

I visited three locations to evaluate the RIB-supported GUC Bede research project: the town of Savar, a one-hour drive north of Dhaka, is home to about 4,000 Bede, most of whom reside in boats or boat-like houses built on stilts; closer to Dhaka, Bede in the hamlet of Salipur live on a narrow plot between the highway and the river; and in the village of Laohojong, south of the capital, most Bede have given up their nomadic way of life and live in government-built houses. These communities are visibly poor.

To conduct any research at all, the Grambangla Unnayan Committee first had to gain the trust of these communities. In Savar, a Bede engineer gained that trust, acting as intermediary between the people and GUC researchers. In other communities, community headmen became PAR animators who facilitated meetings with nomadic groups of 'boat Bedes' to discuss issues

such as education, livelihood security, gender disparity, water and sanitation, voting, citizenship and land rights. The findings of GUC and those local Bede who became *gonogobeshoks*, revealed that the Bede are severely deprived of basic necessities such as food, shelter, medical care and education. More than 80% live below the poverty line on less than a dollar a day.

The increasing availability of modern medicines and the expansion of the state healthcare network have increased the Bede's poverty and isolation. Sixty-year-old Mrs Sor Banu of Salipur explained, 'When I was 15, we had plenty of work. Nowadays people are not interested in our medicines. If they see me walking with my sack of medicines, they often shout after me. Last week someone from whom I had tapped blood refused to pay me and forced me to run away. Sometimes they harass our girls'. Male customers sometimes ask Bede women to enter their houses to perform medical services, then lock the door and rape them. 'My only son will become a petty trader. But selling our medical tools against evil eyes, indigestion, cold, fever, breast pain or rheum will not be sufficient'.

Between 2002 and 2005 GUC's Maksud collected data from 16 different sample areas, including those I visited, in order to account for the Bede's geographical distribution. GUC researchers then tested strategies, mainly through group discussions with *gonogobeshoks*, to include this river-nomadic community in their own development process.

Participatory action = results

The research conducted by GUC and the *gonogobeshoks* helped most Bede become aware of their own potential. The community in Salipur placed improved sanitation at the top of their list of priorities. A pump for drinking water was installed and two latrines could have been placed near it had a local brick factory owner not prevented it, as he did not want the Bede to settle there. A mobile boat for pre-school education was created, the first of its kind in the country, and RIB trained one community volunteer to become a teacher. Such mobile pre-schools have also been created in other Bede communities. Meanwhile, near Savar, 35 young women have been trained to make batiks; twice a week they work two to three hours and undertake non-formal primary education.

Meanwhile, the formerly nomadic Laohojong villagers have begun to organise themselves and speak out. When they received considerably less relief than mainstream Bengali communities during the 2004 floods, GUC researchers took photographs, wrote a report and made it public, and as a result the Bede community received private donations.



A mobile school for Bede children

A.K.M. Maksud

Laohojong women have started small businesses, such as selling chicken and geese or sewing cloth, and having learned the importance of education, they now send their children to school. Group savings have also been established to help pay for new houses, funerals and marriages. One Laohojong Bede, Mohamed Shabeb Ali, has even been elected to the municipal council: 'At first my colleagues did not want me to use a chair, but to sit in the second row on the floor, but I learnt to understand my rights as a citizen'.

At the national level the Bede have formed the National Manta Samiti, a nationwide coalition of Bede interest groups, and joined in human rights demonstrations. For the first time, the Bede and other disadvantaged groups are cited in the Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper. The Bangladesh Planning Commission publicly admits that the Bede and other groups have been living a segregated life and that social services do not reach them. 'The children from these communities must have access to health and education', the Commission asserts.

Buzzword

Development agencies today all claim to include local communities in their activities, but too often their researchers and organisers simply collect and assess data and announce their proposals. RIB has chosen a different path; for starters, it has chosen different target groups, including those passed over by donors. For example, RIB agreed to work with a local NGO that wanted to conduct research among pig farmers but was unable to secure funds from either national or international NGOs.

RIB reminds us of what Paolo Freire wrote more than three decades ago in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1972): that participation is an empowering and educative process. From my own Bangladesh research experience in 1974-75, I remember the risk of favouring exploited peasants and oppressed women to their detriment. Through my conversations with GUC Director Maksud

and other researchers, I learned that because many local NGOs have to deal with local authorities and power holders and maintain good working relations with them in order to make any progress, they do not easily fall into the trap of a one-sided and uncritical pro-poor analysis. Their research reports are often businesslike.

PAR is in vogue. Many who enter the RIB premises use the word, though I'm not convinced everyone uses it with the same notions in mind. One researcher working among the Santal minority in the Chittagong Hill Tracts told me the people researchers he worked with – both men and women – had not brought up gender issues, while I got the impression gender issues were something he was uncomfortable addressing.

But, overall, I am optimistic about the possibility of a new research culture in Bangladesh. A danger of any approach is that researchers will adhere to it to the detriment of those cases to which it might not apply. I met some researchers who had become too rigidly pro-PAR. While it is a sound methodology, PAR has limitations. For research in technological development of, say, a low cost test method for elephantiasis, cross-breeding of pigs or the production of natural vinegar, PAR is not of much help in the marketing realm of the end product (pig meat, vinegar, date palm syrup). PAR is efficient when investigating the supply side, but the demand side requires additional research techniques. ◀

Reference

- Maksud, A. K. 2004. *Action Research for Development in Beday (River Gypsy) Community*. Dhaka: RIB.

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