

## Politics and development

return to the landowner. And there is a downward spiral as the population increases, the land becomes more fragmented and landlessness spreads.

### Women in society

Another set of dismal statistics concerns the position of women, especially rural women. The number of girls in school and the level of female literacy are rising faster than with boys, but are still only half in total numbers. Girls marry at 14 or 15 to a much older man and move to his village. They work 10 or more hours a day at a range of productive jobs — from husking rice and keeping chickens to mending fishing-nets — but rarely earn money. And they usually forego their right of inheritance in order to keep good relations with a brother or (if widowed) a brother-in-law. Meanwhile, as Barbara Brown points out in her 'Women in Bangladesh' article in *CUSO Journal* 1984, a wife 'will understandably try to bear as many (male) children as quickly as possible, to increase her security within her husband's family'. It is not surprising that family planning programs have not achieved their targets of reducing the rate of population growth.

The NGOs, then, have a wide choice of jobs to do. The question that is most difficult to answer is how deeply they should dig through layers of these problems. For the deeper they dig, the more likely they are to hit the stony resistance of the local power elites, the landowners and their allies.

To stick only to organizations with which Canadian NGOs and assistance have been connected, their response to this question has varied. At one end, the Mennonite Central Committee has confined itself to strictly technical training, mainly in agriculture. On the other hand, the Proshika project of training and organizing groups of landless people, which CUSO and later CIDA have supported since 1975 with more than \$3 million, has tackled problems of poverty at different levels. Some of its training, like vaccination of poultry and maintenance of irrigation equipment, is strictly technical. But all the training it has done in "human development" — and most of the 4000 or more village groups formed under Proshika have had such training — inevitably gets into politics as villagers become aware of the power structures around them. Indeed, the first indigenous NGO in this field, the Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC), has published two detailed studies with revealing titles: *The Net: Power Structure in Ten Villages* and *Who Gets What and Why: Resource Allocation in a Bangladesh Village*.

In some cases of individual injustice, Proshika groups have been able to gain redress from powerful local figures. But other attempts to generate income and win some bargaining power in local affairs have failed. For example, some groups put money into irrigation pumps to sell a water supply to the landowners (or their share-croppers). But soon the landowners decided they did not want to rely on such groups — for their interests might conflict — and took to sinking their own tubewells.

The organization that has been forced to confront village authorities has been the Banchte Shekha ("Learning to Live") movement in Jessore district. It is a women's organisation set up (in its own words) "to build confidence and strength of the most exploited groups in the process of

taking control over their lives and attaining human dignity". As a teacher, Angela Gomes, who started it in 1981, saw poor children being kept out of school "because they had no pencil or no nice dress".

She started bicycling round villages, learning about the problems behind such scenes — especially the wretched condition of divorced or widowed women.

She was often chased out of villages by men, but in three years she has managed to set up more than 300 groups who have learned how to argue for their rights, whether it is access to a pond or recovery of some pots that were pawned to buy rice. As well, some 8000 women have enrolled in small business cooperatives and in training courses. This led to the building of a training and production centre near Jessore, and a skirmish with village leaders and "touts" who intimidated the contractors. So 500 women set to preparing the site themselves . . . and the male workers were shamed into returning. Banchte Shekha women have good leadership in the quietly formidable Ms Gomes; they have useful support from CUSO and Inter Pares; they have esprit de corps — a group in Jessore sang us one of their action songs "Amra Bumihin" ("We are the landless"). And they have many tough battles ahead.

### Mutual benefit groups

A more conciliatory approach is followed by Humayun Reza, who inspired the rural development program that is supported on a large scale by the Unitarian Service Committee (USC Canada) and CIDA. Humayun believes something that Proshika would deny: that the landless can combine with the small landowners (at least up to 3 acres) in groups working the land for mutual, if unequal, benefit.

He has organized them into groups of 10 families, who before they receive any land have to show their commitment by going through a literacy class and starting a savings club. As a group with this knowledge and discipline, they are able to make more favorable agreements to lease land. The pattern is for 10 families to lease a 10-acre block from several landowners for five years, and pay them only a quarter of the return. But the landowners are happy, since the overall yield is higher, because the group soon adds irrigation and a second crop. These arrangements take time to make, and 10-family groups for small business are growing faster. But the USC program under Humayun Reza has had remarkable success in the Dinajpur district of northwest Bangladesh; and the training centre started there in 1984 will have difficulty producing enough development workers to supervise the thousands of families applying to join the program.

Can all these grassroots efforts thrive in the changing political situation? At present, they enjoy the support of some far-sighted officials, notably Agriculture Minister Obaidullah Khan. But if the government becomes more firmly established at sub-district level and its officials opt for apparent stability alongside the landowning elite, rather than trying to march with change, there could be clashes and the hopes of the landless could be dashed again. The flight of the small bird is as uncertain as ever. □