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Two Decades of Change in a Bangladeshi Village

This description of a revisit to village Fatepur turns on its head several existing, stereotypical notions of what constitutes development in Bangladesh. The villagers' assessment of what counts – old-fashioned investments in water control and transport infrastructure, as principal agents of progress – is in striking contrast to opinions and facts cited by NGOs and accepted as reality by many donor institutions. More importantly progress has been possible, despite several extraneous contributing factors, due to the ingenuity and vitality demonstrated by the people.

JOHN BRISCOE

Twenty-two years ago I lived for a year in the village of Fatepur, located on an island where the braided distributaries of the world's second largest river system usually merge and sometimes – as in this year's catastrophic floods – collide. My stay in Fatepur was a profound and radicalising experience, in which I learned first-hand of the degrading and dehumanising struggle for survival in one of the poorest areas of the world. What I saw and learned changed the course of my life. Most immediately it led to me taking a public position against the ways in which foreign aid worked in Bangladesh, being fired from my job, and subsequently being declared a 'persona-non-grata' in the country. It also led me to search for 'a better way' and to several years as a solidarity worker in the ministry of water of the newly-independent Marxist-Leninist Peoples' republic of Mozambique. After a long and unpredicted intellectual and emotional journey, it eventually led to me working in the World Bank.

For years I have thought about going back to Fatepur, to visit my many friends there, and to see how their lives had changed. As a water engineer, there was a professional curiosity, too, since a 60 kilometre flood protection embankment was built around the island in the late 1980s. I returned to Fatepur for a week in 1998, staying with the family that had been my host 22 years earlier. I appreciate the opportunity to share my impressions with you.

Twenty-one years ago life there was nasty, brutish and short. Malnutrition and disease were daily facts of life – life expectancy was less than 50 years. Social and political upheavals were endemic. These included the devastating Bengal famine precipitated by the British in 1943 (and recalled vividly by many in the village), the India-Pakistan war of 1965, the war of independence in 1971 and the subsequent years of political instability. Each upheaval had exacted a terrible price, with the vulnerable most directly affected.

Fatepur in 1977

In 1977 Fatepur was under several metres of water for four months every year, and always isolated from the rest of the world. The nearest market was one hour away by country boat; there was not even a tea stall in the village. I once went to the market town with a woman and her sick child, and learned that at the age of 30 the woman was leaving the village for the first time. Technology was primitive. This involved backbreaking and inhuman work: for instance, barges going upriver would be pulled by teams of 'human mules' who trudged along towpaths on the muddy banks. In other instances the results were stunningly beautiful. In the monsoon months, the flooded fields were transformed into an emerald-green sea by the exuberant but low-yielding indigenous floating rice. And each winter the Meghna river would become a picture postcard, as the workers of Fatepur would join a flotilla of elegant wooden boats, all under

billowing white – and rose-colored sails, going to harvest paddy in the Sylhet Depression. The flotilla would return weeks later, with the hulls now weighted down with the grain which was the currency for their work. Behind this beauty lurked a reality of low productivity, vulnerability and suffering.

Harsh as this life was in general, it was much harsher still for the landless and the minority (Hindu) fishermen. In the 1970s there were still remnants of the feudal 'zamindar' system, with its protection of some poor people through patron-client relationships. But observing village life in Fatepur was like reading Marx and Engels on 19th century Europe – these paternalistic relationships were rapidly being superseded by the "naked, shameless and direct exploitation of the market". This was not pretty, either in form (often of uninhibited violence) or in outcome (with the poor forced below the margin of subsistence). During my year in the village, a number of Hindu fishing families were compelled, at knife-point, to sell their meagre plots to one of the more aggressive families in the village. The Hindu fishing community was literally being forced into the river, with some families living for months on end with a foot of water covering the floor of their make-shift shacks.

Fatepur in 1998

In preparation for my visit, I re-read the reams of notes I had taken during my 1977 stay in the village. I formulated a set of issues I would discuss with the families – drawn from all strata of Fatepur society – I had known best. I had predicted in the late 1970s that without revolutionary social and political change the (then) proposed flood control and irrigation project would have massively negative consequences for the poor and for the environment. Since the project had, in fact, been completed in the late 1980s, I went back with considerable trepidation.

What I found astounded me. I found a society dramatically different both from the one I knew and the one I anticipated. Today the people of Fatepur lead lives which are incomparably better than they were twenty years ago. These improvements are manifested in a myriad of ways – in the obvious physical health of most people; in the rarity of a smallpox-scarred face; in the quality of people's clothes; in

the quality of their houses, water supply and toilets; in the number of schools and attendance at these; in the emergence of women into the public domain; in the intensity of work both on the land and in the new, bustling, markets; in the use of modern techniques for agriculture, fish farming and transport. While the technological nirvana painted on the rickshaws of Dhaka is not yet a reality, the changes are immense!

Making a Difference

These changes in Fatepur are, in part, a reflection of changes which have happened throughout Bangladesh. Although the average person still lives on less than a dollar a day, during the past two decades national per capita income has almost doubled, infant mortality has declined by a half and the average woman lives 15 years longer. A typical Bangladeshi woman today has only about three children, whereas her mother had seven.

In Fatepur these universal changes have been amplified by the impact of the embankment. The embankment got off to a terrible start, when a section of the dyke was breached during the first two monsoon seasons of 1987 and 1988. But lessons were learned, and they have been applied. Last year the crests from the snow-fed Brahmaputra and the rain-fed Meghna rivers coincided, and the great rivers collided rather than merged at the south-east corner of the island. The result was the longest flood in Bangladesh in living memory, a flood which has cost Bangladesh an estimated 10 per cent of the gross national product. A friend from the area wrote me about the scene during the floods:

This year monsoon was very bad for us. Whole country was under water for about two and half months. The exception was in Fatepur. The embankment was under threat and they could save it with the help of the community people. They were watching the risk spots whole day and night. So, Fatepur was completely free from flood but the people were very anxious and prepared for any emergency. Now is the time for harvesting the crops as usual. Overall, there was no damage inside the embankment. In the outside area, the crop was not good and also winter plantation (paddy, potato) is late as the flood water receded slowly and the water was in the field for long time.

The impact of the embankment has not been limited to protection from floods, but has permeated every aspect of people's lives – in comparison with a similar nearby area which was not included in the embankment, rice production is twice as high,

incomes are 50 per cent higher, and death rates for children are a third less.

What is even more remarkable (and quite the opposite of my predictions in the 1970s), is that the poor have shared in this progress. The critical factor has been a sharp increase in the demand for labour, as a result of more intensive and productive agriculture. And as landowners have become richer, they have chosen to do less farm work themselves, as was already incipient in 1977. At that time my host in the village would introduce me by reciting my educational qualifications, to which the incredulous listener would invariably ask: "If he's really so well educated, then what is he doing here?" Today this preference for non-farm work is exemplified by the zamindar family of Fatepur. In 1977, although they were diversifying into the contracting and services businesses, the zamindar family lived in the village and managed their own lands. Today they still own the land, but it is farmed by hired labour. The patriarch has moved into the market town, where his one son now manages the cold storage factory. The other son is a lawyer in Dhaka.

The upshot is that a growing market for agricultural labour has been left for the poor, much to their benefit. No longer do the landless labourers of Fatepur go on the annual pilgrimage to harvest paddy in Sylhet – 'we have too much work here', they explain. Although there has been migration of poor people onto the island, when compared to a similar area outside the embankment, landless labourers have a third more income, consume about a half more food and enroll three times as many of their children in school.

The embankment has introduced more ambiguous changes for fishermen and their families, who are vulnerable both because they depend on overexploited common property (the rivers), and because they are a Hindu minority in a Muslim country. In 1977 the Hindu fishing families of Fatepur lived in unspeakable misery in the segregated and overcrowded neighbourhood of Malopara. They were threatened by a powerful neighbour who coveted their land and who used ethnicity as a weapon against them. Upon my return to Fatepur, the inexorable process of pushing the Hindu fishing families out of Malopara was complete. What was once Malopara is now an orchard for the second biggest landowning family of Fatepur. The Hindu community split into several parts – one group moved to Balu Char, an area of Fatepur just inside the embankment; another group migrated to the town of Saitnal, on the banks of the Meghna at the opposite end

of the island; and several families migrated to India. I met with a number of the Hindu fishing families in Balu Char. They, like their fellow-fishermen elsewhere, caught fewer fish now than they had 20 years ago. And they (correctly) saw the increase in embankments as a factor which contributed to the decline of the catch. But they also confirmed that the changes in Fatepur had benefited them in indirect ways. While the decline in fish production from the river has been offset by increases in cultivated fish production, there is a strong preference for river fish, which consequently now sell at higher prices. The Hindu fishing families had also faced the inevitable and diversified out of fishing into other occupations, such as rickshaw pulling and marketing, opportunities which existed because of the buoyant economy of the island. Available data provide only one statistic which can be used to assess the net effect of these changes on the families of fishermen. The food intake of fishing families on the island is 16 per cent higher than that of fishing families in a similar area outside the embankment.

Perception of Change

I discussed the changes in Fatepur with dozens of villagers from all walks of life. Some were dissatisfied with that which the embankment had wrought. While 14,000 hectares are irrigated by the project, there is understandable discontent among those who farm the 3,000 hectares of relatively high land which are not irrigated. There is also understandable lingering discontent among those who had their lands appropriated for the physical works in the project. Compensation rates were consistent with pre-project land prices, but there were long delays and they had to pay large bribes to government officials.

These important exceptions notwithstanding, there was consensus among the vast majority of the people of the island that their lives had improved immeasurably in the past two decades. And there is virtual unanimity among the people of the island that 'the embankment' was the primary reason life had improved so much. There was similar unanimity about the second most common cause of change, namely, 'improved communications'. In Fatepur this means both roads on the island and nationwide investments in roads and bridges and motorisation of the river boats. This has meant easier access for those providing social and commercial services, and lower costs in getting goods to market.

These positive impacts notwithstanding, there have been major flaws in the way

in which the project has been executed. Poor construction quality, exacerbated by corruption, led to failure of the embankment and flooding of the island during the two initial years. Similarly, the quality of construction and operation of the internal drainage and irrigation systems could be much better. Too many farmers get an inadequate service or none at all, and just 10 years after construction, major rehabilitation is required. Even today there is little systematic involvement of users, despite worldwide experience which has shown how important this is for service and satisfaction. The net result is that the project performs at only a fraction of its capacity, and operates courtesy of large subsidies from the government budget. From experiences in many other countries it is evident that this can change, but it is equally evident that this will only happen when there is pressure from both the top and from the bottom.

Role of NGOs

There is a long history in Bengal of action 'from the top'. In the colonial time, feudal landlords built and maintained flood embankments and other public infrastructure. An important challenge for post-colonial Bengal was to develop modern arrangements for this vital public task. The most creative response came from Akhter Hameed Khan, founder of the renowned Comilla Rural Development Academy. Khan's genius was to articulate the idea of 'co-production' of public infrastructure by organised beneficiaries and accountable service agencies. In 1970 Akhter Hameed "saw the servicing agencies being pushed and prodded and even kicked by alert and intelligent farmers". In the intervening 30 years, little has been done in Bangladesh to channel this latent capacity into effective user organisations which demand accountability from government infrastructure service agencies.

What then, of the Bangladeshi non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and their role in organising users to demand that the government be accountable? Although there are many NGOs in Bangladesh – the number was 20,000 at last count, double the number just six years earlier – a few large organisations account for most of the \$300 million a year of foreign money channelled through NGOs. The most prominent of these are the world-famous Grameen Bank (which has pioneered small loans to poor women) and the Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC), which specialises in education, and has 20,000 full-time and 35,000 part-time teachers.

BRAC has played a useful role in Fatepur, by opening a number of schools. As the income of the poor on the island has risen, poor families have wanted to enrol more of their children in school. The supply of slots in government-run schools is limited and, as always, it is the poor who are denied access when there is rationing. Accordingly, schools run by NGOs have made an important contribution to lifting enrolment of children from landless families from the 22 per cent which characterises nearby areas to the 70 per cent level on the island. NGOs have also helped by providing credit to meet a demand which has soared, as farmers have switched to more input-intensive farming and as incomes have risen. Farmers and landless people on the island use almost twice as much credit as those living outside the embankment.

The primary modus operandi of NGOs in this village is as alternative providers of individual services: there is no NGO which works with users of the irrigation services to make these function more effectively and accountably. Similarly despite widespread dissatisfaction with illegal charges, diversion of drugs and supplies and other abuses in the government health system, there are no 'health watch groups'. Most of the NGOs want nothing to do with government officials or agencies, but just want to 'do their own thing'. They are widely viewed as 'the other government in Bangladesh', and generally seem satisfied with this role.

The only evidence of any NGO involvement with the embankment project is a blistering critique (in the form of a video) by Proshika, one of the largest Bangladeshi NGOs. The Proshika video is replete with images of poor and sick women and children, whose misery, the viewer is informed, is all directly attributable to the embankment. There is a remarkable disconnect between the message of this video, and the large body of data available on the area (none of which is referred to or cited in the video) and the perceptions of ordinary people. It gives voice to the fear of many Bangladeshis that 'the NGOs are becoming a parallel state, financed by foreigners and accountable to nobody'.

The lack of engagement between NGOs and the government seems particularly inappropriate given the signs of emergence of 'new forms of politics'. While Bangladesh national politics is notoriously partisan and non-productive (and remains that way), there is a glimmer of hope in the Fatepur area. The current government reserved three spots on the 12-person local councils for women. A neighbour of mine

in the village, Minu Prodhan, is one of the first cohort of elected women. The advance this represents for women is obvious, but it also means an improvement in the quality of local government. Because women politicians represent a break from the past, they appear to be held to different and higher standards. In the Fatepur area, at least, Minu and the other women who have been elected are ones of high moral standing, and with a high level of demonstrated commitment to their communities.

More surprising was evidence of the emergence of a new type of politician on the national stage. As I went around the island, I was told about the member of parliament who represents the island. What I consistently heard was that this was 'a different type of politician', one who had demonstrated his commitment to the people (he was a freedom fighter in the war against Pakistan in 1971), but, more importantly, one who was pulling together all strands of civil society on the island and beyond to address the development challenges of his electorate. Because news travels fast in Bangladesh, I was invited to meet this member of parliament in Dhaka on my return. I did, and was impressed. I do not know how many there are like him – educated, innovative and dedicated to making government much more accountable. But if there are others, then there is hope that, working with an organised populace, they can start ensuring that people become the subjects, not the objects, of government-sponsored development programmes.

Nature of Development

Upon my return to Fatepur I was struck by the dialectic nature of the development process: as the Chinese say, when you open a window you get fresh air, but the mosquitoes also come in. Let me give you two examples – of justice systems and of gender roles.

The justice system of the old Fatepur was sophisticated and remarkably effective in many ways. When my wallet (with all of ten dollars in it) was stolen from my room in 1977, the elders considered this an unacceptable blot on the good name of the village, and so pulled out all the stops, enlisting the services of a psychic from a neighbouring village. The psychic wrote some words on an egg. She instructed that the egg be placed in my room the next evening at the time the wallet had been pilfered. The face of the robber would then be revealed in the egg! Word was spread throughout the village that this was being done, leading to the robber making a stupid

move and revealing his guilt. There was then a meeting of the elders and some harsh physical punishment.

It is true that this traditional system was dominated by the elite of the village. But it was not true that it always served only their purposes. In 1977 I attended a session of the local informal court or 'dorba'. The court had jurisdiction over Fatepur and about a dozen or so neighboring villages. Five elders sat in judgment. The cases were heard in public, with several cases running simultaneously. The case of 'the tree and the toilet' was typical. Three families owed a tree together. Two of the families were relatively wealthy. The owners sold the branches of the tree for 70 taka (about \$5 at the time). The two wealthy families decided that the proceeds would be used for building a latrine which could, in principle, be used by all three families. The poor family did not want the latrine, but wanted their share of the proceeds in cash. The process was exhaustive and contentious. But judgment was swift and just – the two rich families were ordered to pay the poor family their 23 taka then and there. Mechanisms such as this – and during my stay the dorba handled cases as serious as murder – showed the local informal justice system to be remarkably sophisticated and effective in this 'closed village'.

Today the situation is radically different. The market town is now only 15 minutes away by rickshaw and motor launch, and strangers come and go through the village. Theft has increased substantially. During my week back in Fatepur, a thief dug through the dirt floor of a neighbour's house and stole a battery-operated television set. But now there are not just a few known potential culprits, and no effective local mechanisms for addressing the crime. And the formal systems to do not work (they never did). The 'open Fatepur' has no mechanisms for dealing with the rising problem of crime.

Twenty-five years ago the inconceivable happened in the neighbouring village of Enayetnagar – a woman got a paying job! The circumstances are revealing. A female American nutritionist doing research in the area needed to hire a local woman to monitor breastfeeding practices. She was told that religious strictures would not permit this, but she persisted and insisted. Finally the eldest daughter of the zamindar family from the village of Enayetnagar came forth. **Kohinoor was educated, wanted to work and was encouraged by her parents.** Because of the social standing of her family, this was accepted by the society at large. The floodgates were open and gender roles would never be the same!

I had a personal experience of the ways in which ideologies adjust to opportunity in 1977. I was hiring a woman to do some observational work on water use practices. The village mullah came storming in to see me. After remonstrating that the Koran prohibited women to work out of the home, he then informed me "my wife is applying for the job, and I trust you will ensure she gets it, but don't interpret this as meaning that I am in favour of women working!"

Today the situation in Fatepur is totally different. No longer do women scurry away like mice at the approach of a man. There is a sea change in the reality of women's life, and in their prospects. The causes are varied. BRAC, the Grameen Bank and other NGOs have played a progressive role throughout the country, by focusing their development efforts on women. In Fatepur at least, economic opportunity and rising female education have been equally important. And nationally, the private sector has been vital. The single greatest economic success in Bangladesh has been the garment industry, with exports rising from \$7 million in 1981 to \$3,000 million in 1997. This industry employs over a million people, most of whom are women, many of whom have become the main breadwinners for many families. In the words of one colleague who has also recently returned to Bangladesh after an absence of two decades:

It is positively thrilling to watch the garment workers striding off to work at 7 am in Dhaka! Their heads are high, their arms swinging, their stride confident. They look more like NFL quarterbacks striding onto the field for the Superbowl than Bangladeshi women. The sight will knock you over! I can't explain the significance to my colleagues because they did not see, as I did, the women of 1975, scurrying along behind the trees, crouched down, faces hidden behind black 'chadors' and umbrellas, afraid to visit the market.

'Sweatshops' these may be in western eyes; in Bangladesh they offer a way out of poverty for millions of women, and mean that gender roles will never be the same.

As with all other positive developments, there are some clouds on the horizon. In some parts of the country the mullahs hate NGOs for eroding the traditional male-dominated structure, and occasionally attack their offices. This is not an issue in Fatepur, where no one raises an eyebrow at the fact that Minu Proddhan's election poster is pasted on the wall of the mosque. Rather, the more worrying issue with changing gender roles runs deeper. The contrast between the teenage girls and boys is striking. The girls are direct and open, with none of the sophisticated and protec-

tive filters that are a reality for teenagers in western societies. The boys are quite different. They seem unsure of their identity, and struggling to establish their status. Although there is no electricity in Fatepur, there is in Matlab, the now-accessible market town. And there is little doubt that the worldview of the boys is defined in part by what is brought in and valued – Baywatch, I am told, is the most popular television show in Bangladesh! At some level this is amusing and trivial, but there are worrying signs. In schools there are mounting problems with indiscipline among boys, with cheating in exams and with poor performance, while the girls go from strength to strength. And there are emerging problems with rape, alcohol and drugs. While there remain great cohesive forces in Bangladeshi society, one worries about whether the emerging women of Bangladesh will have male counterparts who can accompany them on their journey.

I found myself wondering, too, about other issues, from the important to the trivial: What a profound impact returning immigrants have had on Bangladeshi society; what does corruption mean in a society in which the boundary between the individual and the collective is so fuzzy? how could a self-righteous young socialist-ecologist (me!) have been so wrong 20 years ago? is the World Bank being too uncritical in its dealings with NGOs, and relying on them too heavily as representing the views of ordinary people? who would have thought that a Fatepur family would actually have a pet dog (even though it still remains beyond the bounds of the Fatepur imagination that such a dog could have his own name and be known as anything but 'dog'); how could I explain to my 12-year old daughter that several Fatepur men explored the possibility of her marriage to their sons as a way of getting a foothold in America?

Conclusion

In most corners of the world, the word 'Bangladesh' conjures up an image of cyclones, famines, outstretched hands and pot-bellied babies. Of a 'basketcase', as Henry Kissinger so delicately put it in the 1970s. While most Bangladeshis are still very poor, progress has been made over the last 20 years which is as remarkable as it is little noticed. The root cause of this progress is obvious: it is the incredible ingenuity and vitality of the people. But this potential has always been there, and evidently something has changed in the environment which has enabled this potential to blossom. In the country as a

whole there are many contributing factors – a period of relative peace, increased investment by the private sector, and activity by Bangladeshi NGOs. But in Fatepur, notwithstanding the all-too-familiar presence of corruption and lack of accountability, the people have no doubt that old-fashioned investments in water control and transport infrastructure have been the principal engine of progress. It is striking, and unsettling, that the villagers' assessment of 'what counts', is so drastically different from the conventional wisdom of the donors who play such an important role in Bangladesh and who so reflexively accept claims that the likes and dislikes of the NGOs reflect those of the common people. After the recent flood, for example, many external donors restricted donations of drugs and medical supplies only to NGOs, but household surveys by the World Health Organisation show that less than 1 per cent of sick people in the country use NGO services for acute care. And the executive summary of a recent World Bank report on poverty in Bangladesh mentions today's development buzzwords 'education', 'health', 'microcredit' and 'NGOs' 37 times. But it mentions infrastructure just once, and

never mentions the things which people in Fatepur say have made the difference – flood protection, irrigation and transport infrastructure.

When living in Fatepur 20 years ago, I lived in the shadow of Akhter Hameed Khan, the intellectual and moral giant who worked in this part of Bengal for thirty years. At the time Akhter Hameed wrote that "roads, drainage and embankments are the infrastructure of rural development... The farmers of lands not served by roads, not protected from floods, not irrigated during the winter, will mostly die in distress". What would Akhter Hameed, now an 80-year old man living under a fatwa in his native Pakistan, make of the changes in Fatepur? Arif Hasan, his gifted Karachi disciple and colleague, commented as follows:

The (Fatepur) paper could have been written about most rural areas of Pakistan. Here too, the subsistence economy has given way to a cash economy. Education has changed people's attitudes. New professions, business and commerce have created new relationships and the 'culture of poverty' is dead or dying. Government inputs, however inadequate and badly implemented, have changed the physical and social environment. Akhter Hameed Khan

strongly feels that the changes that have taken place, not only in Bangladesh but also in Pakistan, have created a new society and a new culture which needs to be nurtured and institutionalised, something Akhter Hameed Khan feels that no one is even trying to do...

In the beginning of this memo I described how my first sojourn in Fatepur had changed my life. The return visit has affected me profoundly, too. I have spent my life on development issues largely because of the reality of the South Africa in which I was born, and because of the influence of my mother, who ran an orphanage and creche in Soweto for many years. It is this which drove me to go and live in Fatepur 20 years ago, then to Mozambique and eventually to the World Bank. I came away from the week in Fatepur with a re-doubled commitment, and an exhilarating sense of how the sort of work I am privileged to do can make a difference in the lives of millions of poor people. It also left me with a sense of optimism about what people in places like Bangladesh can achieve if they are listened to and are given a leg up. Again Akhter Hameed Khan said it best: after reading an earlier draft of this essay, he smiled and said 'Bangladesh will go very far'. [27]

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