

Bangladeshi women show the way

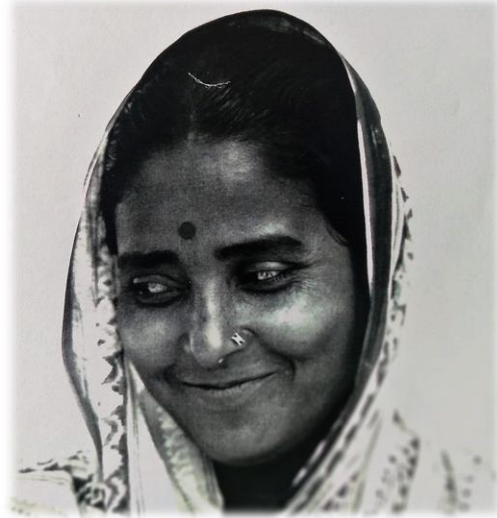
During my travels through Bangladesh - both city and country - I came to admire the way in which women were involved, as if they, and not the men, were the real pillars of society. As project workers and beneficiaries, the women I met at the local level, were adept at doing whatever they could to support themselves, their families and their communities.

There were many inspiring aspects to report on: the beauty of kids; colourful literacy classes; inspirational health clinics, and much more; but it was this single issue of strong women driving their communities, which was the one thing that gripped me most.

Mazeda Mundal - the traditional birth attendant (TBA)

As an example of a strong woman working for the benefit of a number of village communities, I recall very vividly a wonderful lady with a very big heart, whom I met on my travels in the far west of the country.

Mazeda Mundal was one of those selfless people that we meet very occasionally; a woman I first came across in the village of Sadona, Western Bangladesh. It was the twilight of the evening and I was nearing the end of a long, dusty day, with many interviews and countless photographs. She was returning to her village, after, most probably, an even longer day of toil. Mazeda and I: travellers from different worlds!



She was a Traditional Birth Attendant - or TBA, as they are generally known in these parts - responsible for the well-being of young women in neighbouring villages, as they approach and pass through the rigours of childbirth. I spotted her a two days later at a training session for TBAs, but it was our first meeting that left the lasting impression.

Mazeda was small in stature, with eyes that seemed to sparkle, showing her dedication to the work she had been involved in for almost ten years. At the second meeting amongst her fellow workers at a TBA's training workshop, it was fun to see her laugh, with a mixture of pride and embarrassment, when I pointed out that we had met before.

I later found out that Mazeda was one of the first TBAs to be trained and employed in the Sadona district. She commanded respect from co-workers who had come after her, due to her accumulated knowledge and experience. But the lady herself was in fact very poor. Her small house, demolished by floodwaters, had recently been re-built with the help of a loan from the organisation that employed her. So, although she commanded respect, and despite all the years as a dedicated birth attendant, this diminutive woman was deep in debt to her employer. And the amount she received for that work was, even by Bangladeshi standards, quite a small stipend. She could be more accurately classed as a volunteer, with nominal pay, but the bottom line was that Mazeda Mundal, despite her woes, was unreservedly committed to her job ... and her people.

Mya – an inspirational woman supporting her children’s education

During my travels I learnt that schooling in Bangladesh is a bit of a lottery: circumstance of birth comes first, followed by family income, then finding a school and a teacher that can do the job. On one occasion I came across an inspiring story that was first introduced to me by the line: *Cow educates boy!* With this in mind I arrived at a small gathering of traditional huts, with ludicrous visions flashing through my brain which included the humble cow - sacred to a multitude of Hindus on the subcontinent - scratching out letters in the dirt, or counting off chickens with a nod of its head, as they crossed the village path. The modern-day image of the bovine beast, currently undergoing a state of decline, might suddenly help it rise again to worship and acclaim.

But not so. My visions were dashed; the education of the boy by a cow was not a miraculous event, simply an economic fact. The real story was much simpler, though still fascinating. It turned out that Mya, the boy’s mother - a likeable lady and a leader amongst her village peers - had bought a cow with the help of a small loan; the cow gave milk which was sold to other villagers and the proceeds from this small business undertaking paid for her son’s primary school fees.

As I chatted to Mya – with the help of an interpreter - the heat of the day faded with the setting sun and the mud-walled houses and backdrop of coconut palms became silhouettes in the receding light: atmospheric, to say the least. She elaborated on the story, telling me that the venture had borne good fruit in the form of a bull calf, which was sold to pay off the loan. The cow, which Krishna her son had named *Parvatti*, was now in calf again, which would help pay the school fees for her younger child, Jayshree.

As I sipped a hot and spicy chai, with Mya and her son, other women and children gathered around our small, wooden table, joined now by a few men, back from the fields. Mya was a woman of character, tall with dark eyes and strong features. I guessed she was probably younger than the thirty-something age she appeared to be: years of toil had left their mark. But she was motivated – that was clear - adamant that although she had received no formal education, her ambition was to make sure that Krishna and her two younger children would do much better.

The village-based literacy teachers and animateurs

The literacy teachers, of whom I met many, provided training in the basics of reading and writing Bengali, the commonly spoken language of Bangladesh. This training was invariably related to the health and vocational needs of the villagers they served. There was a clear focus on training of women, by women, which seemed to be supported by the knowledge that it was the female of the species who were the driving force, and in many cases, more reliable than their menfolk, to underpin village development.

The teachers were normally chosen from village ranks; from the select few who were fortunate enough to have received eight to ten years of formal education through to the middle or end of high school. These were people who knew the value of education, no matter how basic it might be, for their sisters and brothers, neighbours and friends, living in local village communities.

I recall arriving at one village on an island in the southern, delta area, to be greeted by the sight of ten or twelve women of all ages, seated on in a semi-circle, on raffia mats placed on the dirt floor of the central quadrangle. The vibrant colours of the ladies' sarees contrasted with the brown hues of the thatched-roof houses, which surrounded them on all sides. I quietly unleashed my camera to take both group and close-up shots; as natural as possible, though it is always difficult in these situations to remain inconspicuous. The teacher, or animateur as she is referred to, taught with the aid of a blackboard, while each of the participants held a literacy newsheet to learn from.

The animateurs themselves were paid a lowly, what seemed almost nominal wage, in Bangladeshi *Taka*, which amounted to just a few dollars per week. However, I knew the overall picture was one of trying to spread the impact far and wide, so that on any single day there would be hundreds of these village classes going on simultaneously. It was all done on a shoestring, but I could see that the overall cost of the literacy training programme would add up to a significant sum.

At times I was invited to sit in on meetings where the grassroots animators were themselves receiving further training. This was a cascading method which seemed to work and each time I joined a session I was able to feel the strength and determination that came from the female participants.

New to Bangladesh, I was often able to show my ignorance and make a fool of myself, though this was always treated with great diplomacy by my hosts. At one meeting of village health workers, I remember asking two young ladies seated at the front, why they were dressed in identical yellow and red sarees. My question, relayed through *Dr Dilip* – my guide and interpreter at that point - first produced a few titters from the pair, then resounding laughter from the whole group, once they understood what I had said. I was told that the day was the first day of Spring; the day when unmarried women wore these colours to catch the eye of eligible men. But my embarrassment was overcome when they chose to discuss whether in my country, we had similar customs. My response was a bit weak ... I could only think of Valentine's Day.

Molina - the village seamstress



I wasn't quite sure why we were going to the village of *Chosearika*. My insides felt a little shaken up by the ride on the back of *Dilip's* motorbike and my left shoulder ached from the weight of the camera bag, which had dangled and jiggled from it throughout the journey. We had covered many miles over pot-holed tracks and uneven, brick-paved roads. I hoped, secretly, that it would all be worthwhile.

At the perimeter of the village, we dismounted and as had become the custom, were escorted, procession-style into its heart. The mixed group that milled around us, made up of children of all ages, some barely old enough to walk, others nearing the threshold of adulthood, all inquisitive and all talking at once. One could only assume that most of the village children were out to greet us; it wasn't every day they had the chance to play host to such an odd looking, bespectacled individual, from a faraway land.

We rounded the corner of a relatively large, mud-walled house to be met by an incredible splash of vibrant colours, as if an enormous, bright painters pallet had been tossed into the midst of the subtle browns and greens that made up a Bangladeshi village. Facing us across a small quadrangle was what looked like the display window of a local clothes boutique. In fact, many different articles of clothing; dresses, blouses, skirts and tops - in a variety of colours and mainly for children - hung from strings tied between veranda posts. It took me some time to realise that in the midst of this colour crescendo sat a woman at work on old style, treadle sewing machine. She lifted her eyes from the vibrating needle just long enough to throw a shy smile in our direction.

Molina Begum had received her training on the sewing machine, through classes provided by a project that *Dilip* administered. She then purchased her own *treddly*, with a small loan, provided by the village cooperative. Molina had a talent for this work and had repaid the loan within twelve months from the proceeds of clothes made and sold to families and friends in the village and surrounding area. She had then followed on the success of this venture by taking out a further loan to finance a small rice-husking business. In the lay-back world of the Bangladeshi village, Molina Begum was beginning to show a distinct entrepreneurial flare.

But Molina had also had her fair share of problems. Apart from being materially poor - nothing unique in this neck of the delta-islands - she had been divorced by her husband and left to raise three children. However, through her involvement in the local women's literacy classes, Molina had learned her husband could not file for divorce without her agreement. Her husband had since returned to the family, but his wife now regarded him with a degree of suspicion. She confided in me, using *Dilip* as the interpreter, of

how she often concealed various household items from the husband, for fear that he would try to sell them, so that he could buy liquor and cigarettes. “*Us men are the same the world over,*” I thought to myself. “*Show us a dollar and we’re down the pub!*”

In addition to income derived from sewing and rice husking businesses, the family also had a small plot of land on which they cultivated *bringal (aubergine)* for the local market. With the surplus money generated, Molina had been able to re-tile the roof of her house and was currently re-thatching the veranda. She had also been able to purchase new cooking utensils (these were proudly displayed for a photo session) and in addition had recently invested in a goat and a calf as further income generating enterprises.

Molina Begums story provides a good example of the benefits that women can achieve if they are prepared to take advantage of the local training courses available through their village cooperatives. It is then up to the individual to put the training into practice. It had meant more money for herself and family and has led to challenging her husband’s right to divorce. Those early days in the literacy class had led to Molina’s empowerment.

Before leaving, I had a closer look at the clothes that Molina had made. They perhaps would not win any design awards, but they were well-made, bright and serviceable. I purchased a young child’s dress for 25 taka (about 30 cents). It made me think of just how much work was involved in paying back the initial loan, which enabled her to buy the sewing machine, when the sale price of each item was so small.

Roshni and Lakshmi - women working to protect the environment

To make the most of precious time, I had taken a flight from Dhaka out to the West of the country, bordering India. The main bit of information about this area, I had gained a few days before, from an elderly and well respected, Catholic priest, who was running a one-man crusade to publicise the ill deeds of India in relation to the *Faraka Barrage*. This was the massive weir complex, on the border, that controlled the waters of the Ganges as they flowed from the Himalayas to the Bay of Bengal. The priest contended that in the dry times India closed the gates, meaning that Bangladesh remained parched

and without a decent water supply, while in times of plenty, India opened the gates to flood her downstream neighbour.

Flying over the terrain West of Dhaka, I began to understand the country and its population +a little better. It was a network of thousands of villages connected by rice fields. From the air, the villages looked like small, treed oases, but between these green spots there were very few trees to be seen. Bangladesh needed as much rice as possible, the staple diet on which its 150 million inhabitants depended, but it seemed to me that it also needed more trees to protect the swathes of land where the rice grew.

So it came as a pleasant surprise, when a day or two after landing in the West, I happened upon a small, friendly tree-planting project, run by two young women. The three of us sat together, with *Mohammed* my interpreter, under the shade of what seemed to be the largest tree in in sight. But as I looked up and down the single track that ran along the top of a levee bank, curving into the distance in either direction, I could see many smaller trees on either side.

The two young ladies, *Roshni* and *Lakshmi*, both with long dark hair and each dressed in a colourful salwar kameez, sat cross legged as they told their story. All the trees we could see, stretching each way into the distance, they had planted, together, over the past two years. Their job was to plant and nurture the trees. In the first year they planted 500 tree seedlings; now their daily task was to weed and water the trees, to make sure they grew to maturity. If one tree failed to grow, they would replace it with a new one.

It seemed to me like a very worthwhile venture, supported initially by a project grant. It treed the area, which stabilized the levee banks and gave shade for people and animals, plus it also gave daily employment to the two young ladies. In time, because many of the trees planted were fruit trees, an income would be generated which could then be used to pay the ladies that looked after them. As the trees grew towards maturity, the project would become self-sustaining. After that, the longer term plan was for Roshni and Lakshmi – experienced now at planting and nurturing the trees - to move on and repeat the same scheme on the banks of another road, in the same district.

“Brilliant!” I thought to myself. “We can learn a lot from the people of Bangladesh”.