

A HISTORY OF BANGLADESH

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the Pakistan army to attack the nuclei of the autonomy movement. As the soldiers started their targeted killings in Dhaka and all over East Pakistan, they ignited the Bangladesh Liberation War. We will take up that story in chapter 16 but first we will consider the economic and cultural developments that underlay the political estrangement between East and West Pakistan.

CHAPTER 13

East Pakistani livelihoods

The political collapse of Pakistan had deep roots in economic frustration. In the 1940s, most supporters of Pakistan had been full of hope for the Bengal delta's rapid improvement. They thought that independence was bound to make the region flourish because it would rid itself of the exploitative colonial system and remove the landlords, merchants and officials who had personified it. Of course, Partition would create initial dislocations that needed to be overcome but the longer-term prospects were thought to be bright.

After Partition, however, things suddenly looked much more complicated. The Muslim League leadership was ill-prepared to govern, its policies were not geared towards invigorating the Bengal delta economy and its attempts to construct a national economy turned out to have numerous unanticipated effects. Moreover, population exchange was far more extensive and disruptive than had been expected. The early years of East Pakistan, as the Bengal delta was now known, were characterised not only by political volatility but also by economic turmoil.

POPULATION EXCHANGE

The Partition of 1947 was a demographic disruption of the first order. Huge numbers of people were on the move. In the Punjab, in the west, population exchange was a massive and swift fratricidal horror. In Bengal it was slower, not quite so violent, but equally massive. Here migration prefiguring Partition had begun in 1946, after riots in Kolkata, Noakhali and Bihar. In August 1947, at the time of Partition, a number of distinct groups began to migrate. Their mobility was not primarily the result of widespread purposeful communal rioting (as it was in far-away Punjab). Some moved to improve their career prospects or out of enthusiasm for the Pakistan experiment. Others fled a situation that they found intolerable.¹ For example, many well-off Hindus in East Pakistan were

confronted with a situation that they had not anticipated. They found that formerly respectful Muslim tenants, employees and neighbours, now freed from fear, expressed an antagonism that could take the form of stark intimidation, hatred and hostility. Unable to cope with this suddenly transformed atmosphere and feeling unprotected by the Pakistan authorities, many Hindus in East Pakistan saw no option but to leave their property and homeland behind and face an uncertain future in India. The reverse happened to many Muslims in northern and eastern India.² When such embittered refugees settled in their new homes, they often added fuel to already inflamed communal relations and helped dislodge families of the other religious community.

Nobody knows the size of these cross-border migrations. As one Bangladeshi poet put it much later in a poem entitled 'Broken Bengal':

Violently they pulled at the roots of the land,
And people were flung about in all directions,
No one kept account of who died and who survived.³

The two new states were quite unable to monitor the migrants and often manipulated the figures for political ends. By early 1948, when the flows reduced, officials guesstimated that about 800,000 people from India had migrated to East Pakistan and about a million people from East Pakistan were living in India. After these initial exchanges, cross-border migration did not come to an end, however. It continued in a boom-and-slump pattern over the years, fluctuating in response to political events such as India's 1949 invasion of Hyderabad (a region in the southern subcontinent that was poised to join Pakistan) and widespread communal rioting in both parts of Bengal in 1950. A third upsurge occurred in 1952 just before a passport and visa system was imposed. Up to then travel between India and East Pakistan had been relatively easy, with considerable return migration after each exodus. The remaining years of the 1950s saw little cross-border migration but it shot up again in 1961-5 after riots occurred in both parts of Bengal.

Muslims entering East Pakistan came mostly from neighbouring regions: West Bengal, Assam, Tripura and Bihar, but also from Uttar Pradesh in north India. The Pakistan authorities felt that they had a special duty towards the non-Bengali immigrants, whom they called 'Muhajirs' (persons leaving a place to seek sanctuary), a term recalling the migration (*hijra*) from Mecca to Medina that the Prophet and his followers had undertaken in 622 C.E. Some Muhajirs received state support such as housing and rations, many others had to fend for themselves.

Bengali immigrants (few of whom received any state aid at all) and many locals felt that the state showed partiality towards these non-Bengali newcomers.

Most migrants from East Pakistan ended up in Bengali-speaking regions in India. Kolkata became a city of refugees and a centre of East Bengali émigré nostalgia.⁴ Many lived in refugee camps for years.⁵ Among those who had left behind property in East Pakistan, some continued to derive income from tenants and sharecroppers for years after Partition. Eventually, however, they lost control of their houses, land and businesses, which the Pakistan state declared to be 'enemy property'.

It is important to realise that many non-Muslims migrated from East Pakistan but that far more stayed behind. Unlike West Pakistan, which saw its non-Muslim population dwindle into insignificance after Partition, East Pakistan continued to be home to about 10 million Hindus – one fifth of the population – and half a million Buddhists, Christians and others.⁶

A RURAL ECONOMY

Throughout the Pakistan period East Pakistan was a massively rural society: more than nine out of ten people lived in the countryside. For most East Pakistanis, life was closely linked to the rhythms of agriculture. A rural household's day would typically begin before dawn. The household tasks were allocated according to gender and age. The wife would light straw and cow-dung cakes in the courtyard hearth to prepare breakfast. Her father-in-law might amble off to attend early-morning prayer at the village mosque. As day broke she served a breakfast of left-over rice with salt, chillies and some vegetables to her husband, in-laws and children before sweeping the yard and feeding the family animals. Her husband then led the small bullocks along the village path, raised as a causeway above the floodplain, to the field, where he yoked them to the wooden plough. A son took the goats grazing and a daughter went to fetch water from the nearby pond. The wife and her mother-in-law spent their day cooking, cleaning, washing clothes, replastering the woven-bamboo walls of the house, taking care of the smaller children and tending the vegetable patch. The husband ploughed and had his lunch brought to him in the field. He returned home in the afternoon for a rest and then did odd jobs around the house. The children helped their parents, played or attended the village school. As daylight faded, the husband walked to the next village, where a market was held twice a week

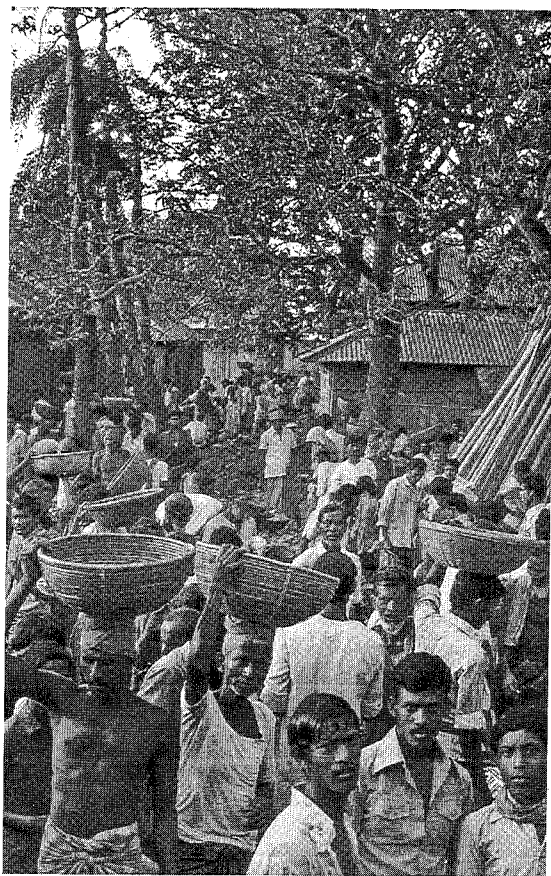


Plate 13.1. A village market.

(Plate 13.1). He sold a chicken there and returned with kerosene oil, fish, cigarettes and the latest gossip. After a late dinner, lit by small oil lamps, the family went to sleep around at 9 p.m.

The social order in the Bengal delta rested on kinship, not surprising in view of life in communities in which family groups worked the land and acted as society's main safety nets. The ideology of kinship was extremely strong and it even embraced people who were not related through blood or marriage. It was (and continues to be) a general rule that strangers quickly establish a fictive kinship bond. Thus a man would call the wife of an acquaintance 'elder sister' (*āpā, didi*) and an elderly shopkeeper

'uncle' (*cācā*). The kin ideology came with complex rules of respect and deference, codes of mutual obligation and protection and intense feelings of belonging. This is not to say that there could not be enormous tensions within the large, often multigenerational households that formed the basis of society, but kinship was undisputedly the model of the rural social order.

Agriculture dominated the economy. Around 1950, 80 per cent of the labour force worked in agriculture, contributing over 65 per cent of the gross product of East Pakistan. Less than 1 per cent of the labour force was engaged in large industry, transportation and public utilities.⁷ These figures changed gradually, but today most Bangladeshis still earn their living off the land: about 60 per cent of the labour force is deployed in agriculture. Strikingly, however, the economic importance of agrarian production has declined to about 20 per cent of the national product. This reflects both agrarian stagnation and the diversification of the economy in the twenty-first century.⁸

ECONOMIC POLICY

After Partition, the governments of both India and Pakistan were concerned with improving living standards and developing more balanced economies. They built on policies and plans initiated during the colonial period; the developmental state predated Partition but now became more dynamic. Both Pakistan and India prioritised rapid industrialisation but they chose different policies to achieve this. Pakistan, unlike India, sought to encourage private enterprise to the fullest. Except for a few strategic industries (arms, railways, hydroelectric power), the state's policy was to leave economic development to private entrepreneurs and to support them lavishly with subsidies and facilities. Where did these subsidies go? Pakistan spent much of its budget on security. In fact, it developed what Ayesha Jalal has called a 'political economy of defence' characterised by the maintenance of defence budgets well beyond its resource capacities.⁹ Between 1947 and 1970, more than half of Pakistan's central expenditure went to defence. About a third of the remaining budget went to industry and a mere one tenth to agriculture, starving development projects.¹⁰ As a result, army generals and the biggest entrepreneurs formed tight alliances with top bureaucrats. By the late 1960s, according to Pakistani chief economist Mahbub ul Haq, just twenty-two families owned 66 per cent of Pakistan's industrial wealth and controlled 87 per cent of the assets of the banking and insurance industries. This finding suggests an extreme

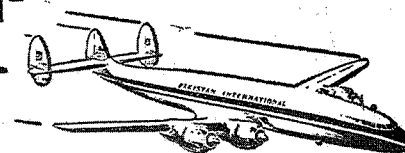
concentration of wealth and power but it also indicates something else: none of these families were Bengalis.

This concentration of economic power in the country's western wing, combined with political power in the hands of West Pakistanis as well, set the scene for a very imbalanced economic relationship between the two wings. For example, two-thirds of Pakistan's foreign exchange was earned in East Pakistan – mostly through jute exports – but much of it was diverted to West Pakistan.¹¹ In this way, West Pakistan received considerable resources from East Pakistan to finance its own development. On the other hand, the government spent less than a quarter of its budget in East Pakistan, where the majority of Pakistanis lived.¹² During the 1950s, per capita income rose in West Pakistan but declined in East Pakistan, and education and communications advanced much more rapidly in the West.¹³

When Pakistan came into being, the eastern wing had been at an economic disadvantage. In the Pakistan period the economic gap between the two wings increased. Although many in East Pakistan blamed this squarely on wilful discrimination in government development policy, there were other factors as well. Government allocations were larger in West Pakistan because most immigrant entrepreneurs settled there and because Pakistan's capital city was in West Pakistan. Foreign investments were lower in East Pakistan on account of the low level of indigenous entrepreneurship and considerable political volatility and labour unrest.¹⁴ Finally, the industrial and urban bias in Pakistan's development policies did not favour the overwhelmingly agricultural and rural economy of East Pakistan.

Facts of geography exacerbated Pakistan's lopsided economic development. First, Partition had left East Pakistan almost completely surrounded by India, cutting old trade links and transport connections. Partition amputated East Bengal from the regional economy that Assam, East Bengal and West Bengal had formed for centuries. This economic disruption put East Pakistan at a disadvantage to West Pakistan. Second, the distance between the two wings of Pakistan was 1,500 km as the crow flies but the uncertain and often difficult relations with India made the two wings actually even more remote. The principal means of communication between them was by sea around the mass of the Indian subcontinent and this added several thousands of kilometres to the effective distance between East and West Pakistan. Air traffic across Indian territory was possible most of the time, especially for passenger services (Plate 13.2), but only 1 per cent of what came to be known as 'inter-wing' trade went by air.

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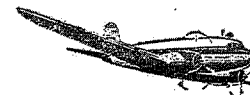
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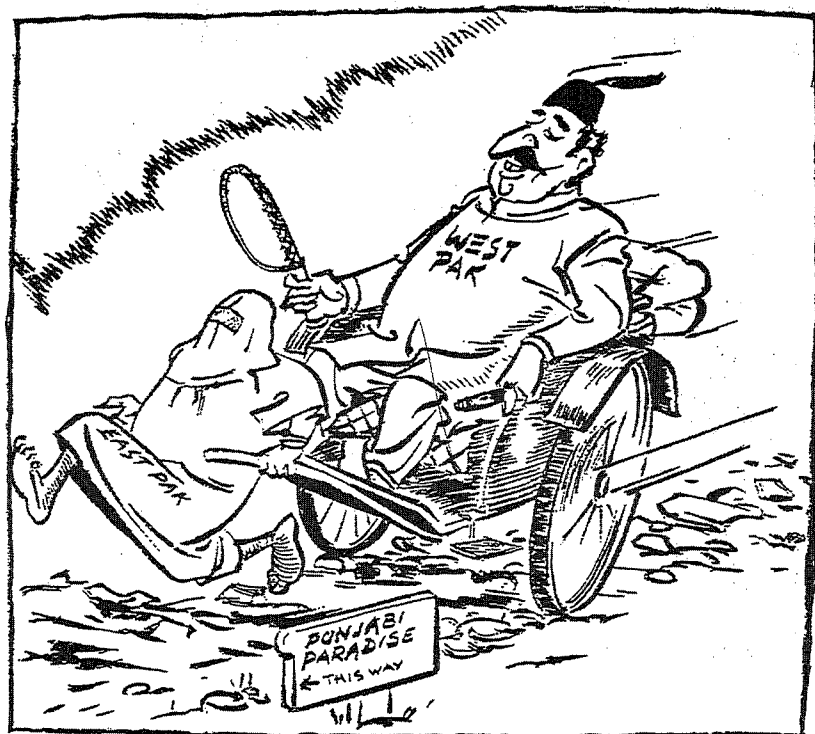
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Plate 13.2. Pakistan International Airlines announces its first direct flights between East and West Pakistan in 1955, eight years after the birth of Pakistan. Up to then, air travel between the 'wings' was via Indian airports.



AFTER THE HONEYMOON

Plate 13.3. 'After the honeymoon.' Cartoon by Ahmed.

Over time the economic disparities between the wings did not decline. Initially observers of Pakistan described the eastern wing as a region neglected and overlooked by the government. Gradually, however, most came round to the view that the region was not so much neglected as systematically exploited by West Pakistani overlords.¹⁵ As the post-Partition euphoria wore off, East Pakistanis began to see themselves very much in the role of second-class citizens, a feeling captured by cartoonist Ahmed in Plate 13.3.¹⁶

To some extent Pakistani rule resembled the Mughal annexation of the Bengal delta some 300 years previously. Dhaka had once again become the garrison town from which North Indian rulers sought to dominate the countryside, agriculture was the mainstay of the delta's economy and the delta's wealth subsidised the centre of power. The West Pakistan

elite consumed a large variety of goods from the Bengal delta, officers sent to East Pakistan felt that they had landed a hardship posting and economic improvement occurred mainly for the benefit of a select few in West Pakistan.

In one important way, however, Pakistani rule differed radically from Mughal rule. The Mughals had developed a system of land taxation in the Bengal delta that the British took over and adapted. Their 'permanent settlement' had made the zamindars (landlords/tax collectors) owners of land and payers of a fixed tax to the government. This system was now dismantled. The East Bengal State Acquisition and Tenancy Act of 1950 eliminated the superior rights of zamindars and those of the many intermediaries below them and made all land holders direct tenants under the government. It also imposed a ceiling on land holdings of about 13 hectares per family. The result was a land tax reform and an increase in state tax demand. It was not a land reform, however. By the end of British rule almost 75 per cent of the land had belonged to Hindu landlords, many of whom had been absentees or had migrated to India after Partition. The new legislation caused powerful Muslim families in the rural areas feverishly to reshuffle and invent claims on land as they grabbed the property of zamindars who had left. They portrayed intermediary rights as direct tenancies and circumvented the land ceiling by registering their fields in the name of dependents. The reform did eradicate the old tax-receiving elite but it actually reinforced the unequal agrarian structure of the delta. It denied sharecroppers any rights in land and equated them with wage labourers. It fell far short of the expectations of the smallholders and landless peasants who had expected to receive the excess land previously held by large land holders. Even though entitled to this land under the new law, they did not get it. In this regard the Pakistan experiment was a bitter disappointment to them: the utopia they had imagined never materialised.

For most inhabitants of East Pakistan, land was the main measure of wealth. Around 1960 some 20 per cent of the rural population had no access to land except as wage labourers. The vast majority of landholdings were quite small: over 50 per cent of all farms were smaller than 1 hectare (together accounting for only 16 per cent of the cultivated area) and almost 90 per cent were smaller than 3 hectares.¹⁷ To complicate matters, individual land holdings were usually fragmented into many different small plots – a result of partible inheritance as well as the need to own both low-lying and higher land. State attempts to consolidate these plots met with fierce resistance and had to be abandoned.

With such small land holdings and very little state investment in agriculture, yields were low and poverty widespread. Nevertheless, rice yields increased from 900 kg of clean rice per hectare in the early 1950s to 1,100 kg in the late 1960s, an increase that is thought to have been largely the result of an ever more intense application of labour.¹⁸

Rice was East Pakistan's staple food but jute was its most important export crop. The fast-growing seasonal jute plant, indigenous in the region, yielded a fibre that was sought after worldwide for making bags, rope, burlap, garden twine, carpets, canvas, tarpaulin and many other industrial products. Its leaves were also used as a vegetable. Both because of its colour and because of its economic importance jute was known in Bengal as the 'golden fibre'. In the late 1940s the Bengal delta had a virtual monopoly in jute production: it supplied 80 per cent of world demand. The Partition of 1947 posed a serious challenge, however: almost all jute was grown in the eastern delta (which now fell to Pakistan) and all of the more than a hundred processing factories were near Kolkata in West Bengal (which now fell to India). The Pakistan authorities, keen to create a national economy, forbade the export of jute to India. Now East Pakistan's jute growers were branded as smugglers when they sold to India's jute mills, the only buyers of their crop. In East Pakistan a tussle ensued between the state and the jute producers that only abated when new jute mills were established in East Pakistan.¹⁹ The best-known of these – and the largest in the world – was the Adamjee Jute Mill in Narayanganj, which came into production in 1955. By the end of the Pakistan period, there were over seventy jute mills in East Pakistan. Meanwhile, India had promoted jute cultivation in its own territory to supply its factories in West Bengal. Thus Partition resulted in the breaking up of what had once been a unified jute production and manufacturing system, replacing it by two competing ones: one in East Pakistan and the other in West Bengal. By the 1970s, however, world demand for jute declined as both systems faced strong competition from synthetic fibres, notably polypropylene.

State attempts to partition the economy in other spheres were less effective. Most trade between India and Pakistan was prohibited but it proved impossible to stop unauthorised cross-border exchange. There was much evidence of brisk smuggling, and even the most energetic policies backfired. For example, in 1957–8 Pakistan militarised the East Pakistan border corridor in a bid to stamp out smuggling. This 'Operation Closed Door' brought terror to the borderland population but was abandoned because it failed miserably in checking unauthorised cross-border trade.²⁰



Plate 13.4. Bamboo raft on Kaptai Lake, 1964–5.

Industrial development in East Pakistan, largely by state-supported entrepreneurs from West Pakistan, typically took the form of processing local materials in a relatively simple manner. Apart from jute manufacturing, other notable new initiatives included the establishment of sugar mills, especially in the western and northern districts, tea factories in the north-east and a large paper mill in Chandraghona (Chittagong Hill Tracts).²¹ The raw material for this paper mill was bamboo, cut from a decommissioned reserved hill forest and floated down the Karnaphuli river in enormous rafts (Plate 13.4). Another industry that developed after Partition was the cotton textile industry. By this time the Bengal delta had long given up producing the cotton that had once made its textiles a household word around Asia and Europe. Now, the raw material had to be imported.

Although the urban population was still a minute proportion of the total population, East Pakistan's major towns were growing fast. Since 1947 the population of Dhaka had tripled to about one million inhabitants. Most newcomers were rural job-seekers who tried to find a niche in urban industries and services. One service sector that grew steadily was public transport, especially in the form of cycle-rickshaws. These had

been introduced in Dhaka in the late 1930s – following two other towns, Mymensingh and Narayanganj – and by the 1950s they had largely displaced the horse-drawn carriages that had been a common sight before. The first rickshaws were of drab appearance, but in the 1950s colourful decorations were added and these soon blossomed into what became known as urban Bangladesh's signature popular art: 'New rickshaws in Dhaka are a blaze of colour. Every square inch is decorated. Tassles, tinsel and twirly bits hang from all parts. Plastic flowers sprout in the front and sides, and pictures and patterns are painted or pinned all over.'²² Tens of thousands of men found their first work in the city as rickshaw-pullers, just as women found work as domestic workers. Most new settlers lived in working-class neighbourhoods that sprang up beyond the periphery of the colonial city as Dhaka spread and added other neighbourhoods as well: office blocks were built in the Motijheel neighbourhood (Plate 13.5), administration complexes and a new market in Ramna, factories in Tejgaon and elite housing in Dhanmondi.



Plate 13.5. New commercial buildings appearing in Dhaka in the 1960s.

By the end of the Pakistan experiment, the Bengal delta had changed a lot. It had become a territorial unit that was quite separate from the Indian territory surrounding it. Political struggles in East Pakistan were for regional autonomy or independent statehood, not for rejoining India. In the twenty-four years since 1947 the population had grown by 60 per cent. Nine out of ten people lived in the countryside. Most of them were dependent on agriculture, so rural crowding was a serious issue, especially since poverty had not decreased. By 1971 there were many more East Pakistanis who lived in poverty than in 1947. Life expectancy at birth had improved somewhat but still stood at below fifty years. In terms of improving the quality of life, the Pakistan experiment had been a disappointment to most citizens.

The roots of aid dependence

Pakistani policy-makers saw themselves as champions of modernisation. They were confident that they knew how to jog the sluggish economy into a high gear and thus bring about 'development'. What they needed was money and a population that would follow their lead.

To be sure, this was nothing new. Agricultural stagnation in the Bengal delta had first become a policy concern in the early twentieth century. The colonial authorities noticed that a closing agrarian frontier and population growth led to stagnating agrarian output and declining rural incomes. This prompted the first attempts at rural development (or 'rural rehabilitation', as it was then called): experiments with village cooperative societies, debt relief, crop research, agricultural extension and the application of fertilisers. Although most initiatives came from the government, some non-governmental organisations (such as the Salvation Army) were also active. The roots of development policy, today such a central theme in Bangladesh, reach back more than a century.

From the birth of Pakistan, the central government saw itself as devoted to development. It assumed an interventionist role, but the funds it released were unimpressive. It also overrated its capacity to transform the economy: 'with few exceptions, projects financed by the centre were among the finest textbook cases of abysmal planning, widespread corruption and gross mismanagement.'¹

After the coup of 1958 the military regime presented itself as the only force capable of modernising Pakistan. It understood modernisation basically as economic development by centralised and authoritarian means, and it aimed at maximising growth and revenues rather than at participation or social welfare. To this end the bureaucracy was changed from an agency administering the law to an agency in charge of economic engineering. Now young bureaucrats were sent for part of their training to the newly established Pakistan Academy for Rural Development in

Comilla, a town east of Dhaka. In terms of growth, the regime's policies were quite successful: during the Ayub era Pakistan's economy grew by some 5.5 per cent annually.

This was not economic development by state diktat, however, let alone state socialism. Throughout, Pakistan's philosophy of economic development was 'private enterprise leavened with government investment', and the gains of economic growth were poorly distributed.² A small elite of robber barons and large farmers reaped the advantages of state subsidies, whereas most Pakistanis suffered as prices rose, real incomes declined and the absolute number of poor people increased. The distribution of wealth between the two wings also showed a widening gap. Although the Ayub regime increased the allocation of public funds to East Pakistan, private investments remained low at about 22 per cent of all investments. In West Pakistan annual growth rates rose from 3.2 per cent in the late 1950s to 7.2 per cent in the early 1960s. In East Pakistan these figures were 1.7 and 5.2, respectively.³ In other words, the military regime's emphasis on growth intensified the existing inequalities in Pakistan. Not surprisingly, economic disparities became a major issue in inter-wing relations. The Bengal delta's elite began to demand regional economic autonomy by means of a 'two-economy policy'. This implied that the economy of each wing should be treated as completely separate and that an appropriate policy should be devised for each.

All this was related to an important change: Pakistan's development policy had become linked to funding from abroad. In the early 1950s the Cold War had made government-to-government aid a useful geopolitical tool, and there was a strong belief among experts that aid would accelerate economic growth. The new state of Pakistan soon established aid links with the United States and at the same time it became a member of US-dominated international security arrangements. West Pakistan received more than five times as much American aid as did East Pakistan, and most American funds were spent on military, industrial and infrastructural development.⁴ The little that reached East Pakistan agriculture – the wing's major economic sector – was used to set up community development programmes, for example the Village Agricultural and Industrial Development (V-AID) programme, which started in 1953.⁵ It foundered and was followed by a new initiative in 1955: the establishment of an Academy for Rural Development in Comilla.

THE COMILLA MODEL

The Academy for Rural Development was given a county (*thānā*) in the eastern delta as a 'laboratory area for experiments in local government and economic development'.⁶ The main idea at this time was that villages formed communities that had to be approached as units through which to introduce 'modernisation'. Intermediaries between these communities and the academy were the 'village organiser' and the 'model farmer'. Despite 'a history of dismal failure of cooperatives in this part of the world', the academy set up cooperative societies once again and developed a range of training, research and extension activities. What made these initiatives unusual was that they emphasised that development was not just the dissemination of expert knowledge to agriculturists but also needed the input of local knowledge. The enthusiastic director of the academy, Akhter Hameed Khan, saw the crux of development as spreading knowledge and changing people's attitudes:

The desire for practical involvement, the belief that old knowledge must be tested and new knowledge acquired through unending research, the urgency to make scientific knowledge useful by extension – these are the basic attitudes which developed in the United States, and could start the same process for us, too.⁷

After the 1958 coup the Comilla academy became a linchpin in the military regime's attempts to win legitimacy in the rural areas. A significant element of the basic democracies was the public works programme.⁸ The objective of this programme, largely conceived by US advisers, was to make use of underutilised manpower in rural areas to work on 'nation-building' activities – constructing embankments, roads, schools and irrigation schemes – and to pay the workers mainly in US surplus wheat.⁹ Akhter Hameed Khan, who was actively involved in shaping the works programme, saw it as an important instrument to legitimise the regime. He wrote to the government: 'Frustration, bitterness and cynicism will disappear... as millions of low income rural people go to work in the slack farm season... [and] the protective works... will be omnipresent symbols of a good government.'¹⁰ Critics of the works programme were quick to point out that it was more successful as a propaganda tool for the regime internationally than as an infrastructural improvement. In their opinion, the works programme did provide more employment, but the public works themselves were mainly

mud roads and small bridges, poorly planned, executed and maintained, and without local participation or proper accounting.¹¹

In the 1960s the academy received many international visitors. Its formula for rural development, now known as the Comilla model, was hailed as a breakthrough and as a humane alternative to China's compulsory people's communes. The Comilla model included family-planning programmes, irrigation and electrification schemes, credit facilities, women's training and programmes for storing, processing and marketing agricultural produce. From the beginning there were three concerns about the programme: its heavy dependence on the efforts of a single individual (its energetic and well-connected director); its doubtful sustainability if international funding dried up; and the difficulty of reproducing the programme beyond the 'laboratory area'. There was also scepticism as to whether villages in the Bengal delta could be seen as communities. Did co-residence really mean shared interests and loyalties? Despite these misgivings, the Comilla model set the agenda for future rural development programmes in Bangladesh.

Between 1959 and 1969 the inflow of external aid resources grew sixfold.¹² From 1960 onwards, most foreign aid – half of which came from the US – was channelled through the World Bank's Aid-to-Pakistan consortium. This group consisted of the United States, West Germany, the United Kingdom, Canada, France, Japan, Belgium, the Netherlands and Italy.¹³ By sharply increasing its commitment, the consortium signalled its support for Pakistan's military regime and became a partner in its development strategy:

It is important to note that the growth of inequality in Pakistan was not the unintended or unconscious by-product of Pakistan's development strategy. Pakistan's policy makers actively pursued policies which promoted inequality... The flow of foreign aid took place within the framework of this particular set of socio-economic objectives, and helped to facilitate the implementation of growth through inequality.¹⁴

Thus increasing inequality in Pakistan – both in terms of poverty and in terms of regional exploitation – was sanctioned by the world's wealthiest states. Pakistan's development policy was decidedly authoritarian and top-down. In this sense the plugging of the Comilla experiment as East Pakistan's signature programme of rural development was misleading. Most development policies were conceived and implemented with scant regard for local sensibilities or local knowledge. We have seen how Pakistan's development regime widened the gap between rich and

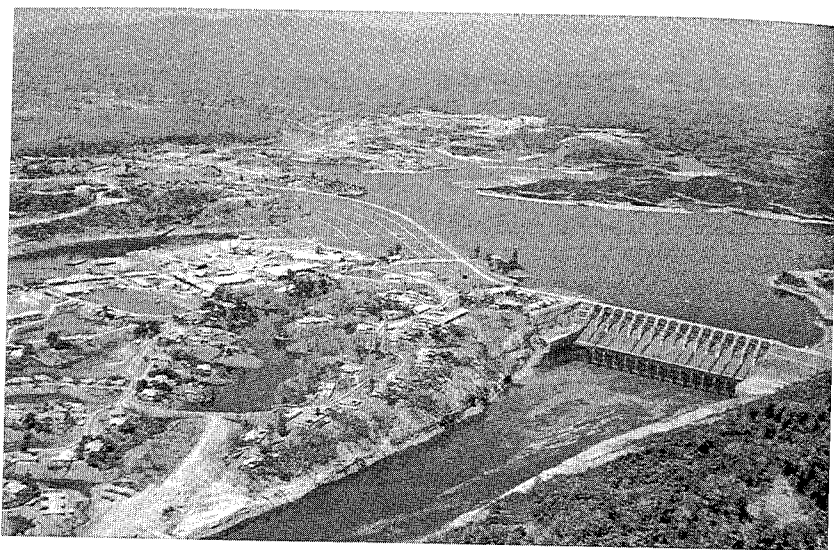


Plate 14.1. The Kaptai dam, 1964-5.

poor and between the country's two wings, fuelling mass discontent in East Pakistan. But within East Pakistan it also initiated a regional disparity that was to have serious political fallout after East Pakistan became Bangladesh. This was most acute in the case of the Kaptai dam, a massive engineering work in the Chittagong hills (Plate 14.1).

THE DAM IN THE HILLS

One of East Pakistan's initial problems was a scarcity of power. It had to import most of its energy. This changed in the 1950s, when exploitable quantities of natural gas were found in the eastern districts of Sylhet and Comilla and foreign aid made it possible to use these to run a cement factory and a fertiliser factory in the region. More energy was needed, however, and Pakistan's planners scored a great success when they persuaded foreign aid-givers to finance a huge hydroelectric project in the Chittagong Hill Tracts. The plan to create an artificial lake in the Chittagong hills actually dated back to 1906, but the work could be taken up seriously with foreign funds only in the 1950s. The project brought thousands of Bengali workers from the plains and engineers from North America and Europe to this non-Bengali area. By 1961 a dam had been

constructed across the Karnaphuli river at a village named Kaptai. It was widely celebrated as a triumph of modernity. Before its powerhouse could begin producing electricity for far-away cities and industries, however, the immense (650 km²) and weirdly shaped Kaptai lake had to fill up. The lake submerged many villages and forests and 40 per cent of the arable land in the Chittagong Hill Tracts. Displacing about 100,000 people and devastating wildlife, it was a typical example of top-down development (see box 'Shilabrata and the Great Exodus').

Shilabrata and the Great Exodus

Shilabrata Tangchangya was completely unprepared when the Kaptai dam uprooted his small village:

'I still hear the booming sounds of the dam gate closing that continued throughout the night. By the morning, the water had reached our door-steps. We set free our cows and goats, hens and ducks, and then began the rush with the affected people to take their rice, paddy, furniture and whatever else possible to the nearby hills. . . Though every possible belonging was taken to the hill top, many still went to their houses to spend the night. But many of them had to rush out of their houses at dead of night when the swelling waters touched them while they slept'.



Plate 14.2. Hilltops sticking out of Kaptai Lake, 1965.

Nripati Ranjan Tripura, who used to live in Kellamura village, remembers:

'Our village was also devoured. We first took shelter on an adjacent hill. The hill was not affected by the inundation in the first year. The water came up to the base of the hill and stopped. During that time it looked like an island. But gradually, in the following months, the sides of the hill began to erode as the waves hit them. It completely went under water in the second year. We had no choice but to move.'

Those who were displaced remember the construction of the Kaptai dam not as a triumph of development but as the Boro Porong (Great Exodus; *bara param*). To them it was 'grotesque and monstrously iniquitous... We had no guns so we wept in silence, in humiliation and in anger.' Meanwhile, the electricity generated by the Kaptai project reached the cities in the plains but not the villages of the Chittagong Hill Tracts.

Almost none of the affected people received any compensation, nor did the new project generate employment for them. Some settled around the lake but most were forced to seek refuge in other parts of the Chittagong hills. Tens of thousands could not find a niche and fled to India and Burma. The Indian government settled these development victims in the far-off state of Arunachal Pradesh in the 1960s. Today they and their descendents live there as barely tolerated and effectively stateless people, eking out a very uncertain existence.¹⁵

AID DEPENDENCE

The Pakistan period saw the establishment of a pattern in which economic development in the Bengal delta was sustained by foreign aid, not by mobilising resources internally. Involvement of intended beneficiaries in development planning was negligible and development administrators were accountable to external patrons, not to local voters. The system, inherently undemocratic and top-down, worked best in a firmly controlled environment. Not surprisingly, it flourished under the well-funded post-1958 military dictatorship. Pakistan's state elite became progressively addicted to foreign aid and – as aid strengthened state institutions – the country's rulers allowed their development priorities to be set by foreign donors.

These donors were confident that support for Pakistan's strongest economic sectors and enterprises would lead most effectively to rapid economic growth, and that the wealth so generated would gradually trickle down to the poor and to weaker economic sectors. This policy of betting on the strong worked out especially unfavourably in East Bengal,

where it failed utterly in narrowing the gap with West Pakistan, discouraged the development of a local entrepreneurial class and kept tens of millions in poverty. The political crises that rocked the Bengal delta in the late 1960s were a response to this failure. Two economists summarising Pakistan's development performance on the eve of the Bangladesh Liberation War pointed out that while domestic policy-makers certainly were to blame, 'foreign donors will bear a substantial burden of responsibility for the outcome of Pakistan's struggle in the years ahead.'¹⁶

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