

CHAPTER

THREE

Back in Chittagong

On my return to Bangladesh in 1972, I was offered a fancy title and appointed to the government's Planning Commission. My job was a bore. I had nothing to do all day but read newspapers. After repeated protests to the chief of the Planning Commission, Nurul Islam, I resigned to become head of the Economics Department at Chittagong University.

Chittagong University is located twenty miles east of the city of Chittagong on 1,900 acres of barren hills. Built in the mid-1960s from designs by a leading architect of Bangladesh, the university looks impressive. The buildings are constructed entirely of exposed red brick with open corridors and expansive rooms. But although pleasing to the eye, these modern buildings are not at all utilitarian. When I arrived, for instance, there was a huge office for the head of each department, but no office space for the rest of the teachers. One of the first things I did as head of Economics was to convert my office into a common room for my colleagues. Strangely enough, this made the staff uncomfortable. They expected the head of the department to have a big room, even if others did not have any place to sit.

It was a difficult time at the university. Teachers were refusing to grade examinations, accusing students of copying their answers from books and from each other. Many of the students were part

of the Mukti Bahini (Liberation Army) and had just returned from war. They still carried their guns and threatened to harm the teachers if exam results were not announced soon.

At that time I lived with my parents in town. My father allowed me to use his car to commute to the campus every day. Along the way I drove through the village of Jobra, which stood between the highway and the campus. I noticed barren fields next to the village and asked a colleague, Professor H. I. Latifee, why they were not being cultivated for a winter crop. As he did not know, I proposed that we go talk to the villagers and find out the reason. It turned out that there was no water for irrigation.

I thought we should do something about the unused fields. It was a shame to let the land around a university campus remain barren. If a university is a repository for knowledge, then some of this knowledge should spill over to the neighboring community. A university must not be an island where academics reach out to higher and higher levels of knowledge without sharing any of their findings.

Our campus housing faced a range of hills, and from my classroom I could see a stream of boys and girls, men and cattle, walking through the campus toward the hills every morning. They carried sharp knives and at sunset they returned with loads of twigs. It occurred to me that the university should convert these hills into fertile cropland. This would bring additional income to the university, employment to the villagers, and food to the country at large.

I also grew more and more curious about the village itself. I launched a project, with my students' help, to survey Jobra's economy. We wanted to find out how many of the families in the village owned cultivable land and what crops they grew. How did people without any land make a living? What skills did the villagers have? What impediments did they see to improving their lives? How many families could grow food to feed themselves for the whole year? How many could not? Who were the poor?

Analyses of the causes of poverty focus largely on why some countries are poor rather than on why certain segments of the population live below the poverty line. Socially conscious economists stress the absence of "entitlements" of the poor. What I did not know yet about hunger, but would find out over the next twenty-two years, was that brilliant theorists of economics do not find it worthwhile to spend time discussing issues of poverty and hunger. They believe that these will be resolved when general economic prosperity increases. These economists spend all their talents detailing the processes of development and prosperity, but rarely reflect on the origin and development of poverty and hunger. As a result, poverty continues.

The 1974 famine dragged on and on, and the worse it became, the more agitated I grew. Unable to stand it any longer, I went to see the vice-chancellor of the university. A popular social commentator and novelist, Abul Fazal was considered by many to be the conscience of the nation. He greeted me politely.

"What can I do for you, Yunus?" he asked. A ceiling fan turned slowly overhead. Mosquitoes buzzed. His orderly brought tea.

"Many people are dying of starvation, yet everyone is afraid to talk about it," I responded.

Abul Fazal nodded. "What do you propose?"

"You are a respected man. I would ask you to make a statement to the press."

"Yes, but what?"

"A call to the nation and its leadership to end the famine. I am certain that all teachers on this campus will cosign their names to your letter if you take the lead. It would help mobilize national opinion."

"Yes." He sipped his tea. "Yunus," he said, "you write the statement, and I will sign it."

I smiled. "You are the writer. You will know what words to put in the statement."

"No, no, you do it, Yunus. You're passionate about this. You'll know what to say."

"But I am only an economics professor. And this document should become a rallying cry, a call to action."

The more I insisted that he was the perfect man to bring national attention to bear on the famine, the more Abul Fazal encouraged me to write the letter. He pushed his point so strongly that I had no alternative but to promise I would try. That evening I wrote out a statement. The next morning I brought the draft to the vice-chancellor and waited while he read it.

When he was finished, Abul Fazal reached for his pen and said, "Where do I sign?"

I was stunned. "But it is strongly worded. Maybe you want to change some things or suggest other ideas."

"No, no, no, it is excellent," he said. And with that he signed on the spot.

I had no choice. I signed the document as well, and I made copies of it and presented it to other faculty members. Some teachers raised objections to one word or another, but because the vice-chancellor had already signed, all of them eventually agreed to add their names to the declaration. We delivered it to the press that night, and the next day our statement was carried as a banner headline on the front pages of all the major newspapers.

Our statement started a chain reaction. Other universities and public bodies that had not spoken out against the famine took up our call. I began focusing all my efforts on farming. It was clear that Bangladesh, a territory of 35 million acres with a very dense population, needed to increase its food production. We had 21 million acres available for cultivation. In the rainy season we produced mainly rice and jute. By extending irrigation and improving water management during the dry winter season, we could increase our crops. Specialists estimated that the existing land yielded only 16 percent of our crop potential.

I decided I would experiment on the microlevel by helping the villagers of Jobra grow more food. But how would I go about it? Grow more in each crop cycle? Increase the number of crop plantings in each plot? I was not an agronomist. But I made it my business to study the low-yielding local variety of rice and more high-yielding varieties developed in the Philippines. At first the farmers were amused by my findings. But when they saw how very serious I was, they agreed to let me plant the high-yielding rice in their fields. My students and other university teachers joined the effort as volunteers. We explained to the village farmers the importance of spacing the seedlings at regular intervals and planting in a straight line to optimize crop yields. The local newspaper published photos of us, knee-deep in mud, showing local farmers how to use a string to plant rice in a straight line. Many readers were contemptuous of my hands-on approach.

Despite such skepticism, I kept trying to bring the academic world and the village together by championing a university project called the Chittagong University Rural Development Project (CURDP). Through the CURDP, I encouraged my students to go with me into the village and devise creative ways to improve day-to-day life there. By now I had almost completely abandoned classical book learning in favor of hands-on, person-to-person experience. Based on their experiences in the village, students could also choose a topic and write a research paper for course credit.

In the winter of 1975, I focused my attention on solving the problem of irrigation to raise an extra winter crop. I knew that during monsoon season almost every square meter of land was cultivated, including wasteland marshes, which produced rice and fish. Yet all these lands remained unused during winter. Why not add a winter crop? Every day I noticed an unused deep tubewell sitting idle in the middle of the uncultivated fields. It was the dry winter season, the season when the tubewell should have been ir-

rigating the land for a new crop. But nothing was being done. The tubewell just sat there, brand new and unused.

When I asked why the tubewell was idle, I learned that the farmers were supposed to pay for the water but that they had fought with each other over the issue of money collection during the previous dry season. Since then they would have nothing to do with the deep tubewell.

This struck me as a terrible shame. In a country of famine, here was a 300-foot deep tubewell—a driven well—that could irrigate some sixty acres. I decided to make the tubewell work again.

It was not easy. Of all the modes of irrigation then available, deep tubewells were the most capital intensive. With their high operating costs, they proved highly inefficient and encouraged rampant corruption among those who dealt in fuel oil, lubricants, and spare parts. For the deep tubewell to operate efficiently, it needed an efficient water distribution system. In other words, it required a large number of small farmers to implement uniform crop decisions on their fragmented holdings. These farmers also needed instruction on fertilizer use, plant protection, and the repair and maintenance of the pumps. Unfortunately, although the government generously invested in modern irrigation technology, it did not provide the time, the resources, or the effort to resolve the people-centered problems such technology brought with it. Because of perennial management problems and technical breakdowns, the farmers were reluctant to reopen their tubewells. As a result, almost half the deep tubewells in Bangladesh had fallen out of use. The rusting machinery in abandoned pump houses was a testimony to yet another failure of misguided development.

In Jobra, I called a meeting of local farmers and sharecroppers. I proposed an experiment, in which we would all join a new type of agricultural cooperative called the Nabajug ("New Era") Three Share Farm. The landowners would contribute the use of their land during the dry season; the sharecroppers would contribute

their labor; and I would contribute the cost of fuel to run the deep tubewell, the seeds for high-yield crops, the fertilizer, the insecticide, and the technical know-how. In exchange, each of the three parties (farmers, sharecroppers, and myself) would share one-third of the harvest.

At first the villagers were suspicious of my proposal. So much ill will and distrust had built up between the well operators and the farmers that they were not ready to listen to my plan. Some argued that paying me one-third of the harvest would be too much. Even with my offer to bear all losses, my proposal failed to interest them.

At a second meeting, one week later, I was able to convince them that they had nothing to lose. They would receive irrigation water, fertilizer, seeds, and insecticides without any up-front payment. They only had to agree to give me one-third of their harvest. The poor sharecroppers greeted my proposal with enthusiasm. The relatively well-off farmers reluctantly agreed to give it a try.

This was a difficult period for me. I would often lie awake at night, anxious lest anything go wrong. Every Tuesday evening I visited the farmers and held a formal meeting with the four student "block leaders" I had appointed as well as my thirteen-man advisory team. We discussed and reviewed the problems of fertilizer, irrigation, technology, storage, transport, and marketing.

The first year's efforts ended in success. The farmers were happy. They had not spent any cash and had gotten a high yield. I, however, lost 13,000 taka because some farmers gave me less than the one-third they had promised. But I was still thrilled. We had managed to grow a crop where no crop had ever grown before in the dry season. The fields had been full of the emerald green of standing rice. Nothing is quite as beautiful as farmers harvesting their rice. The sight warmed my heart.

But I still had misgivings. The success of our three-share experiment had highlighted a problem I had not focused on before. Once the rice was harvested, labor was needed to separate the rice from the dry straw. This mindless, boring work was offered to the cheapest day laborers: destitute women who would otherwise be reduced to begging. For hours on end these poor women would separate the rice with their feet, holding themselves upright by gripping the tiny ledges on the wall in front of them. All day, some twenty-five to thirty women would perform this continuous twisting motion, wrapping the rice straws around their feet to separate the paddy. In the early morning they would race to work, competing for the most comfortable position against the wall. What a terrible life—to earn forty cents investing the weight of your body and the tiresome motion of your bare feet for ten hours a day! These women, many of them widowed, divorced, or abandoned with children to feed, were too poor even to be sharecroppers. They were landless and assetless and without any hope. They were the poorest of the poor. It was clear to me that the wealthier the farmer, the more he earned from my Three Share Farm experiment, and the poorer the worker, the smaller was her share. “Why should we be happy with your Three Share Farm?” one woman said to me. “After a few weeks of threshing, we are out of work, and we have nothing to show for ourselves.” She was right. For the same work, a woman could earn at least four times more if she had the financial resources to buy the rice paddy and process it herself.

The more I studied Jobra’s poverty, the more I realized how important it was to differentiate between the really poor and the marginal farmers. International development programs in rural areas always focus on farmers and landowners. In Bangladesh, half of the total population is worse off than the marginal farmer. At the time I was studying Jobra, government bureaucrats and social scientists had not clarified who the “poor” in fact were. Back then, “poor person” could mean many things. For some, the term

referred to a jobless person, an illiterate person, a landless person, or a homeless person. For others, a poor person was one who could not produce enough food to feed his or her family year-round. Still others thought a poor person was one who owned a thatched house with a rotten roof, who suffered from malnutrition, or who did not send his or her children to school. Such conceptual vagueness greatly damaged our efforts to alleviate poverty. For one thing, most definitions of the poor left out women and children. In my work, I found it useful to use three broad definitions of poor to describe the situation in Bangladesh*:

P₁—the bottom 20 percent of the population (“hard-core poor”/absolute poor)

P₂—bottom 35 percent of the population

P₃—bottom 50 percent of the population

Within each category of poor, I often created subclassifications on the basis of region, occupation, religion, ethnic background, sex, age, and so on. Occupational or regional categories may not be as quantifiable as income-asset criteria, but they help us to create a multidimensional poverty matrix.

Like navigation markings in unknown waters, definitions of poverty need to be distinctive and unambiguous. A definition that is not precise is as bad as no definition at all. In my definition of the poor, I would include the women who threshed rice on our Three Share Farm; women who made bamboo stools; and petty traders who had to borrow at 10 percent per month or sometimes per week. I would also include others like them who earned so little weaving their baskets and sleeping mats that they often resorted to begging. These people had absolutely no chance of improving their economic base. Each one was stuck in poverty.

*In 1995, the Consultative Group to Assist the Poorest (CGAP) and the Micro-credit Summit Campaign Committee formally defined a “poor” person as someone who lives below the poverty line and “poorest” as someone in the bottom half of those below the poverty line.



My experience with Jobra's deep tubewell convinced me to turn my focus on the landless poor. Soon I started arguing that wherever a poverty alleviation program allowed the nonpoor to be co-passengers, the poor would soon be elbowed out of the program by those who were better off. In the world of development, if one mixes the poor and the nonpoor in a program, the nonpoor will always drive out the poor, and the less poor will drive out the more poor, unless protective measures are instituted right at the beginning. In such cases, the nonpoor reap the benefits of all that is done in the name of the poor.