

# **An Inside Look at Two BRAC Schools in Matlab**

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**Working Paper Number: 8**

**BRAC-ICDDR,B Joint Research Project  
Dhaka, Bangladesh**

**1995**

## **Preface**

Empirical evidence point to a causal relationship between the socio-economic status of individuals and communities and their health. Indeed improvement in health is expected to follow socio-economic development. Yet this hypothesis has rarely been tested; at least it has not undergone the scrutiny of scientific inquiry. Even less understood are the processes and mechanisms by which the changes are brought about.

The Rural Development Programme (RDP) of BRAC is a multisectoral integrated programme for poverty alleviation directed at women and the landless poor. It consists of mobilization of the poor, provision of non-formal education, skill training and income generation opportunities and credit facilities. The program is the result of 20 years of experience through trial and error. However evaluation of its impact on human well-being including health has not been convincingly undertaken.

The Matlab field station of ICDDR,B, is an area with a population of 200,000, half of whom are recipients of an intensive maternal and child health and family planning services. The entire population is part of the Center's demographic surveillance system where health and occasionally socioeconomic indicators have been collected prospectively since 1966.

A unique opportunity arose when BRAC decided to extent its field operations (RDP) to Matlab. ICDDR,B and BRAC joined hands to seize this golden occasion. A joint research project was designed to study the impact of BRAC's socio-economic interventions on the well-being of the rural poor, especially of women and children, and to study the mechanism through which this impact is mediated.

In order to share the progress of the project and its early results, a working paper series has been initiated. This paper is an important addition in this endeavour. The project staff will appreciate critical comments from the readers.

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## **Acknowledgements**

This study was done under the auspices of the BRAC-ICDDR,B Matlab joint research project. The Aga Khan Foundation, Ford Foundation, and USAID have supported the project. The BRAC and ICDDR,B are supported by countries and agencies which share their concern for the health and development problems of developing countries. Current ICDDR,B donors include: the aid agencies of the Governments of Australia, Bangladesh, Belgium, Canada, China, Germany, Japan, the Netherlands, Norway, Republic of Korea, Saudi Arabia, Sweden, Switzerland, the United Kingdom and the United States; international organizations including Arab Gulf Fund, Asian Development Bank, European Union, International Atomic Energy Centre, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the United Nations Development Programme(UNDP), the United Nations Population Fund(UNFPA) and the World Health Organization(WHO); private foundations including Aga Khan Foundation, Child Health Foundation, Ford Foundation, Population Council, Rockefeller Foundation and the Sasakawa Foundation; and private organizations including American Express Bank, Bayer A.G., CARE, Family Health International, Helen Keller International, the Johns Hopkins University, Procter Gamble, RAND Corporation, SANDOZ, Swiss Red Cross, the University of California Davis, and others.

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## **SUMMARY**

Since 1985, BRAC has been implementing its Non-Formal Primary Education (NFPE) Programme for disadvantaged children, primarily in the rural areas. From a modest start, the programme has rapidly expanded and by the end of 1994 it covered over 800,000 children in 28,270 schools. However, setting up these schools over such a short period of time was a stupendous job for the NFPE staff. The study, dealing with only two schools at Matlab depicts a picture of the multitude of problems that were faced during the initial stages of establishing these schools. Though the schools were set up simultaneously in a similar socio-cultural matrix, performance of the schools, in terms attendance, competency of the teachers, teaching methods and relation with the parents, showed marked differences. The study made an in-depth critical analysis of these differences and problems and made valuable recommendations to improve not only the performance of the schools, but also the management of the schools, taking into consideration the socio-cultural characteristics of the immediate environment of the two schools. These recommendations may be equally applicable in setting up future NFPE schools.

## I. INTRODUCTION

“BRAC’s experience with community participation, its knowledge of the values of behaviours of village people and its program implementation experience were essential ingredients for the success of the Non-Formal Primary School” (Lovell and Fatema, 1989).

Since independence of Bangladesh in 1971, non-governmental organisations (NGO’s), including BRAC have been carrying out a wide range of voluntary activities in the field of health, family planning, education, poverty alleviation, income generating credit programmes, community development and human rights programmes. In 1985, BRAC initiated a primary education programme in response to the need of the rural poor. By the end of 1994, 28,270 schools with an enrolment of over 800,000 children had been operating all over Bangladesh. Two models have been developed for two different age groups of children. The first, called the Non-Formal Primary Education (NFPE) is a three-year programme for children aged 8 to 10, who have never attended schools or have dropped out of any type of schools. The second model called the Basic Education For Older Children (BEOC), is a two-year programme for children aged 11 to 14 who have also never attended schools. Nearly 75% of the students of both schools are girls. The BRAC’s programme complements the government’s Universal Primary Education Programme in its aim to reduce illiteracy by providing basic education to poor disadvantage children.

Nearly all BRAC schools are located in rural areas. Before organizing new schools the NFPE programme staff conduct village surveys to find out where schools are needed. During these surveys, the local government officials, the Union Chairman, the village elites and members of the target group<sup>1</sup> are consulted and they are given an idea about various aspects of BRAC schools. The village people have to have consensus before a school can be set up. Before final decision is taken on setting up a school, three important factors are taken into consideration: (i) availability of a teacher in that particular village; (ii) the number of boys and girls of particular age group who need education; and (iii) the availability of a “bari” (a cluster of households) where a room may be rented for the school.

Various literature emphasize on four important aspects of rural-based primary schools: (i) relationship between the school and the community; (ii) supervision and monitoring; (iii) teachers; and (iv) students and guardians. According to Chantanavich and Chantanavich (1990), a school is a unit within a society and functions largely with the cooperation and goodwill of the people it serves. If the community leaders are enthusiastic, cooperative and lend moral support to the school, positive attitude towards the school from the community as a whole can be assured. However, constant supervision and careful monitoring of the attendance of teachers, their efficiency in teaching and the students’ progress are equally important for the success of the schools. In a case-study of a school in Bolivia (Avalos, 1986), it was observed that the same teacher and her supervisor had been working for five years continuously, which helped them to monitor the activities of the school without any interruption, as well as to build up rapport with the community. Lookheed and Verspoor (1991) believed that parents should be kept informed of their children’s progress through regular household contacts and guardian-teacher meetings.

The overall objectives of the present study were to: (i) assess the relationship between the community and the NFPE schools and teachers; (ii) examine the changes that have been brought about in the community

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<sup>1</sup> The target group as defined by BRAC consists of the people who are landless or have less than 50 decimals of land and sell manual labour for at least 100 days in a year.

due to the schools; and (iii) identify the factors which influence the performance of the schools. There are three parts to this study. The first part deals with the establishment of NFPE schools and the character and relationship of the schools within the community. The second part presents a comparison between the two schools, and the interaction between the teachers, parents and community members. Finally, the third part attempts to find out the form of antagonism of the members of the community towards the schools.

## II. METHODOLOGY

The study was based on two schools (School A and B) in Matlab Thana.<sup>2</sup> The informations were collected through interviews with members of the community, teachers, parents and Programme Organizers (PO) of NFPE. In addition, useful information were also obtained by the following means: direct observations in classrooms for a period of three months in 1994 to grasp the classroom dynamics and teacher-student interactions; collecting historical information about the school from the NFPE staff, community leaders and teachers; and by attending one of the regular monthly refresher's courses conducted by NFPE for the teachers.

### Limitations of the study

It is an in-depth case study of two schools in one village and though, some of its basic findings may possibly be similar to other areas, the study can, by no means, be considered as representative of all NFPE schools, as each school may have its own set of problems peculiar to the micro socio-cultural characteristics of its own immediate environment.

## III. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

From the very inception of the two schools, it was evident that the effort was beset by a host of problems such as, inadequate resources, shortage of staff, judgment of error and so on. The PO utilized the services of a local village woman to organize the children for the schools. She was promised a job as a teacher because of her services rendered during the initial stage of setting up the schools; but eventually she did not get the job as she was unmarried.<sup>3</sup> The field staff, instead, recruited someone else and this created serious problems which generated a long standing conflict amongst some individuals within the community and the teachers which had detrimental effect on the performance of one of the schools (School-B).

Another serious drawback of School-B is the absence of parental involvement in the affairs of the management of the school. The school does not organize monthly parent-teacher meetings, as it should and consequently the parents are unaware of how their children are progressing or if they are regularly attending classes. To make the matter worse, frequent transfers of the POs in the past year and a half made it nearly impossible to build up an effective and meaningful rapport with the community, teachers

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<sup>2</sup> Thana is an administrative unit.

<sup>3</sup> BRAC prefers to hire women as teachers who are married and only in most unusual circumstances an unmarried woman is recruited. This is because most unmarried women tend to leave their village after they are married to live with their in-laws. It is expected that the teachers should teach in the school for a minimum of three years.

and parents. There also appears to be a lack of understanding on the part of the teachers regarding the usefulness of the parent-teacher meetings.

The teaching style in School-B needs much improvement. The teacher has a tendency to hit the children when they cannot follow the lessons. The students are highly irregular in their attendance and there are only 17 to 18 children left attending the school. The number of students in a normal NFPE school is 30. Five children have been replaced in the last six months and this has further affected the attendance rate and motivation of the students. Due to irregular attendance and replacements, the teacher is constantly repeating the lessons resulting in significantly lagging behind the scheduled curriculum.

### **Establishment of the Schools**

The focus of this section will be on the historical background of the formative stages of the two schools within the same community. By understanding how the schools were set up will give us an insight into the character and relationship of the schools with the community.

The village, relatively large one, where the two schools are located, lie in the south-western part of Matlab Bazaar in Chandpur District<sup>4</sup> The village can be reached from Matlab Bazaar mainly on foot and partly by rickshaw. Most of the households in the village are farming households. There are also a large number of fishermen, day labourers, businessmen and service holders; but nearly all the inhabitants of the village are dependent, at varying degrees, upon agriculture for their livelihood. The villagers are all Muslims and most of them are extremely poor. The village community is composed of five mosques, two madrassas (religion schools), a government school and a few other youth and cooperative clubs. The two NFPE schools, which were established in the village in December 1992 hereafter, referred to as school-A and school-B.

The following people played critical roles during the setting up the schools. Their perception and views of all the happenings, which affected the two schools during and after their establishment, are discussed below to obtain an understanding of the complexities of how rural society works.

**Ranu:** A 23 year old woman, unmarried, and currently unemployed lives with her mother. She was involved in the initial stage of founding the schools. She was promised a job of a teacher by the PO, but was later turned down because she was unmarried.

**Hajera:** A friend of Ranu, about 26 year old, married, got involved with the BRAC schools, because her friend Ranu informed her of job vacancies for teaching. She is now a teacher at school-A.

**Parveen:** About 20 year old and married, lives with her mother and is a teacher at BRAC school-B. She got the job after Ranu was turned down.

**Mezzbauddin:**  
(Mezzba) Studying at a college, about 24 year old and unmarried. He was helping Parveen in managing the school. Later for unknown reason he cut off all connection with Parveen.

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<sup>4</sup> An administrative unit higher than a Thana.



**Enayetullah:** He is a member of the local Union Council (lowest elected body). He is also a member of the Government Primary School Management Committee.

**Fazilatunessa:** She is the leader of the BRAC's Village Organization (VO) and also a BRAC health worker of the village community.

### **Ranu's story**

Ranu is presently unemployed. She lived in Naranyganj, near Dhaka, for a month in search of employment, but failed and returned to her village in the hope of finding a job. Her father who worked in a mill also lost his job. She is planning to appear for her Intermediate Examinations. She heard about BRAC through a friend, who informed her that BRAC was looking for teachers, especially a "social awareness" teacher to train *Samities* (Samities are the local names for BRAC's VOs that give loans to women). She went to a nearby village to find out more about the job, where she met the PO who mentioned that he was interested in opening up schools in her village and asked whether she would be interested in helping him.

"I was given two jobs by the PO, one was to set up a *Samity* at my village and the other was to help find boys and girls for the proposed schools. I talked to some of the women and visited a few houses and organized *Samity* in our village. I made a list of 68 children who were not at the time enrolled in any school. I along with the PO and Mumtaz (a part-time research worker of BRAC) went around the village and the PO to find out the number of children who were interested in studying. I am the one who got Hajera (the present teacher of school-A) involved. I told her that BRAC was looking for another teacher. She was interested. We were both interviewed for the jobs. The PO promised me that I would get the job if I helped him recruit the children". During the author's interview with Ranu, her mother walked in and interrupted us by saying, "My daughter was involved in organizing the schools. She was asked by the PO to recruit children and was promised a job on that basis. My daughter told the PO that if she didn't get the job she would be embarrassed and laughed at by the locals. He reassured her that she would get the job. Look, what BRAC has done to her. They knew she was unmarried." She appeared to be extremely upset and left us after this outburst.

Under the NFPE programme, after recruiting a teacher, she is sent for training at TARC (the Training and Resource Centre of BRAC). After a teacher has successfully completed her training she starts teaching at the school. Ranu went on to explain that she and Hajera had received the training and only after completion of her training she was told that they could not hire her because she was unmarried. "Parveen (the present teacher at school-B) used to go and sit everyday at the NFPE and RDP (Rural Development Programme of BRAC) offices to get my job. She knew that I couldn't get the job because I was unmarried". Ranu further said that as she was very desperate for the job, she attempted to falsify records to prove that she was married to one of her cousins. According to Ranu, to make sure that she didn't get the job, Parveen told everyone in the village that Ranu was lying about her marriage to get the job. Parveen had deliberately slandered her name and reputation for which she would never forgive her. Now, even her cousin wouldn't talk to her. Parveen also told the staff at NFPE that Ranu gave up trying for the job because she just couldn't handle the shame and pressure anymore. Parveen had ruined her life.

Ranu did not feel that the PO was to blame even though he had been responsible for promising her the job in the first place. "He was a kind man and he tried to help me, it's not his fault. It's Parveen - she was

after my job. She didn't even have to go through an interview because Mezzbauddin helped her to get the job.... she even went for training after a month of teaching at the school". Ranu's parting words were, "Parveen's mother has spread malicious gossip about me even though her own daughter has been married twice. Do you know that Parveen hits the students and abuses them? Once she hit a child so hard that there were bruises all over his body. A lot of parents have complained. She is not a good teacher."

### **Hajera's Story**

Hajera has one daughter (2 years old) and her husband works in the Bangladesh Rifles (BDR), an auxiliary force. She lives with her parents. She has been teaching at school-A for over a year now. Her school is located next to a mosque. She told me that she didn't like Parveen, because when she initially tried to help Parveen (at the beginning of the year) with some songs to teach the children, Parveen kept the songbook for several days and would not return it. "I did not like the way Parveen took so long in returning the book, which needed. I asked one of her students to remind her about my book. Parveen arrives at my school the next day accusing me of threatening her and abused me."

Gradually, it became apparent that Hajera did not like Parveen because she felt that Ranu deserved to be the teacher of school-B and Parveen had manipulated in getting the job. Hajera then went on saying that at first Ranu got the job but couldn't take it because she was unmarried. Since Ranu helped to collect most of the children for the schools, the PO told her that if somehow she could prove that she was married, he would be able to hire her. But Parveen made it absolutely certain that everyone in the village; especially the cousin's family knew that Ranu had used her cousin's name to prove that she was married. This created a huge scandal and fight broke out between the two families. Eventually, Ranu backed out from the job as she no longer had the strength to fight people like Parveen--a woman so low and mean that I have no words to describe her."

Hajera did not comment on Parveen's competency as a teacher during this interview. A month later when we interviewed her again, she was teaching Parveen's class for two months, as Parveen was on maternity leave (often when a teacher is on maternity or sick leave, the teacher from the nearest school substitutes her). According to the PO, there is always competition between neighboring schools, therefore, the substitute teacher is not always as sincere as she is for her own school. Hajera is a good teacher but she was very harsh with Parveen's students. Attendance also markedly decreased during this period.

In one particular incident, Hajera lost her patience with Parveen's pupils when they couldn't spell correctly. She turned around and looked at the author and shouted, "Look at the state of these pupils! Even if I teach them for a hundred times, they can't remember." She again started screaming at the children during their math lesson, when some of them were unable to answer correctly. "How did she (Parveen) teach you numbers? How? What has she taught you, children?" Hajera complained, "The children are very slow in learning. Parveen hasn't taught them anything; they don't even know how to count. They don't even know the alphabets."

When I attended the next teachers' refresher course, she complained again to the PO about Parveen's students, "I can't make them come to school; they are just not interested in studying and their attendance is irregular. I can't run around all the time trying to make these children come to school."

## Parveen's story

Parveen is 20 years old and with one son lives with her mother. Her husband works at a mill in another town. She was on maternity leave for 2 months at the time of the interview. She is the teacher of school-B, where Hajera was substituting for her, as mentioned above.

“Ranu got the job and went for training and then all I heard was that she didn't get the job because she was unmarried. I was given the job and now Ranu blames me for losing the job. It's not my fault that she couldn't prove she was married and everyone knew she was not telling the truth. At the beginning when we (Ranu, Hajera and I) applied for the jobs as teachers, Hajera and Ranu deliberately didn't tell me the date of the interview. Can you believe it? They told the officers at NFPE that I must be unwell and that is why I didn't show up. The PO himself could have told me the date of interview for the job when he came to the village. Instead, he asked Ranu to inform others about the date of the interview. That is the reason why I initially didn't get the job. I didn't get a fair deal.”

While I mentioned that she has had a few problems with her school with signboards being stolen, high rate of student dropouts, poor attendance, etc., she replied that Ranu and Mezzba were her adversaries and they were trying to subvert her school. “Ranu tells the parents of the students that I have ruined her life and that I am not a good teacher. Mezzba has caused a lot of problems for me too. He has gone around telling the children that I teach on Christianity and for which they will be buried in black cloth.” (At this time, there were rumors spreading around the Matlab region that BRAC schools were teaching Christian studies. Any children who study at a BRAC school would be buried in a black cloth). “Mezzba has harassed some of my students. Just the other day Shilpi (a student) came crying to my house. She told that Mezzba has been saying horrible things to her about me. She is terrified of him.”

Later, I questioned Shilpi about the incident and she repeated what Parveen had told me. I asked Parveen why she didn't confront Ranu and Mezzba on this matter. “Ranu is far too clever. She sometimes uses other people to go around saying things about me and that's why I am unable to confront her as she will deny it. I have complained to Dr. Ruhul Amin (Mezzba's uncle who is well known in the village and works for International Centre for Diarrhoeal Disease Research, Bangladesh (ICDDR,B) and he scolded Mezzbauddin but no one else (community leaders) has really said anything to him. Don't you understand Mezzba is rich and he wants to keep us the poor people down? About four/five months after my school opened Mezzba took away six children by telling the guardians all sorts of lies about me. He even took away Fazila Apa's son (Fazila is a leader of the *Samity*). These parents believe everything they are told.”

I mentioned about changing the timing of her school from afternoon to morning because Mezzba complained that the children's extracurricular activities coincided with the *Asr* (afternoon) prayer time at 4.30 p.m. “Yes, the PO listens to whatever he says. Why do you give him so much importance?”

Though she didn't mention anything negative about Hajera she did mention that she was keen to get back and teach her class. Parveen went back to teaching after a month instead of waiting for the usual two-month maternity leave period. According to her stepsister Taria, Parveen didn't want Hajera to teach her class any longer because she felt that her students were being spoiled.

### **Mezzbauddin's story**

He is a 24 year old college student who comes from a well-off farmer's family. His uncle Dr. Ruhul Amin, is a well known and respected member of the village community. Interview with him was quite informal but extremely brief as he did not have the time for a long chat; or more likely he wanted to avoid the interviewer.

“Parveen is not a good teacher as she hits the children and scolds them constantly. She should be dismissed from her job. Hajera is a much better teacher. I am going to write a letter to the local NFPE office and the Head Office of BRAC in Dhaka to tell them what a useless teacher Parveen is. This school will never improve if she continues to teach there. Even I can teach better than she.” He denied ever having removed the blackboard or signboard and was really angry at Parveen for slandering him. “She is going around saying all these awful things about me.... this school will never do well if she continues teaching there.”

He had not written letters till then to the NFPE office in Matlab or to the Head office. May be he was just bluffing. He was still trying to get Parveen fired by complaining about her lack of teaching abilities. Recently a BRAC field worker heard the following exchanges in one of the houses of the village. Mezzba speaking to Hosnara (mother of a NFPE student), “Parveen has no aptitude for teaching and she is a NFPE school teacher. I will admit your daughter in the regular primary school. Tell your daughter to go to the regular primary school for the next three days and I will come and help admit her on the fourth day”. On enquiring about her daughter, Hosnara replied, “Yes, on some days my daughter goes to the BRAC School and on other days she even doesn't go -- she spends all her time just being naughty”. It must be remembered that Hosnara being very poor would naturally like to please Mezzbauddin (Mezzba).

Ranu and Mezzba are good friends and, as Mezzba is a man, it is easier for him to go around slandering Parveen. Both would like to see Parveen's school ruined and then she would be out of job. It seems that they are conspiring to oust Parveen from her job and install Ranu in her position.

### **Mr. Enayetullah's story**

Mr. Enayetullah<sup>5</sup>, a member of the local Union Council, states, “At the beginning I didn't know anything about BRAC or its NFPE programme. Ranu approached me with the information that BRAC was interested in opening two schools in our village. I went to Matlab and met the PO of NFPE and the RDP officer-in-charge to discuss about establishing the schools and I agreed to assist in renting the Patwari house for School-B. My name is on the Deed of Agreement. I also recommended Ranu for a job in one of the schools. Parveen and Hajera are both good teachers and I have had no problems with either of them.”

### **Fazilatunessa's story**

She is a VO leader and a BRAC-trained health worker for the local community. “I heard about the NFPE schools from other people and I heard that they were looking for disadvantaged children to study in the schools. “When she was asked about the Christian rumors spreading around the community, She replied, “Mezzba is a very bad person. He keeps saying that School-B is a Christian school. On learning this, his

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<sup>5</sup> Mr. Enayetullah is also committed to the government's programme, which is 'Education For All, by the Year 2000.' He is highly respected in the village.

uncle Mr. Ruhul Amin gave him a good beating.

Fazilatunessa did have her son studying at School-B, but apparently after listening to Mezzba, she withdrew her child who is now attending a government school. She, however, denied this, saying that her child was considered too young to join a BRAC school so she had to withdraw him.

### **Programme Organizer's (POs) story**

This particular PO was not involved in the initial stage of establishing the schools in this village. The PO who had been in charge of setting up the schools was transferred six months after the opening of the school. The PO we interviewed was in charge of monitoring and supervising the two schools. "You see these dropouts are occurring partly because the government schools are promising wheat (under a government programme) to these poor people, and partly, though to a much lesser extent, because of the Christian rumors". In the beginning, he didn't want to mention any problems faced by School-B other than the ones mentioned above. After discussing the rumors I had heard about the conflict between Parveen/Ranu, Hajera and Mezzba, he reluctantly admitted that he has had some problem with Mezzba. "That school (B) has been a problem right from the beginning --it's Parveen - she is a problem." He completely discounted the possibility that perhaps Ranu had a role to play in the problems that were occurring at School-B.

The PO informed that during the opening of 40 schools in the Matlab region in 1992 there were only two POs. They had to open those schools within two months. When organizing a school, the following procedures are followed: (a) village survey; (b) learners survey; (c) teacher recruitment; (d) school house selection. These require a long time and hard work. It is very difficult for a small number of POs to manage all their works.

On our next visit to Matlab after two months, we were informed that the PO we interviewed had been transferred and that there was a new PO. He was also transferred after two weeks. Frequent transfer of the POs and shortage of staff during the initial stage gave rise to the problems already mentioned.

To sum up it may be stated that Ranu feels used and double-crossed by BRAC and she can only vent her rage and frustration at Parveen. BRAC is a large organization and Ranu knows that she is powerless to fight the perceived injustice that has been meted out to her by BRAC. Therefore, her desire for revenge could only be directed toward Parveen.

Hajera and Parveen are not on friendly terms and therefore, if Parveen has any problems with parents or students in her School (B), she cannot rely on Hajera for support. If good relation doesn't exist among the teachers and the community members are aware of it, this can create an adverse image of BRAC and its schools. Whether Mezzba had a conflict with Parveen on account of Christian rumors he was spreading or because they were once close in the past, he has become a problem for Parveen. Parveen is also disliked by Ranu and Hajera. Both Ranu and Mezzba are conspiring against her so that she eventually loses her job.

By initially depending solely on Ranu and despite of the fact, that she was unmarried and could not be appointed as teacher, the PO had created a weak link with the community. To make the situation worse there have been three different POs within a short span of a year and a half and as a result none of them

could get enough time to develop a desirable level of friendly linkage with the community. Maintain a good rapport with the community for smooth running of the schools if the link is so weak. Apprehending quick transfer the POs lost the motivation in building up a good relationship in the community. Moreover, apprehending quick transfer, the POs could not have sufficient motivation in building up a good relationship in the community.

Mr. Enayetullah (Union Member) did not have much to comment on some of the problems affecting school-B. One of the reasons for his lack of interest could be that he went all the way to Matlab to recommend Ranu for a job. He is highly respected in the village, and a man of his stature may have felt offended that the NFPE staff had disregarded his recommendation. Public sentiment towards BRAC also suffered from this incident as they feel that a local girl of their community had been exploited. Regaining confidence of the community seems to be an uphill task for BRAC in view of the frequent transfer of the POs.

### **Selection of School Premises**

This section deals with the views, impressions and reaction of the household-owners of the schoolrooms obtained through interviews with them. They expressed their views on the school-related problems.

**Patwari Bari:** Two families jointly rented out a room for School-B (Parveen's school)

**Sarkar Bari:** Eight families are jointly involved in renting out a room for School-A (Hajera's school)

### **Patwari Bari**

Salauddin, a young man of 24 years was interviewed from Patwari Bari as his father was physically invalid and he was the principal individual representing two families, involved in the negotiations with BRAC for renting out the room for School-B.

“Ranu informed me that BRAC intended to set up a school and whether we could provide them a place for the school. I told her that I would have to think about the proposition. Then the PO came and told me that they would like to rent the room for three years for which they would pay us Tk. 6,000. I, along with Enayetullah bhai (Union Member), went to Matlab to close the deal and obtain an advance. The agreement was signed in November and the school was opened in following January.

When inquired whether he had faced any problems with the school or any of the POs so far, he said, “Yes, there have been a few problems with the blackboard being stolen and we have lost quite a few students because of the ‘Christian’ rumors. There has been antagonism between the two teachers - you see Hajera and her friends are against Parveen. Some people are working in collusion with Hajera to get rid of Parveen. I am alone and I am too scared to help her. Parveen is a good teacher.” He didn't mention any names in the interview about who these people might be.

He answered in affirmative when I asked him if he had discussed his problems with the PO. “You see I knew the previous PO really well and we used to chat a lot. I really don't know this new PO.”

## **Sarkar Bari**

Eight families have joint ownership of the school room (School-A, where Hajera is the teacher). Mr. Nizunnabir Sarkar, a retired air force sergeant, who is one of the owners of the Bari, was interviewed.

“About 40 to 50 parents agreed, so the school was set up here over a year now. We were given Tk. 5,000 loan to renovate the room for the school. The whole process took about 2 months, from the time of approach by the PO to the opening of the school.” He then went on to discuss some of the problems that had affected the school-B. “A signboard and later a blackboard were stolen. The school lacked proper care.” Another woman sitting beside him interrupted to say, “Mezzba did it. Its because they once liked each other (Mezzba and Parveen) and now Mezzba hates her.” She was told to be quiet by Sarkar and continued speaking, “I don’t know why there are higher dropout in the other school (B), but we don’t have any such problem in our school. There are 6 of us in the school committee and we are constantly monitoring the school to see if there are any problems. There are some conservative priests who oppose BRAC schools, but these problems will be resolved.”

Sarkar household is relatively better off than the Patwari household (School-B). The Sarkar household can exert more influence on the community because: (i) they are a large group of eight families; (ii) they are relatively well off than the Patwaris; and (iii) the villagers place more values on what they say. As opposed to school-B, school-A has a strong school committee, which maintains a good relationship with the PO.

## **Performance of the Schools**

This section discusses the performances of the two schools. Some of the reasons as to why School B is not functioning well have been mentioned earlier. There are several other contributing factors which affected the performance of the two schools are discussed under the following headings:

- (i) Quality of teaching
- (ii) Parents-teacher meetings
- (iii) Replacement of dropout students

NFPE schools teach 3 subjects: Mathematics, Bengali, and Social Studies. The schools operate with few established rules and as such a good many activities of the schools largely rest on the teacher. As teachers are given similar training at the training centres, teaching and learning activities are expected to be similar in both classrooms and were mainly based on recitation, question and answer, dictation and copying from the black board. Individual pupils on the board or on papers do math exercises and Bangla was learnt by repetition and recitation of the words.

### **(i) Quality of teaching:**

#### **School A**

The overall performance of School A was found to be good. The dropouts from this school have only been 4 students. The reason for dropouts appeared to be that the parents of these students transferred their children to government schools in order to be entitled in obtaining free wheat. The following factors may

have contributed to the satisfactory performance of the school:

- Hajera is a conscientious and dedicated teacher.
- She always states the objectives of the lessons in clear terms.
- She always interacts closely with her students during teaching.
- Maintains discipline in class without corporal punishment.
- Has good classroom management skill.
- Organizes her pupils in groups and makes extra effort to explain subject matter to slower learning pupils.
- The children have been motivated to be on time in school and the attendance is regular.
- Hajera is constantly monitoring her students' progress by giving informal tests and regularly checking homework.
- Homework is given daily and consists of a review of the work done on that particular day.
- She appears to have maintained a fairly good relationship with the guardians.

### **School B**

Parveen claims that there were only about 6 to 7 dropouts. During the study period of three months it was observed that the classroom attendance never exceeded 18 pupils. Her reasons for their irregular attendance were either they were busy in doing household chores or they were sick, and so on. Earlier she blamed the dropouts on the 'Christian' rumors and government distributing free wheat to their parents. Later on though she blamed Mezzbauddin and Ranu for the dropouts and disruption in her school. Whatever may have been the reasons, the author found that:

- Parveen did not appear to be as dedicated as Hajera and sometimes terminated the school early.
- She has been irregular in her attendance.
- Her brother, who is not trained, sometimes substitutes her in the class.
- She resorts to physical punishment when trying to keep order in the classroom.
- The children are often, late and attendance is very irregular.
- She does organize her students in groups but does not seem to explain the subject matter properly.



- No special attention is given to the slow learners.
- She often allows the children to answer in chorus, rather than individually.
- Children are not as attentive or disciplined as that of in school A.
- Though Parveen does assign written homework daily, she does not evaluate the students with informal tests as often as Hajera.

Both the teachers do talk about local environment (*Paribesh*) when teaching Social Studies. Discussions ranging from what item of food was taken that particular day to questions about how to remain clean were regularly brought up in both the schools.

None of the teachers, however, was found to encourage daily extra curricular activities. This could be attributed to all the false stories that are being spread about BRAC children being busy with singing, dancing, learning Christianity, etc. The teacher may also run out of time for extra curricular activities as they have to cover three subjects a day within scheduled three hours and besides, a lot of time has to be spent on Math in both the schools.

#### **(ii) Parents - teacher meetings**

In rural societies having a strong oral tradition whereby personal contacts are much more valued than printed materials, efforts must be made to improve and strengthen the oral interaction between field level functionaries of NFPE and their rural clientele. This interaction is an essential link in the chain of non-formal education in rural areas. (Berstecher and Malpica, 1985).

The NFPE programme attach much importance on staff organizing meetings once a month between guardian, teachers and the PO, as it is considered to be an important factor in running a school efficiently. From these meetings the guardians get a better understanding of what is being taught in the BRAC school system. They are also able to monitor the progress of their children and discuss any problems that their children may face. Teachers, in general, are respected and listened to by the local community. If there are only few meetings organized in a year, most of these parents would feel hesitant to approach, a teacher if they had any problems. Having regular meetings break down the barrier of hesitancy and encourages and involves parents into interacting more closely with the school authority and if needed they may also help teachers find out solutions to any problems that may arise. This can enhance attendance and inspire positive behavior of the students.

On attending the refresher courses one gets the general impression that the teachers felt that meetings were only needed when there were problems at school and having monthly meetings may have some reflection on their competency. As one teacher proudly explained to the author, "I've had only one parent-guardian meeting for the whole year of 1993, and the was right at the beginning when the school was just being set up". Another teacher told me that she had no problems with attendance, " You see there are no problems in my school, and then why you need such meetings? "Hajera (School-A) says, "Yes I've had 4 or 5 such meetings. When there is a problem, we have a meeting. Parveen (School-B) also says, "I have had 3 or 4 meetings. When the PO tells me to organize a meeting, I do."

Random informal interviews were conducted with several parents on their attending the parent-teacher meetings. Most parents did not attend the meetings regularly, as they were not held regularly since the schools opened in December 1992. The PO felt that there were too many problems in the schools, for which it was difficult to organize meetings. The teachers on the other hand, believe that meetings are necessary only if there are problems. Many parents also cannot find out time to attend all the meetings.

Another factor that may be acting against calling the meetings regularly is that some teachers may feel that since most parents are illiterate, they are not concerned or they will be unable to comprehend the various activities of the schools. Life in the village community is very informal and they (parents and teachers) are not used to “formal organized meetings” as such; hence the teachers and sometimes even the POs may not appreciate the benefit of monthly parent-teacher meetings.

### **(iii) Replacement of students**

Like any other school, the students of BRAC schools have varied level of performance. Some children learn faster than others. The slow learners may develop a fear of study and they finally reach a stage when they discontinue their studies. This creates a long-standing serious situation when new ones replace these dropout students. As they missed the preparatory phases of learning, the new students often have problems keeping up with the rest of the class. The children who are ahead may lose interest and get bored if the teacher has to constantly repeat the lessons for the benefit of the new pupils. This disrupts the continuity of learning and tends to lower the performance level of the regular students and at the same time the new pupil suffers, as he/she does not have a strong foundation to build on. Although Hajera (School-A) has lost 4 students to the government schools she does not want to replace them as she feels that this will slow down the progress of her class. In School-B, 5 pupils have been replaced so far. This could be another reason for the poorer performance of school-B as compared to school-A.

## **The Issue of ‘Christianization’**

Linking Christianity with BRAC schools frequently cropped up during the study. Several community leaders were contacted to know more about it. Broadly speaking there are two types of leaders in a village, formal and informal. Formal leaders are those who are recognized by the government officials and accepted in the community as such. It is the informal leaders such as Imams (religious teachers) who are respected by the community (CIRDAP, 1984). Imams (sometimes also called Maulanas) authority may not be officially recognized but their views and opinions carry considerable weight and influence in the rural society. Such leaders often act as catalysts in bringing about social changes and development and therefore, it has been suggested that any new project which is meant for development of rural areas could be brought to the notice of the people through its informal leaders.

To obtain more information on this aspect Maulana Nizamuddin, a well-known and respected religious leader of the village was interviewed. He is also the headmaster of the newly opened “Madrassa” (a school that emphasizes on Islamic studies). On questioning about BRAC schools, he commented,

“No one got in touch with us; we just heard that a school is going to be set up for children. I really can’t comment on BRAC schools, as I have no idea about them. I have read articles in newspapers about BRAC saying that BRAC is un-Islamic; so far I have not found anything un-Islamic about BRAC in this village. If it were so, we would have stopped it from functioning”. He mentioned that he had close contact with government schoolteachers. “Every month I meet Mr.Enayetullah (Union Member) and the government school teachers. We talk about the progress of the schools and discuss the problems. You are the first BRAC person I have met,” he said.

It was obvious from the study that there was no contact between the BRAC staff and the religious leaders from the initial stage of opening the schools to the present. If the purpose of the schools were explained to these leaders they would have given moral support to the schools. A few other leaders who were present at the interview remarked that they did not really know what BRAC was all about. “What is BRAC’s design (BRAC er uddesho ki)?” they muttered. If the religious leaders were taken into confidence from the very beginning, these absurd rumours about Christianity could not have gained any ground and the school-B could have run smoothly.

## **IV. CONCLUSIONS**

Relationship between the two teachers and between them and some of the locals is far from congenial. The ordinary community members are aware of this mutual hostility and this has created a negative image about BRAC and its schools. Being aware of the fact that Ranu is an unmarried girl, which automatically disqualifies her for getting a teaching job in BRAC schools, her exceptional capacity in organizing students for establishing new schools was fully exploited by the then PO by promising her a teacher’s job. This not only resulted in a weak link with the community, it also created an environment of animosity in the community, which prevailed to this date. This situation could have been averted by (i) not using Ranu in organizing the students and (ii) not transferring the original PO until the schools were running smoothly well. Frequent transfers of POs seriously impaired organizing the schools.

Other reason as to why School-A is running more efficiently than School-B, is the support of the household owners of School-A. The Sarkar family being a large extended family has a lot more influence in the community and Hajera (teacher of School-A) can count on them for support unlike Parveen (teacher of School-B), where Salauddin (owner of the School-B) was the only adult member of the Patwari family and he is not well off and quite young. Higher proportion of replacement students of School-B has partly caused the progress of the school to lag behind School-A. The regular children will eventually get bored when the lessons are constantly repeated to assist the new students to catch up with the class. Some of the new students may also develop a fear of study if they fail to follow the lessons and may finally drop out. Stronger parental involvement through regular meetings could have helped to : (i) lower the rate of student dropouts; (ii) identify the irritants through discussion with the parents and (iii) eliminate the adverse effect of the 'Christian' rumors through better understanding of BRAC's school systems on the part of the parents.

It is apparent that the field staff did not consult the religious leaders and other village elites when they planned to set up the schools in the village and this oversight resulted in a lapse of communication and created misunderstanding, which encouraged some of the religious leaders to spread rumours that BRAC was a 'Christian' organization. If the BRAC field staff could establish close rapport contact with them, they could have relied on their support when the 'Christian' rumours started.

Rural life has its own style, occupational and social structure, settlement patterns and social institutions that lean heavily on tradition. As a whole, urbanization and the impact of the changing world have not yet made any appreciable impact on the rural communities (CIRDAP, 1984). Village people are still influenced by superstition and traditional ways of thinking and living. There is a greater sense of communal brotherhood in these rural communities, but that does not mean that there are no rifts and divisions.

It is safe to assume that entering into rural areas with a development programme, which is new to the community, is a very delicate task. It, therefore, becomes imperative that the community must have a clear understanding about the objectives of the programme, which, in one way or other, is bound to bring about significant changes in the way of life of the rural people. And this can only be achieved by gaining their confidence and trust through their deep involvement and commitment to the process of development BRAC is seeking to promote in the area.

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