

EDUCATING LANDLESS WOMEN FOR SELF-RELIANCE (JAMALPUR)

INTRODUCTION

Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC) is a non-governmental organisation involved in various activities with the objective of contributing to the economic and social development of rural Bangladesh. Founded and run by Bangladeshi nationals, it began in a small way in February 1972. Initially formed to rehabilitate refugees of the liberation war returning to Sulla Thana in the District of Sylhet, BRAC has grown into an organisation with projects and activities in several other districts. The scope of operations has evolved from rehabilitation to integrated rural development, human and institutional development, and the design, testing and implementation of innovative approaches, techniques and methodologies for rural development. The focus of development has shifted from a community approach to the mobilisation and organisation of the poor and disadvantaged sector of the population.

Sectoral programmes such as agriculture, horticulture, pisciculture, animal husbandry, duck and poultry raising, nutrition, health care, family planning services, and functional education are initiated and controlled by cooperative groups of disadvantaged people. The disadvantaged people are made aware of their rights as citizens and then provided with functional literacy to become self-reliant.

The present case study is an example of a project in which the approach has been to promote rural development activities through functional literacy programmes to organised groups of women. Conscientisation and functional education are cardinal features of the project. Women's groups are encouraged to undertake income-generating ventures and social action for their own benefit. Most income-generating activities are initiated through the groups' own savings with substantial credit support from BRAC.

CURRENT ACTIVITIES

At present BRAC is involved in two other major projects besides the one at Jamalpur.

Sulla Project

Begun in February 1972, Sulla is the original and still the largest rural development project. Phase I, the rehabilitation programme, ran from February to October 1972 and consisted mainly of a large housing programme (10,200 units) and the rehabilitation of fishermen. Phase II ran from November 1972 to December 1975; in this BRAC was involved in eight sectoral activities, the emphasis having shifted from rehabilitation to the development of rural institutions and infrastructure. In Phase III, the last phase of which ended in December 1980, the focus was changed to the mobilisation and organisation of the marginal farmers in ensuring their participation and control in the process of development.

Manikganj Project

The Manikganj Project began in April 1976. As a result of the experience gained in Sulla it started at a more advanced stage.

The approach in Manikganj has been to promote rural development activities through the formation of groups of the people from the initiating organisation. Disadvantaged women of the community have been brought together to organise themselves into groups.

ORIGIN OF THE JAMALPUR WOMEN'S PROJECT (JWP)

In July and August 1974, Jamalpur District was badly affected by floods. UNICEF's Nutrition Unit responded with a food-for-work scheme to engage in agriculture a large number of women begging in the Jamalpur Town area. The following year, at the request of UNICEF, BRAC provided education for 840 women who had participated in the scheme. It trained fifteen of them to work as functional education teachers in their local areas.

In due course these women teachers along with their learner groups, expressed their keen interest in taking up different village-based women's development work in addition to their functional education classes. They felt that by staying and working together they could solve their problems. What evolved was a plan designed, directed and implemented by women.

Project Area

Jamalpur is a district town, approximately 120 miles north of Dhaka, to the east of the River Brahmaputra. The Jamalpur staff covers 20 villages within a radius of one to five miles of Jamalpur Town. These are the villages where most of the original destitute learners live.

Personnel

The JWP staff operates from an office-cum-dormitory in a rented house in Jamalpur Town. The present strength comprises a Programme Administrator assisted by five Programme Organisers and a Technical Assistant for silkworm production.

Objectives

The main objective of the Jamalpur Women's Project (JWP) is to work with the landless women for their advance towards self-reliance and collective social action.

The target population of JWP is the most disadvantaged of the age group 15-45 in 20 villages of Jamalpur Municipal area. BRAC's basic definition of the disadvantaged is those who have no control over the means of production and distribution; who are landless having no assets and who are selling their manual labour for their survival.

Functional Education

BRAC's functional education, with its problem-posing methodology, is basic to all BRAC development activities. The methodology is based on learners' participation through dialogue facilitated by the teacher, who is not an outsider but is from among the group members. The curriculum centres on real life problems and their possible solutions. The aim of the functional education is not only to make each learner critically conscious of her environment, but also to motivate the learners to take actions which beneficially affect their environment. Functional education, therefore, provides an excellent form for target group interaction and motivation. Most of the 39 groups have completed functional education.* Seven new centres with 125 learners started functioning in 1980.

* The curriculum comprises 60 lessons, each one on real life problems like diarrhoea, sanitation etc. The lessons are supported by explanatory charts.

The BRAC staff also gives emphasis to the involvement of women in more income-generating schemes. At the same time concerted efforts are being made to put these women in a better position socially. Due to staff constraints it is very difficult to expand the area of work. However, automatic expansion is taking place as the existing groups are influencing the adjacent village women to form groups and to take up social and economic actions in consultation with the existing group members and BRAC staff.

Group and Economic Activities

To date there are 39 groups with 760 members. In addition, more groups have formed themselves in the surrounding areas, but have yet to be given functional education or any income-generating activities. These groups, however, are also meeting and saving regularly.

The groups have their own group fund which is created from their savings and the profits of income-generating activities. With the group funds the members take up small-scale income-generating schemes like cultivation, small trading, goat rearing, oil crushing, weaving, rickshaw operating and paddy husking.

Jamalpur women group members are traditionally paddy rice huskers, so the majority of the loans are for paddy husking. These loans carry an interest at the rate of 12 per cent per annum and the repayment instalments are weekly. The women are required to pay the principal and interest in approximately 40-45 weeks. The instalments are paid from profits and a contribution of two Takas is also paid each week by every member to their group fund. Earnings are approximately Tk.40-45 per week. At the end of a scheme, the members can either invest an amount for buying assets or they can continue the programme on their own. This income also helps to add to their family income.

The BRAC staff help the groups to maintain records. They are also heavily engaged in organising and motivating the groups and at the same time advising the group members whenever and wherever necessary. The staff members visit the villages every day and they are in constant contact with the members. The loans are used strictly for the purposes for which they are taken. There has been no problem in repayment.

Weaving Centre

Originally there were two groups of 24 members at the Weaving Centre; today only one group with sixteen members is working there. This group has finished functional education and is highly motivated, but due to many technical problems still has to be subsidised by BRAC.

Sericulture

Different group members are given training in rearing of silkworms and spinning of yarn. The yarn is brought by the Sericulture Board. Recently, however, the women of the JWP have planted about 1000 mulberry trees near the town. When these trees mature, many more women could be employed in sericulture. About 16 women are engaged in rearing silkworms and in hand-spinning of silk. BRAC's sericulture centre also rears silkworms and distributes the cocoons to the women.

Kantha Embroidery

Seven groups in five villages are involved in traditional *kantha* embroidery of wall hangings and bed-covers. BRAC assists with working capital and marketing facilities through its own sales outlets.

Jute Goods

One group, which trained in the production of jute goods, is involved in small-scale manufacture financed by the group's own funds.

Poultry

In eight villages women have been trained in poultry vaccination and diseases. These women are now providing this service at a token charge to their group members and villagers. Some of them have been given loans from their group fund for small poultry farms in their homes.

Agriculture

Two groups have taken up cultivation of potatoes, wheat, onions, etc. from their own funds.

Savings and Bank Accounts

Group members contribute their savings regularly to their group funds. The groups are encouraged to open savings bank accounts for security as well as investment purposes. The accounts are in the name of the group, and withdrawals are authorised by the group. In the course of time these women will become familiar with normal banking systems and procedures.

Health and Family Planning

Preventive health measures and family planning are discussed in the functional education classes and also in the weekly group meetings. The government health services available locally are also discussed with the group members so that they can demand these services collectively. BRAC staff motivate the women to take family planning measures and the response is encouraging.

Social Actions

There are certain outcomes of JWP which, although not visible, are important.

- A group which agitated collectively last year to get medical services from the town hospital still receives special attention from the doctors.
- Many group members have bought assets like tin roofs, cows, goats, rickshaws and land from the income they have earned.
- Some groups are proposing to employ teachers paid from their own funds, appreciating the need for their children's education.
- Members from three groups went on a deputation to the Deputy Commissioner for an allocation of tubewells for their villages. Two tubewells have already been constructed and work on another is under way.
- In one village, one husband of a group member wanted to marry for the second time. The group took action, informing the family of his prospective bride that he was already married, in consequence of which the proposal was dropped.
- The groups, in general, try to solve their own social problems themselves without involving outsiders, so that there is less chance of exploitation from outside.

Conclusion

The women in Bangladesh are usually kept in the seclusion of their homes, in the belief that if they go out "their eyes will be opened". Thus, as the women are kept ignorant, they can be suppressed. The other instrument of exploitation is that the women are usually totally dependent economically on men.

The JWP's work has meant that women who were destitute are now socially more aware of themselves as persons. Participating in different types of income-generating programmes, they have gained experience in planning, financial management and operational efficiency, and are learning to take new responsibilities. In addition, these rural women today have realised the importance of being literate. By not only signing their names but also deciphering clearly what they are expected to sign, the women cannot any longer be exploited by the money lenders.

Furthermore, they have now come out of their veils and have some economic independence. Through interactions they are conscious of their rights. They are more vocal in their demands and hence have a social impact in Jamalpur - a fact which influences other women in the surrounding region.