

*During the last week of April, I visited Bangladesh on behalf of the Bangladesh Relief Fund. I wanted to check on the progress of the projects that Muhit Rahman had initiated in December. Here is what I saw while visiting two locations:*

**1. Fisheries Loan and Revolving Fund:** BRF has invested in a fisheries project in Manikganj, about two hours west of Dhaka, Bangladesh's capital city. A loan from BRF helped hire more than 200 workers to deepen two large ponds, which will produce fish for sale in local markets. Repayments from the BRF loan will go into a revolving fund, which will be used for loans to small enterprises.

In Bangladesh, water rules the land. During the monsoon, which is roughly June through September, much of the landscape is covered by water flowing toward the Bay of Bengal. During the dry season (October through May) the floodwater recedes. An enormous amount of water remains, however, flowing through rivers or standing in ponds.

Fish from the Bay, the rivers and the ponds are staples of the diet of Bangladesh -- and also staples of the economy. From the rivers comes the famous *hilsa* fish, a fragrant favorite of Bengali cuisine. From the thousands of ponds scattered among rice fields, come carp, catfish, and freshwater shrimp, as well as many other kinds of fish.

The day was hot and sunny when I visited the fishery in which BRF has invested.

Zia (A. A. Ziauddin), the businessman who owns the fishery project, actually manages two fishery projects. For a non-governmental organization that works with fishermen in the area, he manages several ponds. On his own land, he operates two large ponds.

Both groups of ponds are only a few kilometers from the Jamuna River. In 2004, when record floods covered half the country, the Jamuna topped its banks and floodwaters topped the edges of Zia's ponds. His inventory swam away. BRF's investment helped Zia deepen his ponds and build up their borders -- a job that required several weeks, and employed 210 day laborers. The employment of the day laborers is the first employment-generation result from BRF's investment.

I saw dozens of men swing angled shovels into banks of gunmetal-gray mud, load shovelfuls of mud into baskets, swing them onto a co-worker's head. That worker then plodded slowly uphill, and tipped the basket so that the mud fell onto a field of banana plants. The pond-deepening project had a side benefit, Zia said: "The mud is so rich, you don't need to use fertilizer for two years."

**2. Cow-Lending Project: Cows will be loaned to women to raise for milk to sell. Any calves born from the cows will be raised and sold.**

I also visited the health-oriented NGO where I previously worked. The People's Health Center (known as GK) will undertake three projects with the fund's help. One had already begun. It is a micro-lending program, but instead of lending money it lends cows.

The cows are being loaned to women in Gaibanda, in the northeast of the country, alongside the Jamuna River. Gaibanda is district where Muhit has family connections. He has an aunt who lives in Bharatkali, a village that with each year's relentless erosion, gets closer to the banks of the Jamuna. Bharatkali is one of Gaiband's many villages and also the location of the primary school that is being supported by BRF

Gaibanda not only has sentimental significance for Muhit's family. It also is an area with a tremendous need for assistance.

The rivers that run through Gaibanda, especially the Jamuna, carry huge loads of silt and sand. Every year, silt and sand islands (known as *chars*) build up in the river bed. A map of the area shows the Jamuna channels forming a complex set of channels and islands, almost directly north to south -- like a heavy, complex falling straight down a woman's back. People who settle on them cultivate soil that is relatively poor because of its high sand content. They also live very insecure lives. Their small homesteads are regularly flooded out. For these and other reasons, most people who live on the *chars* are extremely poor, and stay poor. They settle on the *chars* because they have no other land to cultivate, and no other skills than farming.

I was unable to visit Gaibanda during my one-week trip. But Shafique Khan, a senior GK worker, had visited just before I arrived and gave a verbal report. He said that although the people living on the *chars* are desperately poor, the women are determined to get ahead by borrowing cows, which will produce milk for sale. When calves are born, the women will raise and then sell them.

The women, Khan observed, also are quite straightforward and opinionated. Khan said this with a smile pulling at the corner of his mouth. Bengalis as a people are famously talkative, poetic and opinionated. Although Bengali women are taught to be subservient and quiet in many situations, most Bengali women have plenty of opinions to spare.

The liveliness of the Gaibanda *char* women was hard to tell from the photographs Khan brought back. Each woman cast her eyes modestly downward, and draped her *saree* (made of colorful fabric, in designs and weight I know to be among the cheapest available) deferentially over her head. Each one, standing next to her new cow, stood straight. The body language of pride and hope was hard to miss.

I hope that, on my next trip, I will meet them and hear more about their cows – and their hopes. In the meantime, I had a terrific time reconnecting with old friends at GK. When I first met many of them, in 1977. I joined the GK team, so to speak. Now, we are on the same team again, trying to offer assistance to Bangladesh.

**3. McNeil Fellowships; Providing scholarships to selected women to train as pharmacists/medical assistants.**

This program, to be performed under the auspices of GK's university, will train village women as para-pharmacists. They will return to their villages, and practice there. The purpose of the program is to provide a counter-weight to the influence of poorly trained local pharmacists, salesmen, and 'quack' (self-trained) doctors. Although some of these local people may be well-meaning, they all are tempted to sell the most expensive medicines instead of the most effective. Often, they counsel patients to take antibiotics for all medical conditions, instead of only those conditions for which antibiotics are appropriate. Incorrect antibiotic use has led to stronger strains of scourges such as tuberculosis (TB), and reduced the effectiveness of antibiotics for everyone.

GK has been training young men and women, but mostly young women, as paramedics for nearly 30 years. Its training program is internationally known and respected.

The scholarship program had not yet started when I visited. I had a very quick meeting with Zafrullah Chowdhury, one of GK's founders and the initiator of new ventures. We literally met while getting on (I) and off (he) the same plane. He reported that after additional analysis, he had determined that the cost per individual is likely to be twice as much as initially estimated. BRF has decided that the project is worthwhile—at least on a pilot basis—even with the higher estimated costs and has apprised GK of such.

Zafrullah had just returned from a meeting in Malaysia where, among other things, he discussed the need to train para-pharmacists for villages. The idea met with approval at the meeting, because many countries have similar conditions in their villages: low levels of education, literacy and medical knowledge lead to incorrect dosing of antibiotics, incorrect prescriptions, and too much spending of families' scarce money on useless and even harmful potions.

**4. Savar Poultry Project: One afternoon, Muhit's mother, Dilara, took me to visit the two sheds full of pullets that sit on a dry and dusty patch of earth in Savar, about one hour outside Dhaka.**

In the 28 years since I first went to Bangladesh, Savar has become industrialized in a modest way. Small factories and stores cluster alongside one main highway (on which 3 cars can just barely drive abreast) and the new, narrow roads. There are even a few tall buildings alongside the road. A few enterprises -- such as GK, a nearby university, army cantonment, and the grounds of a memorial to the 1971 war -- have planted trees and now have green campuses full of shade. Still, many trees, including the formerly ubiquitous jackfruit trees, have been felled to make way for growing industry.

Overall, though, Savar is never more hot, dusty and dry than off of the roads, in unimproved fields where the jackfruit trees' heavy shade is welcome but all too limited. That's where pullets are being raised in two sheds, about 50 feet long, sitting parallel to each other on a small plot of land owned by Muhit's relatives (the land was otherwise idle and its use is free.)

The pullets were about three months old when I saw them. When we left, the young man who manages the farm, with his wife and relatives, rode with us to the main road. He then bid us goodbye, got out of the car and walked off to fetch vaccines.

Raising chickens for sale has become a cottage industry all over Bangladesh. Most chicken farms consist of a shed or two, where chicks or pullets are fed until they are ready for sale.

I was struck by two of the challenges of raising chickens: keeping the chickens free of disease, and keeping them cool enough to survive in hot weather.

Headlines from Asia recently have trumpeted the toll taken by Asian bird flu. Hundreds of thousands of chickens have been slaughtered in an attempt to keep the flu from spreading. Bangladesh is free from the kind of infection that has affected countries such as Hong Kong and Thailand -- at least for now.

Nevertheless, chickens must be raised with care to ward off disease. Below the steps to each shed was a pan of purplish liquid: Anyone who walks into the shed to feed the chickens must dip the soles of his or her feet into a solution of potassium permanganate, which leaves your feet purple but disinfected. They must be vaccinated to guard against illnesses that could wipe out a shed full of chickens, and eliminate a season's investment.

**5. Other:** The Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee, now known simply as BRAC, is internationally known for running a network of small schools in the tens of thousands of villages. The schools cater to girls, who are often the lowest on the family priority list when it comes to deciding which children from a poor family will get to attend school. BRAC also has many other projects around Bangladesh, from a dairy that produces packaged milk to Aarong, a fashionable store selling gorgeous, handmade clothing and crafts.

Muhit had visited BRAC and explored the idea of a price-support project to help farmers in a few villages in the upper western quadrant of the country. Although Dhaka is prosperous, compared to what I first saw 28 years ago, the districts to the north and west are drier, and farther from Dhaka's busy urban market. Chicken farmers, for instance, sell their chickens for considerably less than the going price in Dhaka.

The price support idea, which was BRAC's proposal, is currently up in the air. When Muhit returns to Dhaka in June, perhaps he can decide whether to pursue it.