

Disaster Response in Bangladesh

Shelley Feldman
Florence E. McCarthy*

ABSTRACT

Basic socio-economic trends in Bangladesh surrounded the independence of the country in the early Seventies and have contributed to the changing forms and functions of the Bangladeshi family. This period included not only a Liberation War, but a set of environmental and social upheavals that ran the gamut from floods, typhoons and famine to social and political instability. It is suggested that selected changes in social relations or social institutions, which were exacerbated by these natural and social upheavals, have become permanent aspects of daily life in the country. It is hypothesized that disasters tend to exacerbate existing trends and patterns of instability or inequality rather than initiate completely new forms of response. In one sense, disasters may be said to attack the weakest link in a society and may encourage changes which are already imminent in that society.

The international image of Bangladesh is one of a disaster ridden and disaster torn nation; the basket case of the world. A country overpopulated and underfed. Indeed the tumultuous first decade of its history has altered many aspects of Bangladeshi society. Analyses of selected institutional aspects of Bangladesh suggest that a number of short term changes such as the dispersion of the extended and nuclear family, due to immediate needs to escape the liberation war or the floods and famine, have occurred during this period. However, the perpetuation of selected conditions in Bangladesh have qualitatively altered aspects of its social fabric and have since become institutionalized as new forms of social relations in the country.

One area which has undergone quite significant shifts is the rural Bangladeshi family. These shifts can be linked

to, and have been exacerbated by, the set of natural, socio-economic and political upheavals which have dominated Bangladeshi history. Among those patterns which have come to dominate the nature of rural life in the countryside, three will be given attention here: these include labor migration, both within and outside Bangladesh, changing patterns of labor force participation, and a growth in the number of single headed households.

Much of the work on disasters consider such incidents as abrupt, unusual, epiphenomic events that temporarily disrupt social environments (Erickson, 1976; Form and Nosow, 1958). One primary purpose of this type of research is the documentation of the response of people, communities and institutions to catastrophic events. A second focus of disaster research concerns the costs of reconstruction and recovery (Dacy and Kunreuther, 1969; Kunreuther, 1973). One dominant theme in the relief and rehabilitation emphasis is the role of the federal government in the post disaster period, aid to the private sector, and insurance possibilities. In short, one may say that this focus concerns the economics of disaster for either the individual, the community, or for other mobilizable resources. A third major emphasis in the literature concerns disaster consequences; what, for example, are the psychological and behavioral responses to disaster initiated behavior? Theories of mass behavior, family and social stress, community solidarity and organizational mobilization have gained increasing prominence in these areas of research.

A final issue in the literature on disasters concerns the life history of the disaster phenomenon. Chapman, for example, has outlined seven stages in the disaster process: warning, threat, impact, inventory, rescue, remedy and recovery. These still prove valuable in categorizing much of the recent disaster literature. Important in this approach is the concern with assessing how individuals and communities recover their former stability, or achieve a stable adaptation, to conditions which appear to have been initiated by disaster. A number of recent studies, for instance, have charted the nature and extent to which there is a return from disaster "initiated" behavior to former patterns of living or to a reestablishment of equilibrium in an affected area (Erickson, 1976; Forrest, 1978; Quarantelli, 1978; Stallings, 1978).

The effect of disasters on primary social institutions and the integration of a society as a whole, as opposed to the community or disaster arena, are less often investigated. For example, factors not always considered in disaster consequences or outcomes, but which greatly influence post disaster "stability" or adaptation include, 1) the change in socio-economic conditions which irrevocably change the relationship of people to their surroundings, and 2) the change in relations among people themselves which not only respond to, but affect, the nature and dynamics of general societal operations. These latent consequences engender both short and long term effects; the latter usually manifested in institutional breakdowns and rearrangements.

One primary institution often seriously and permanently affected by disasters is the family. However, present working definitions of the family significantly hinder a generalizable analytic tool. For example, in the current American tradition the family is generally perceived as a social unit bound together by "affectional" and "sympathetic" ties; "a unit of interacting personalities" (Lasch, 1977). That is, within American social science the family is viewed as an institution providing primarily emotional rather than other significant social supports to its members. This view is particularly clear in the sociological literature as well as that of the "helping professions" where family refers to marriage, and marriage is envisaged as the variety of relationships existing between partners. Studies in this genre focus on 1) kinship or types of family structure, 2) issues of divorce, extended and open marriage, and 3) patterns of and relations among family members especially as concern forms of communal living, childbearing, and childrearing.

In this tradition, the family is emphasized as a unit of social organization epitomized by the highly psychologized and individualistic behavior of its members. This working definition of the family makes it difficult to employ as a useful concept in discussions of families as productive units. Much of the analysis of the American family could be greatly improved if it were seen as an integrated, not isolated, part of society. If the family was viewed in terms of the social services it provides its role in the reproduction of daily life would be more clear. That is, in spite of changes within the relations between

partners, the family continues to play an essential role in the reproduction of labor power and in providing the socially necessary but unpaid labor of wives and mothers. While other social institutions have taken over some of the functions of the family the involvement of the family in the basic social production of existence continues unabated. Recent work by feminist scholars has begun to address the dual role of the family as a socially necessary aspect of the production and reproduction of society and has highlighted the productive role of the family unit.

Ignoring the role of the family as a productive unit has consequences for analysis of both American societies as well as less developed capitalist societies. Our focus here is solely concerned with the latter. We use the term capitalist penetration to signify a complex dialectical process of social transformation that include not only the introduction of capitalist aspects of production and forms of surplus extraction, but includes as well the local conditions and already existing modes of production which hinder, shape, and support the introduction of capitalism. In less developed capitalist societies, where capitalist penetration has yet to transform basic social institutions to the appearance of western counterparts, the family in its productive aspects is an essential unit of social analysis. In these countries the socially necessary aspects of production are identifiable in the linkage between men and women working directly in production for consumption and use.

Changes in the family directly affect and are a response to the changes in productive relations; from production for use to production for exchange, and from home-based production to small-scale industry and mechanized production outside the home.

The Bangladesh Context

Bangladesh, although a small and densely populated country, has some of the richest farm land in the world. For much of its history it has been able to sustain its population on rain-fed agricultural production consisting primarily of two rice crops and supplemented by the cultivation of pulses, oils, vegetables, fruits and spices. Although somewhat on the fringes of the turbulent and violent poolitical history of Bengal, the area that was

East Bengal, then East Pakistan, and now Bangladesh, has nonetheless been affected by various forms of domination including British colonialism and subsequent forms of capitalist penetration.

The nature of British influence is best seen in the changing forms and factors of production and in attendant changes in social relations. While one can trace the effects of the domination and control of Bengal under the British Raj, this is not the object of the present paper. It is sufficient to say that processes initiated during the Raj have not been qualitatively altered by shifts in the political fortunes of the country. That is, whether the rulers were British, Hindu, Pakistani or Bangladeshi, the basic patterns of exploitation, power and control have not been significantly altered even though they may have intensified over time.

The most salient features of these relations have been 1) the transition from a barter to monetary system of exchange and from subsistence to market oriented production, 2) the continuing exploitation of the peasantry by means of taxes, forced labor, high interest rates, onerous tenancy and sharecropping agreements and low in-kind or wage payments, 3) the consolidation of landholdings among the larger landholders through mortgages, and as collateral on loans, by fraud, force and/or the misuse of the legal system, and 4) the drain of surplus capital from the rural areas which is used either for consumption, e.g., the purchase of consumer items and the building of elaborate houses, or for investment in non-agricultural activities such as trade or commercial enterprises. Money is also spent on educating children and this is considered an investment by families from all sectors of the society. Villagers, for example, attempt to send their girls to school because literate daughters have better marital prospects than do illiterate girls; for educated sons there exists the chance of some form of employment in the towns and cities or even abroad.

The present conditions of Bangladesh are constrained by the fact that approximately 90 million people live in an area the size of Wisconsin. About ninety percent of the people are rural based, and the population density for the countryside is estimated at 1375 persons per square mile (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, 1979). With this as the environmental context for the villages, it is not surprising

to find that approximately 40 percent of the population are either landless or have less than one acre of land; literacy is estimated to be 30 percent for men and 18 percent for women (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, 1974), and malnourishment is thought to plague at least 40 percent of the people (Nutrition and Food Service Institute, 1977). The real wages of people have fallen from an index value of 100 in 1963 to an index value of 66 in 1975 (Clay, 1976), and during this same period, the cost of living index has risen from 100 to 560 (Clay, 1976; Khan 1977).

The Family in Bangladesh

Historically the family has been the most important unit of social organization in Bangladesh. The traditional form of this unit has been the joint or extended family characterized by patrilocal and patrilineal bonds. Male family members, in order of seniority, assumed the responsibility and obligations for female family members as need arose. That is, the extended family, upon the death of a brother or father, or in rare cases the divorce of a woman, ensured the security of wives and sisters.

While the **samaj** (village society) and **rayet** (lineage) have been important, it has been the family that provided the basic security and support for its members. In fact, one criteria used by villagers in the determination of poverty is the presence or absence of family or kin. It is from the family that one receives basic support and assistance in time of need, and to which one owes first loyalty. In a society where basic social services are almost entirely lacking i.e., there is no government financed social security, or health services, nor any support for the unemployed, disabled or infirm, the family unit must provide these services and act as the basic buffer between the individual and the rest of society. The importance of the family is reaffirmed in other social customs and arrangements such as marriage and property relations.

Arranged marriages remain the norm in Bangladesh as they facilitate the best interests of the families involved. Marriages link families through the union of two people, which is perhaps one reason why the preference or choice of the individuals involved are given little attention.

Cross-cousin marriages, or alliances among the kinship group are preferred as these keep property and assets within the family.

The family and extended kin group are also the basis for mutual assistance and help. For example, kin members share bullocks for ploughing and may often help sow, plant, weed and harvest one another's plots. Other equipment is shared among relations, particularly next of kin, and often labor is jointly provided for some particular task. Family and kin members are also usually given preference in buying the land of impoverished relatives. While extraordinary tensions may also exist among such groups, kin members are quick to stand together when challenged from outsiders.

A number of factors in the rural areas have encouraged an intense competition among and between families for land. The concentration and fragmentation of land-holdings, rising production and interest costs, and limited alternative employment opportunities, combine to generate centrifugal forces in the country which threaten the stability of family life. Social relations also increasingly reflect these growing social and economic pressures. For example, the ability to maintain extended families has steadily eroded as male as well as female members are forced to migrate for work, as the amount of land owned per family is reduced to a point unable to support relatively large families, and as the dependency on wage labor has divided the productive unit and fragmented families in response to members being forced to seek employment outside the village.

The Social Consequences of Disasters

As landlessness increased during East Pakistan times, the pressure for wage income also increased among those no longer tied to the land. However, day laborers were only a small percent of any village population. The 1961 Census reported landlessness as being 18 percent in Comilla District which had at that time one of the highest rates of landlessness in the country. Wives in these families generally did not work, or only took occasional employment during the harvest seasons, when husbands became ill, or when need became very great (McCarthy, 1967).

Characteristic of the prevailing monsoon climate are periods of heavy rainfall, which, coupled with rising water in the rivers, results in frequent flooding. Flood control has been a central concern in the area since the British period, yet even as late as 1969-70 severe flooding brought homelessness and hardship to millions of then East Pakistanis.

With the War of Liberation in 1971 an estimated 9 million refugees crossed the borders from East Pakistan into India. For those who did not leave the country, their lives remained unsettled as they had to flee from their homes whenever Pakistani armed forces approached their villages (Ahmed, 1977).

The War of Liberation thoroughly disrupted the existing bureaucratic-political system as well. The hegemony of the West Pakistanis in trade and finance was matched by their domination in government. Senior bureaucratic posts were filled by West Pakistanis, and a majority of the appointments to the Civil Service of Pakistan also went to West Pakistanis. This meant that few East Pakistanis had extensive administrative or bureaucratic experience at senior levels of government.

The famine of 1974 further disrupted village life as countless numbers of people were forced to leave their villages in search of food. Famine related deaths are estimated as being 100,000. Women and children were particularly noticeable in the towns and cities as they sought food and work in tremendous numbers.

While most refugees returned to Bangladesh, and the numbers of homeless, hungry people gradually drifted back to the villages, fundamental changes had occurred. For example, the sale of land rose from approximately 64,000 acres in 1971 to 156,500 acres in 1974 (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, 1979:211); rice production dropped in the early Seventies from almost 12 million tons to less than 10 million tons, and flood and drought losses of rice ranged from a quarter of a million tons to almost 2 million tons during this same period (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, 1979:246).

Also of significance during this period was the shift in foreign aid to the country. In 1971 external assistance to Bangladesh amounted to US\$ 591 million; by 1974-75 this figure had risen to almost US\$ 1.3 billion, and at the present time equals about US\$ 1.9 billion. Involved in the

transfer and utilization of this aid are 18 donor countries, 9 major international and bilateral lending agencies, and about 80 voluntary agencies (Storror, 1979). Such a major involvement of foreign governments and agencies in the basic economic activities of the country signifies a basic shift in donor involvement from relief work to development activities. It also signifies an increasing influence of donor involvement in government decision making, planning and implementation. While the effect of this influence may be greater control by such agencies, it also signifies, although to a significantly lesser extent, the continued presence of selected problems in the country.