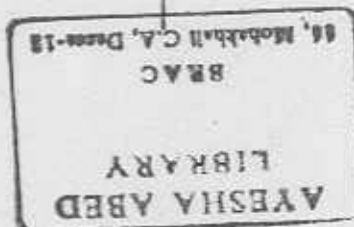


40

Economic Studies
Vol-1

f

THE PERCEPTION, CONFLICT BEHAVIOUR AND
LEADERSHIP OF THE POOR IN AN RCTP VILLAGE



RESEARCH & EVALUATION DIVISION
BANGLADESH RURAL ADVANCEMENT COMMITTEE
66, Mohakhali Commercial Area, Dacca-12

THE PERCEPTION, CONFLICT BEHAVIOUR AND
LEADERSHIP OF THE POOR IN AN RCTP VILLAGE*

The village Milagi has 1415 inhabitants and is located near Gheor Thana Headquarter, about 52 miles north-west of Dacca City. The general view of the settlement of this Muslim inhabited village indicate that it is a recent one and the forefathers of the present generation were mostly the migrants from the neighbouring Manikganj area. The village has 255 houses mainly of thatched roofs, walls of reeds and mud huts with no electricity. The village dissected into two parts by a snaking rivulet, has an area of 1½ sq. miles with one primary school, 3 mosques - all located on the main Kancha road.

Very little is known about local history and even the last 25 years seem to be a puzzle in the memory of the most prominent inhabitants of the village. There are legends of some cruel native dynasties who were decimated by a surge of epidemic illness leaving the village desolated for many years. The most aged man of the village still recollect the scene of Zamindars who used to annually come to the village with their courtiers for procuring paddy with a procession of tamed elephants.

Economic Profile:

Out of the total 1415 inhabitants, 741 (52.4%) are male and 674 (47.6%) are female. A married female above 15 without a child is highly exceptional in the village. The average size of the family is 5.5 and 43.7% of the total population are under the age

*The study was undertaken by the Research and Evaluation Division of BRAC. The report owes a lot to Dr. Salehuddin Ahmed for his valuable comments on an earlier draft. Mr. Zafar Ahmad was responsible for researching and writing of this paper under the supervision of Mr. A.M.R. Chowdhury.

of 15. 77.5 per cent of the total population did never go to school. Only 38 persons have education upto S.S.C. level and above out of whom the number of graduate is only one. 30 per cent of the total households have no land and 46 per cent of the households have land less than half an acre. 26.3% of the households may be considered marginal farmers with lands between .51 acre and 2.00 acres. Only 22 households have land more than five acres. About 67 per cent of the total households of the village with land less than one acre fall in the category absolute poor who were and still are the constant victim of grinding poverty.

The choice to study the village was motivated by the report of previous conflict between the poor and the elites over Gram Sarker election. The election was virtually won by the poor members of the Samity but they were deprived of full victory through the manipulations of the power structure.

Methodology:

Most of the information was gathered through discussion, participation and conviviality extending over a month. Two purposively arranged general meetings of the poor and some small group discussions seemed indispensable. For generating certain information on conflict behaviour and leadership, individual interviews with elites, BRAC workers and with personalities came out prominent in the aforesaid discussions were preferred. Most of the demographic and economic information of the village stem from the filled up questionnaires of the RCTP baseline survey conducted by BRAC in the area.

A Remarkable Closeness:

Inspite of their poor knowledge about their legal rights, the poor showed considerable awareness about their everyday socio-economic problems. They are able to verbalise such problems and sometimes are able to define them precisely. In course of a group

discussion the poor participants discussed among themselves the various problems facing them. But there is a striking similarity between the perceived problems at Milagi and the picture existing at the national level. We have generalised below only some of their problems to show how they are the microcosm of the national scene.

Poor's Perception at Milagi

- i. Most often we can't procure sufficient food. Sometimes we can not procure at all. In slack seasons we are sometimes forced to take 'JAO' (Rice gruel).
- ii. There is practically very little work for us in the village. Except in sowing and harvesting period most of us remain unemployed all over the year.
- iii. We have very little or no land. Some of us do not even have our own homestead. Few people own almost all the arable land of the village.

National Statistics

Poverty is so endemic and ubiquitous that over 65 per cent of the population can not afford to meet their minimum dietary needs. /1

The proportion of population unemployed has increased from 66% in 1961 to 72% in 1974. At present employment stands at 25.3 million or 28% of the entire population. Planning Commission suggested that in 1980, 0.66 million or nearly 48% educated job aspirants remained unemployed. /2

According to 1977 land occupancy survey, nearly 33 per cent of the rural household do not possess any arable land and 50% of the households may be considered virtually landless possessing less than half an acre of land per household. On the other hand the richest 10% of the households operate 50% of the arable land. /3.

- iv. We can not arrange any treatment for us and for our children. We have little access to Thana Hospital where they demand money for medicine. We can seldom manage meat, milk or fish for our family.
- v. We do not have any facility for adult education in the village. Samity's course, too is not running smoothly.
- vi. During Pakistani period we could buy most of our necessities with Tk.6.00. But the same amount can barely buy one seer of rice now.
- vii. In the lone primary school of the village our children are sometimes driven out by the teachers for skin diseases, nasty dress etc.
- Malnutrition is a serious threat to overwhelming majority. 50% of the children suffer from protein-energy malnutrition. About 50 thousand children are affected each year by vitamin A deficiency resulting in partial or complete blindness. /4
- At present 78% of the total population in Bangladesh are illiterate. Absolute number has risen to about 702 lakh - which has become the most formidable bottleneck in the modernisation process. /5
- The price index has gone up by about 600 per cent over the 1969-70 level. Compared with the price level before the second world war the present price level is more than 35 times. /6
- 42% of the children in Bangladesh do never go to school. Of those who go to school, 50% leave the school before passing the elementary class. /7

References:

- /1 Second five year plan Chapter II
- /2 Ibid Chapter VI
- /3 Ibid Chapter VI
- /4 Draft of the Two year Plan Page - 252
- /5 Second five year plan Chapter XVI
- /6 Sanwar Ali, "planning and development" Political Economy Vol. II, No. I.
- /7 UNICEF.

Besides the above, they also spoke of indebtedness, continuous fear of starvation, harassment by the Mahajans and the police and lack of drinking water. All the above curses of "misfortune" were the outstanding bottlenecks before the people of Milagi in any transformative effort for their own emancipation.

Emancipation: Its Scope and Content in Milagi

To emancipate means, literally, to set free. But freedom does in no way mean unrestrained behaviour or license. It refers to the maintenance of an atmosphere where every individual has the opportunity to be his best. But what usually happens is that the right of the many is illegally trampled by the vested interest against all accepted social norms or legality. This is more true to the disadvantaged rural poor of Bangladesh. So, within the special context of upliftment of the poor, emancipation connotes a sizeable victory over privileges, stagnating circumstance and perpetual dependency. Our extensive interaction to conceive poor's perception reveals three pernicious situation from which Milagi people seem to seek deliverance. (a) The first situation is the psychic paralysis and despair created by a gradual subsidence of their own images which is destructive to self-respect and confidence. Their initial realisation that they are inferior to, less intelligent, less energetic and less fortunate than those who control their lives has stolen all their hidden ingenuity. Their present perception is that the dynamisation of poor's potentialities through group integrity, appropriate group actions, conscientisation and collective effort can salvage them from the state of sluggish passiveness. (b) The second situation was the presence of socio-economic constraints like money lender's exploitation, unemployment, working for dictated wages, official neglect, patron-client ties etc. which block poor's creativities. The potentialities of poverty ridden people of Milagi was stifled

to such an alarming extent that they took about four months to define their own needs and goal even under the inspiring facilitation of the RCTP field workers. Moreover, exploitative domination by the privileged class for decades together striped the poor of their ability to understand how exploitative social system affect them and how to identify and satisfy their own needs by facing the challenges posed by their own environment. (c) The third situation from which the Milagi people seek emancipation is the evil of all servitudes to nature and to ignorance. A particular section of the people is exploited when it is unable to master the destructive forces of nature and of social systems because of ignorance and inability. The poverty ridden destitutes of Milagi have little knowledge about how nature mercilessly impinges upon them with disease, malnutrition or other scourges, and how their transformative endeavour can release them from the bondages of superstition, ignorance and lethargy. But the poor womenfolk has some extra bondages in our male dominated rural society where they are helpless even in their own homes. Along with endemic poverty, total dependency on male counterparts dowry, polygamy, physical torture etc. were the added situations where from they seek a gradual rescue.

Till the formal formation of a male Samity on 23rd October, 1979, RCTP field workers were the chief agents of motivating, conscientising and invigorating the dispossessed people of Milagi and making them critically aware of their own environment. A female Samity which came subsequently into being as a natural corollary, pulsated new hope in the heart of the hitherto passive section of the Milagi populace. They perhaps, sought to achieve the desired emancipation through a gradual process of group formation, collective economic activities, continuous orientation and functional education. But this simple effort for existence breded mounting opposition from the third month of the formation of the Samity.

The village was known as the local stronghold of three major political parties of the country and the mounting opposition from the elite became a threat to the Samity from the very inception. The richer section of the area, perhaps, sought to resist any such move from among their clientele which would ultimately reduce the possibility of exploiting the poor.

Background and Issue of Conflict Behaviour

The activities of the village organisation was accepted with total annoyance and disgrace by the Youth Complex Members, land owners and U.P. Members. Repeated visit of local elites to RCTP office with a view to dissuade them from motivating the poor, simply strengthened the poor's determination to move forward. Any incident of misbehaviour, paying less wage, forcing to work more than 12 hours, or confiscation of their property by the money lenders became a permanent agenda of the weekly meetings. Every such incident amassed indignation - future course of action was atleast pondered over if not sorted out. But the conflict behaviour of the poor became explicit on some issues such as Gram Sarker election, payment of lower wage rate, and an incident of adultery.

"The poor people of Milagi, dislike and abhor quarrel with anybody. We did never do that in the past. We are now reacting only to assert our existence in the village". Said Syed Ali, a leader of the group.

The Process of Conflict

1. The daughter of a poor Samity member used to work in the house of a local elite as a maid servant. Suspecting that the girl was being regularly raped by the elite, some members of the village organisation raided the suspected spot and caught the elite redhanded. The girl who disclosed nothing so far apprehending danger for the poor parents and

fearing the risk of being a social outcast, detailed the whole series of repeated rapes mercilessly committed by this village leader. Joining hands with some other elites of the area the man tried to prove everything as total fabrication and he got the support of most of the influential persons of the locality in his effort of proving innocence. But the vigilance and unity of the poor nullified all their effort. The poor members of the Samity remained determined and uncompromising with utmost unity and the undaunted attitude of the poor forced the elites to give in. An amicable reconciliation came when the man gave Tk. 2,000/- in cash and half a bigha land by a registered deed to the girl. The of the Samity. This incident between the poor and the rich of the village gave the members of the Samity the confidence that united effort can give them victory. Most of the leaders were found equally active during the conflict situation.

2. - At the time of Gram Sarker election, the Samity unanimously decided that they will make their leader - Syed Ali, the chief of the Gram Sarker. When the C.O. and other officials came for the purpose, the poor villagers unitedly placed their case before them and sufficiently proved that they are the majority. The elites who were divided into three factions and proposing three candidates so far, took no time to get united against the poor and influenced the circle officer to shift the date. On the second date, about two weeks later, all the three factions of elites came to face the poor with a unanimous panel. All the poor of the area gathered. The circle officer who was collusively kept misinformed by the elites was the only hope for them. The C.O. virtually became the puppet of the circumstances and because

of the conspiracy of the elites the meeting ended in a pandemonium. The date was again deferred indefinitely. When the elites, in collusion with C.O., tried to accomplish everything secretly the conflict went to its zenith and the leaders of the Samity warned the C.O. about the possible repercussions of such a manipulation. No party was ready to surrender. Later on reconciliation came. A marginal farmer from outside the Samity became acceptable to both the parties as the Gram Sarker Prodhani. Three representatives of the Samity were taken as the members of the Gram Sarker.

3. Landowners of the village Milagi were giving lower wages to the labourers than the wage rate prevailing in neighbouring villages. They were apparently taking the advantage of over supply of labour in the village compared to existing demand during the Rainy Season. The members of the Samity refused to sell their labour at a lower price disregarding the probable hardship which might befall on them as a result of such withdrawal. The landowners initially thought that the poor labourers would not be able to withstand the economic hardships for more than a few days. But the expectations proved to be wrong. Similar Samitys were therein neighbouring villages. So, sympathetic outside labourers did not come to sell labour in Milagi. Circumstances forced the landowners to come to an amicable settlement with the labourers and thenceforth normal wage prevailing elsewhere was given to the wage earners.

But the above instances of conflict incidents portray only the one side of the picture with an erratic implication that the poor are at a lofty stage of social solidarity. But the deficiencies and instances of failures are still innumerable with the group. When after the incident of wage bargain Syed

Ali was prohibited by the discontented elites from walking through a elite owned narrow passage linking his home with the main road, the Samity could practically do nothing. A frank discussion with the poor reveals that apprehending similar prohibitory measures for themselves they considered it strategically wise to remain silent spectators and they ultimately surrendered to the situation. When the group was passing a hectic time of unpleasant events during the Gram Sarker election some unidentified group members regularly leaked out the decisions of the closed consultative meetings of the poor. This leakage of information acted as a major setback forcing the Samity to accept partial victory. Syed Ali the most vocal proponent of the poors' interest suddenly became disinterested and passive in the rape case as the involved landowner was his relative.

Outcome of Conflict Situation:

The major conflict situations briefed above have obviously had some intended effects on the exploitative hierachical structure of the village. The following points are worth mentioning:

1. The elite dominated hierarchical structure of the Milagi rural community has been shaken and the poor are perhaps a social force to be reckoned with. The village now consists of two groups. The organized poor and resource owning elites frequently competing and sometimes collaborating with each other. The instance of Gram Sarker election is a relevant example.
2. Though the poor of the village are in a majority, elites still hold more power because of their resource power and more access to government officials. Had it not been so, all the post of Gram Sarker would have come to the poor.
3. The Samity did never resort to violence and mediation was

the mode of settlement of disputes in all the cases. They were never aggressive and always on the defensive.

4. What the Samity is now lacking is the command over resources. But otherwise they have sufficiently proved that corporate life is the best guarantee for peaceful existence with the rich in the village.
5. The Samity has enormously uplifted the social position of the poor. Syed Ali Tamezuddin, Pashan Ali and Mukshed from among the Samity members are now invited to Salish by the elites. Most of the group leaders have also "easy access" at present to the U.P. Chairman, Circle Officer, Thana Medical Officer and local bank Manager. These were unimaginable before the formation of the Samity.
6. In the conflict situations, BRAC was a passive spectator and everything was decided by the members themselves by frequently convening cadre and general meetings.

The rural community in which overwhelming majority of our people live is characterised by the sheer absence of poor's resistance against any injustice inflicted upon them. These unfortunate victims of century-old exploitative processes lose all the power to react even to physical atrocities mercilessly perpetrated upon them. The elite centred power net in the villages, fetters the dispossessed poor in the shackles of patron-client ties, where they are the passive respondents to patron's whims. But the poor in the village Milagi do no longer belong to the clientele of the elites so much. Unity, co-operation and group life has given them the strength and determination to carve a rightful place for themselves in their own environment slowly pushing the elites into a state of gradual seclusion from the poor.

Analysis of Leadership:

In our country the history of rural development documents that

large and small farmers form cooperative simply to gulp government grants in the name of rural development. Membership in these societies are dominated by large and well to do farmers. Those who have little or no land remain grossly under represented in these societies. Leadership in the cooperative is dominated by large farmers and even the small farmers are entirely unrepresented in the leadership. These leaders enjoy a greater share of benefits whereas their participation in group fund is relatively low. The leaders of these societies mostly fail to uphold the basic principles of the cooperative with an apparent objective of developing leadership from among the disadvantaged poor and checking concentration of power in a few powerful hands, BRAC consciously embarked on a policy of organising exclusively the poor who are in large majority in our rural areas. In our effort to study the leadership pattern in the Milagi village organisation, we have analysed only certain aspects which can give a better appreciation and understanding of the present leadership trend.

Economic Background of Leaders:

In our analysis of leadership pattern in Milagi we have taken into consideration all the people of the 15 member operation team formed with the leading people to run the executive affairs of the Samity. This executive team of newly emerged leaders is apparently a good combination of young and old members, who made themselves prominent within the group through past record of performances. The youth in the younger leaders combined with the prudence and experience of the old made the village organisation socially important in the Milagi rural community. The following table gives a picture of the economic status of the leaders,

Table - I

<u>Distribution according to Possession of Land</u>		<u>Distribution according to Age</u>	
<u>Landholding Group (in acres)</u>	<u>No. of Leaders</u>	<u>Age Group (in years)</u>	<u>Total</u>
00 - .24	10	25 - 34	4
.25 - .49	0	35 - 44	6
.50 - .74	2	45 & above	5
.75 - .99	1		
1.00 - 1.24	2		

Ten leaders having less than 25 decimal land have only homesteads with no arable land in their possession. Average family size is five and about 4 persons depend upon each leader for their livelihood in average. With almost no arable land at their disposal these 'poor leaders' of the poor are nothing more than habitual wage earners. The number of dependents they are to shoulder sufficiently depict the embarrassing extent of pecuniary distress in which they are struggling for subsistence. Except Tamiz, Piar Ali and Majid, who make seasonal trades with no appreciable capital of their own, all the leaders of Milagi village organisation are wage earners. This is characteristically an interesting phenomenon in our rural society where any past attempt of leadership development among the poor was piratically robbed by small and large farmers. Servitude and passivism of the poor is an inverse covariant of resource domination by the elites. When more resources whether economic or social, are generated to the poor, the process of emancipation steps in. In Milagi, the well organised village organisation itself proved to be the best resource at the disposal of the poor which give the leaders courage and strength even though they were the poorest of the poor.

Qualities of Leadership:

Inherent attributes and visible qualities by dint of which persons become prominent within the group are certainly difficult to accurately ascertain as it involves a complex process of analysing human behaviour. But analytical observation reveals that the common behaviour through which they expressed themselves as leaders were their outstanding role in decision making, organising others and mobilising them for attending meetings. Only five persons including Syed Ali (55) and Tamizuddin (45) were quoted as having the linkage with external connections like BRAC. Dexterity in record keeping become the first quality of only Majid (25) who maintains almost all the records of the village organisation. Some other qualities ascribed by the humble members to their leaders include regularity in contri-

tribution and attendance, more group works more social links and right understanding of the situation. Power of speech in meetings, capacity to articulate the agenda, honesty and integrity were also the prominent qualities of some of the leaders. But the rate of acceptance by the fellow members varied from leader to leader.

But what sort of benefits economic or non-economic are alluring to the participants which induce these subsistence people to sacrifice more time for the group? Though most of the leaders take no time to unequivocally declare "We are serving ourselves and our fellow brethren for the greater interest of all of us" it may appear rhetorical to many. An inherent desire of social prestige and a silent inclination of getting included in the BRAC funded schemes are perhaps the outstanding fueling agent.

Role of the Leaders:

The function of the leader is not to be active himself but to make all others to be so. Syed Ali (55) the most aged leader of the village organisation played pivotal role in the formation, integration, consolidation and democratisation of the group. His courage and stead-fastness was a source of inspiration and strength for the hitherto unorganised poor of ^{the} village. But he is a bit deficient in supervision and not so well managed in accounts keeping. Tamiz who is considered by the members as the second man, now fills the gap and hurriedly emerging as the most important leader of the Samity. Majid, who is a professional biri maker helps maintain the accounts and records of the Samity. Most of the remaining leaders mainly help collecting weekly contribution and organising the meeting. Moreover, almost all the leaders are related to the supervision of BRAC financed schemes somehow or other.

Awareness gives the leaders psychological strength to withstand challenges which the group confronts. But this did not invariably happen in Milagi. Some leaders specially Tamiz and Pashan

All are more survival oriented than emancipation oriented with the solitary goal of economically uplifting their position keeping the Samity, if possible, aloof from any conflicting situation. But the remaining leaders including Syed Ali, Nayeb Ali and Sukur Ali are more emancipation oriented and think that exploitation by Mahajans and land owners for decades together is at the root of their present misery. But these subjective factors did never block them from taking collective decisions in conflict situation^{as} mentioned earlier.

Role in Decision Making:

What is interesting to note is that there is neither a formal leader of the group nor even a chairman of the operation team (executive body). But there has always been an informal chief of the Samity who maintain linkages with all and Syed Ali priorly occupied that position. But because of the circumstances stated earlier, Tamiz now occupies the position of informal chief of the Samity. The reason of the absence of a formal chief is not far to seek. The realisation of the RCTP field workers is that division of leadership function to many as well as accumulation of the same in a single hand give rise to unending organisational complexities and facilitates internal rift. To them, the wisest way to avoid the problems of concentration as well as division is adopting the principle of group leadership where the leaders jointly sort out the work programs on the basis of the decision of weekly meetings and then divides the work between themselves. In this system maximum participation of the general members in the affairs of the Samity is ensured.

But how so many leaders without a formal chief ensure the integrity and cohesiveness of the group? In fact, RCTP workers are the intervening factors behind the whole drama in Milagi. The function of the relevant BRAC worker in the Samity is not only to suggest and advise, but also to regulate and conscientize. In the general

meetings most often the BRAC workers select the priorities, raise the agenda, initiate discussion and influence the course of decision. But he tries his utmost to elicit opinion and decisions are always made on the basis of the support of the majority. But any work or decision which does not prejudice the interest of the loans is exclusively left with leaders and general members of the Samity.

Discussion:

Though the kind of group cohesiveness which is being maintained at present has been working well with no operational difficulties, the system may ultimately cause irreparable damage to the future existence of the Samity. The present need of "Nursing the leadership baby" through continuous supervision, prodding and spoon-feeding, may never end and the baby may never learn to walk because of overdependence on BRAC. If BRAC at all wants to ultimately withdraw after making the cooperatives self reliant, leadership must be allowed to develop through trial and error with least external intervention. A democratically elected institutionalised chief of the Samity may be a right step in right direction both in Milagi and elsewhere.

Conclusion:

Meaningful upliftment of the poor who have so long been disproportionately neglected in the development process calls for a strategy which counteracts further pauperisation. If the poor are organised into groups free from domination and awareness is given to them without making decision for them, they develop the capacity to respond unitedly. The case of Milagi teaches that when the interest of the poor becomes apparent to them as well as the ways of effective action, they can respond to the situation.