

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

WDF-18

Barabagh: Afternoon in an East Bengal Village

c/o American Consulate
Dacca, East Pakistan
September 8, 1957

Mr. Walter S. Rogers
Institute of Current World Affairs
522 Fifth Avenue
New York 36, New York

Dear Mr. Rogers,

We bought a bunch of bananas and hired a motorcycle-rickshaw---my new friend Abul Kalam Shah and I---and rode through the narrow dusty crowded streets, out into the countryside, to any village.

We drove onto a new concrete highway. The driver speeded along, the wind flapping the short sleeves of his shirt. The breeze dried up the sweat on our faces. The road was straight, and the land lay low on either side, filled with the short and tall and light and dark greens of rice, sugarcane, jute and banana trees, crowded together in lushness.

On the left now, the brown river comes curving close to the road then---interrupted by scattered shallow islets---stretches away broadly to a line of dark trees on the far horizon.

The land and the water are flat together, and in the distant canals the squat cargo-boats, pulled along by a square puffed sail, seem sometimes to be floating on the water, sometimes skimming along on land.

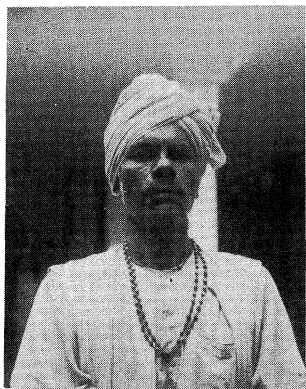
The land and the water go as far as the eye can see and then, at that low, thin, far-off line, the sky begins, blue, and as deep and round and broad on all sides as the sky can ever be.

The highway ends. An old, much-dented bus stands waiting for more passengers. The end of the line. We turn onto a narrow dirt road and bump along. We pass fishermen, wading waist-deep in the river-bays, flinging their round nets, and waiting...a young gentleman, wearing clean shirt and wrapped lungi and looking city-bound, walking bare-foot, carrying his slippers in one hand, umbrella in the other...three women, hidden under white burgas, moving along amidst a small herd of solemn, staring children.

On we go. An occasional bamboo hut by the roadside, and now a tea shop---a thatched roof over the pounded earth, a table and two benches, sprawling customers---and now a betel-leaf vendor, squatted under a faded black umbrella, and a barber, cutting hair under the shade of a tree: we have come to a market town. More shops: sweets and vegetables and fish and cloth and earthen pots, plastic combs, paper toys, mirrors and pictures of mosques and of bosomy movie stars. Which market? "Mirpur! You have come to the shrine?"

The worn, squat-domed shrine sits inside a shady compound crowded with people. The women, holding babies, sit along the wall. The men sit under the huge, covering tree. They are quiet. Many have empty bowls for food. There will be free food today. A madman, his wrists bound together by iron bangles, raves and chases the children away from us.

Inside the dark tomb is a freshly whitewashed coffin-shaped stone. The caretaker explains: "Shah Ali Baghdadi, a pir from Baghdad, nine centuries ago." The smell of incense and flowers. From the low canopy hang hundreds of bright colored silk kerchiefs "for him to remember some special request." A young couple come, offering two fine hens. My friend Kalam stuffs a rupee into the box.



The fakir

Outside, in a quiet corner, sits a strong-eyed man dressed in saffron clothes. What do you call yourself? "Fakir." Mendicant. "I go from shrine to shrine. I have been here 29 days, saying prayers for all who have asked me in the villages... Sometimes they give me food for two days, sometimes a few coins...I will soon be finished here and gone to another shrine."

Beggars, cripples crowd around. We go back to the rickshaw and go on our way.

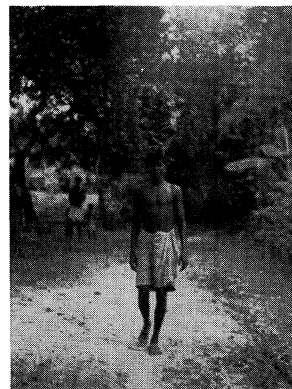
We ride along slowly, under the mango trees, the jackfruit trees, past the luxuriant bush on either side. On the road, brown, but through the jungle, green. Then again into the grassy open.

We try the bananas. I toss my peelings aside. Then I notice that Kalam has saved his up and now throws them, one by one, to the scrawny cows grazing by the roadside.

A path suddenly comes out of the side, and a young man comes toward us carrying on his head a stack of chopped wood. Is this the way to the village? "Correct. This way. Straight on." On into the jungle again, and then to a clearing, and a couple of huts, and a farmer, dressed in bright green lungi, standing there. "Peace be unto you." "And to you be peace." He is a handsome, bearded man of 30, with shining eyes full of courtesy. I ask, and Kalam translates. Two small boys, one wearing lungi, the other only a vaccination mark, hang onto their father's legs as we talk.

His name is Mohammed Ghanu Qazi. He owns eight bighas of land (three bighas to an acre) split up into three separate parcels. Mostly he grows rice, but also mustard, for the cooking oil, and gourds, chillies, bananas and pineapple. He also has a small "tank" or pond with fish.

He farms alone. "The woman" cooks and husks the paddy. Twice or thrice a week, he takes vegetables to the Mirpur bazar, two miles away, and buys more rice. Most of his income, though, comes from selling the milk of his six cows. There are a few farmers who have bullocks for farming. The others hire.



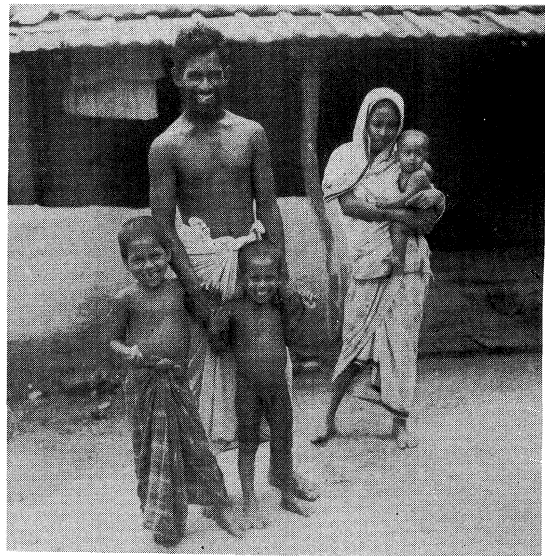
Barabagh's road

Passers-by, neighbors, have gathered to listen. Mohammed com-

plains, "No, we cannot save money these days. The price of rice is high, and we are not self-sufficient. I myself grow eight maunds (80 pounds a maund), but we must buy 36 maunds more." And taxes are high: "The Government Officer comes each year and takes eleven rupees and eight annas (a rupee, having 16 annas, is worth \$.21)."

His wife is a cousin, chosen by his eldest uncle, after the death of his own father. She was "twelve or fourteen" years old when they were married "twelve or fourteen" years ago.

She has borne four children, all living. "Four boys." Remarkable! we say. How can this be? Everybody laughs.



The Mohammed Ghanu Qazis

The oldest boy is in class three in the village school. He will have three more years, enough, and will then work full-time on the farm. The other boys will go to school too. "Education is good." No, he himself could not go. His father died when he was young.

May we see your house? "Yes, that is reasonable." Facing inside on a little courtyard of pounded earth is the house, the hut, with smooth mud walls and a corrugated-iron roof: a verandah and one door leading into one room perhaps ten by fifteen feet: an earthen floor, four small barred windows, a hanging kerosene lamp; a two-foot high wooden platform taking up the whole right side, the bed; a bench and two plain wooden chairs; in the corner, a 55-gallon oil drum, one-third filled with grains of rice; a shelf of empty glass bottles, two tiny blue plastic cups, and a mirror; along the wall, a row of earthen jars partly filled with pulses or spices; a clothes-line, with one draping lungi, one sari; everything immaculately clean.

"We are seldom in the house in the day," he says. "Kerosene is expensive and we are in bed by eight o'clock," as close as he can figure. Awake in the morning at five, first prayers, then to the fields at eight, some breakfast of rice, chillies and fish around ten, back to the fields or to the market, home in mid-afternoon for prayers and a meal, then caring for the cattle, and prayers and supper and bed. A neighbor vouches for him: "He prays five times a day. A good Muslim."

Outside, Mohammed shows us his well and his cattle shed. You must be a big man in the village. "No, the biggest man is the haji," the one who has made the pilgrimage to Mecca. "He has some lands." Have you visited some place? "Long ago I went to Dacca," eight miles away. What do you hear from there? Have you heard that Mr. Suhrawardy is coming soon from Karachi to Dacca? Karachi he has heard of, but not Mr. Suhrawardy. The British are gone, we say. "Yes, and the Hindus," he replies. "Pakistan is free."

We thank him very much and go back out to the road.

Men pass up and down the road, carrying loads of bamboo poles, grass, wood and bags of rice. What's the name of this road? we ask. There is a discussion. Some say it goes to Mirpur and is "Mirpur Road." Others say that it also goes the other way, toward another river. Someone answers: "Just 'the road.'"

A man holds an official-looking document in his hand. What is it? "The certificate. I have bought two bighas of new land." How many now, all together? "Fourteen, and I expect more from the in-laws when they die." "He is safe," someone says respectfully. "My lands are low lands, very poor," he protests. "This year has been very dry...no water ...worse than the floods the last two years."

He is fortunate, the others say: he has two unmarried sons working in Dacca as laborers at the ghat, the landing place. "True, but I have three daughters, only one married, and two at home." The first daughter's marriage cost him Rs 250, he recalls with no pleasure. "I had to take loans from three or four people, but I repaid in six months. Two more daughters..."



Mohammed Yaqob

An old man comes along the road, and the others bring him over, as in a game. "He has come from the market." What have you brought? "Rice and fish," and he begins to open the gunny sack as if ordered to do so. Don't bother, please. Nonetheless, he explains fully:

He had brought half a maund of chopped wood to the bazar, sold the wood for half a rupee, took Rs 5 extra and bought six seers of rice (a seer is two pounds) for the Rs 5 and two fish for the half-rupee.

The extra money? He is a carpenter, making plows and chairs and timbers for houses. Before, he had been a cultivator, but he had three daughters and "no son came," so in order to get more money he became an apprentice for a month and then a carpenter.

"My name is Mohammed Yaqob," he says. How old are you? "Forty-five." One or two laugh. "He is sixty. One of the oldest men here." We ask him some questions: He cannot read, but he has learned to sign his name. He owns one lungi and one genji, or T-shirt, but no shirt, as some of the others do. He has heard of the moving pictures, but not seen it.

We ask: If you had one wish, Mohammed Yaqob, one thing that would surely come true, what would it be? He is still for several moments, but the expression on his face never changes. "Death," he answers. Death? "Yes," he answers slowly, "I have no sons, only daughters. I must go on working. There is no one who can care for me. I don't know what will happen."

I am speechless. There is a pause, then Mohammed Yaqob goes on: "Just the same, I am walking, I am working, I have health. All things are up to God."

We say good-bye and walk down the road. Four or five farm laborers

are plucking rice shoots for transplanting. That house, they say, belongs to a member of the Union Board, the self-government council for several villages.

He comes toward us, a slender middle-aged man with aplomb. We meet in the middle of his rice-thrashing space. He has chairs brought out from the house and we sit there by the piles of straw. By the house, two women peer out from behind the rush screen, then duck inside.

His name is Mohammed Abu Bakar Siddiqi. He is obviously a man of the place, and he tells us about Village Barabagh. There are "600 to 800" families. The village goes one mile this way and one mile that way. It comes under Tejgaon Police Station, six miles away. But the police come only when there is a crime. Most of the quarrels, petty thefts and other disputes are taken to Wali Matbar, the head of the Board, for settlement. "He is an old man."

Before Partition most of the villagers were Hindus, but since Partition they have left, one by one, for India. Why? There were "disturbances" in Dacca---"but no communal riot"---and they left. Many of them were tenant farmers but many owned land. They sold their land for good prices when they left. "They must be happy with the other Hindus now." Oh, there are many Hindus left in East Bengal,"but the money-lenders have gone. They were so oppressive on the people." No, no refugees from India have settled here.

What's new in the village these days? we ask. He says the V-AID ("Village Agricultural and Industrial Development" program) officers come and talk about planting vegetables and fruit. "They gave some poultry free, but mine were stolen." He got some more, and now has 35.

What else under the V-AID program? "The club," a bamboo-thatch hut used for teaching non-school children and illiterate adults to read. "Here is one man, here." A man of 40 who had been squatting, listening, suddenly becomes flustered with attention. With great prompting he tells us that after one month in the club he could write his name, and that now he reads a newspaper. "In those days," he says, "we did not have the sense that education was necessary." Well, what is education for? "With education I can get a job or improve my farming..." he trails off. Our host adds: "He can look at the newspaper a little and understand."

Any sanitation program? "There is some talk. It is clean here in the countryside. That is for the city." Any cottage industries such as weaving or basket-making? "We do not have time for that."

Who are the other visitors to the village, besides the tax-collector, the V-AID men and the police? "There is a roaming barber, but he is not good. The good barber is in Mirpur." Occasionally, an umbrella-repairman comes. A cloth-vendor comes once in a while, but prices are lower in the bazar.

Is there a doctor here? "In Mirpur. But no one is ill here. When there is a birth, the village women help." Yes, in other villages there is cholera and typhoid, but "here we have clean wells."

Who makes up the village? "All farmers, mostly owning their own land, some who are boatmen, the village watchman, two imams at the mosque, some few schoolteachers---there are sixty-five boys in the school."

What amusement is there here? "Not so much. Before, there were the Hindu festivals, but we Muslims are not much for that. Some young boys play---a discussion, with gestures, indicating volleyball.

He himself attended school up to class seven. "I understand English," he said in English, but he thought we had better stick to the Bengali. No, the girls do not attend school. Some say that education is good for them too, but only a little. His own wife did not go to school, but there was a tutor for a while. She is younger by 15 years. Yes, a few men have more than one wife. "Up to four is permitted by Holy Koran." But it is expensive.

He reads Freedom, the Muslim League Bengali daily, and also the weekly Pakistan Soil and the monthly Tenants' Voice. There is a radio in the village---battery-run---given by the V-AID to the college student. In Mirpur there are radios with electricity. Electricity may come to the village, but only after a while. "There are so many villages." They are building a dam near Chittagong, but that is far away.

His income comes partly from the rice and jute and bamboo grown on his six bighas of land, but mostly from being a petty contractor for the Government. He uses the money for rice and cloth, mustard oil and soap. No, not many have soap, but many use washing soda. He smokes the little brown biri cigarette, and occasionally "an English one."

He offers a statement: "An American is the richest man in the world. They know. They are educated. They have worked hard, with unity. Pakistan---now we are on the path of progress."

We say good-bye. He apologises: "I wish I could offer you tea, but I have none." We thank him and go back to the road.

Our audience is waiting. One man points to another, leaning against a bicycle, and says: "This man says that since Pakistan the poor are poorer and the rich richer."

He is a slightly sullen man with a few days growth of beard. We go to him. "Since Pakistan," he says, "the poor are poorer and the rich richer." What do you mean? "The man who carries so many maunds gets Rs 1/8 or Rs 2 a day, and there are four people to feed at home. Rice is Rs 35 or 36 a maund. A contractor to the Government charges Rs 100 to the Government and gives me Rs 16 for doing the work."

What do you do? A stone-breaker, a brick-chipper. Before, he was a tenant farmer, but "the weather went bad." "Although there were eight bighas of land, it was food for only one month. I went to the city."

In the British rule, he continues sternly, "things were too good---justice!" Do you mean that the British treated the Pakistanis better than Pakistanis treat Pakistanis now? "The police take money from us," he complains. How? "If some of us are talking after work, the police will grab us and take us to the station. Then they realise Rs 2 from us."

before they let us go." How often does this happen? "It happens."

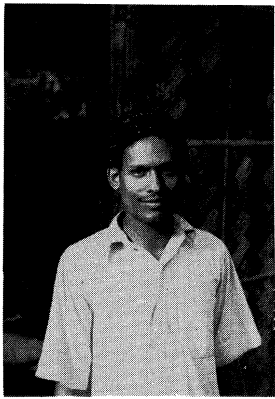
But how about all the Five-Year Plan does: roads, schools, new industries, canals, wells and all that? we ask. "In the British rule," he continues, "rice was Rs 2/8 a maund---in one year Rs 5 at the most!"

Look! What about all these projects in the Plan? "Oh yes, yes, that is good, for the big people." Is there nothing for the poor? "Under the British rule we would get four annas a day, but for two annas there were two and a half seers of rice..." One man interrupts a bit apologetically, "I think he used to work for the British." "He is right, he is right," says an old man.

We want to see the college student. All right, farther on.

Farther along the winding road we find him in a prosperous farmyard where geese are hunting noisily for grains in a fresh pile of straw.

He is a respectful, bright young man of 22, Safiruddin, a first-year student in Jagganath College in Dacca. He is wearing shirt and lungi and shoes--- the first man wearing shoes. We enter a small hut, but it is too hot. We move the chairs outside to the yard.



Safiruddin

He speaks English, but the others want to listen, so we use Bengali and my English. "It's true. I am the first college student in the village... The economic conditions are better now, and I like education...My two older brothers take care of the farming side...fifty bighas."

Each morning Safiruddin rides his cycle to the bus stop, and boards the bus for the city, for the college. "There are boys from many parts of East Bengal there. And the professors are learned men!"

"...I wanted to study Science, but my eyes are not good, so I went into Arts. I want to become an advocate.... a steady income, and I don't have to work for someone else...No, I will be an advocate in Dacca, but I will keep connections with the village." He seems unsure now. "I will live here...I will purchase an auto." He smiles at that.

What is your idea of some of the things the village needs to become a better place? we ask. "Yes! We have begun a club among students and even old men to improve farming. I am the Educational Secretary. The V-AID officers explain the first step is manure from cow dung and greens from the jungle for compost. The second step is clearing the jungle for more land..."

Then: "Improved farming first...education for all...clean houses ...roads...electricity."

Good. India has made much progress, we say. "Yes, there is so much progress in India, not like us." Why? "Nehru's leadership...they have a big country." Why not so much progress in Pakistan, as you say? "There are so many changes in Governments." Why is that? "They are fighting among their own groups. That is our trouble."

He talks enthusiastically about college and sports. A bright boy. I hesitate, then decide to give him a short speech on "opportunity" and "responsibility." Pretty pompous, but Safiruddin is a very important young man. We say good-bye.

The sun is lower now, the shadows longer. We take the path to the mosque. I expect a whitewashed mosque with minarets. Instead, just another mud hut. A bearded man with an embroidered white skullcap is busy splashing water from a bucket on his feet. He is the imam, the priest, "A.K.M.S. Haq." He says there are only a few minutes.

He was selected as imam by the villagers 24 years ago. He gets Rs 20 a month and food, and has "one wife, one son and one daughter." He gives religious training to his son, who is the other imam. There is a madrassah, a school meeting in the mosque, with 35 boys and girls. There are prayers five times a day, and funerals and weddings---thirty or thirty-five of each in a year. "I am also a homeopath," he adds.

Since Partition "there is an increasing number who attend prayers." Still, "religion is slipping away from the people." He blames the "English schools." More children should be in the madrassah.

He must go inside. A photograph, please? "No, that is against my religion."

From inside the mosque comes the words---a cry, but strangely weak ---"Allah o Akbar..." "God is Great..."

Back down the road toward the motorcycle-rickshaw. At a farm-hut on the way, three women stand by a well, splashing themselves, saris and all, with buckets of water: the evening bath. Farther on, a farmer and two small sons stand by a pool, he wringing out the long strands of jute that have been soaking there, they "working" too.

Along the road comes a tiny old woman carrying a large round basket on her head. What do you have there? We help her set it down. It is heavy. Glass bangles, drinking glasses, a couple of bars of soap. She is a badia, a "gypsy," a widow who lives on a boat at Mirpur and goes selling by day on the land.

How much do you make in a day? "Two or three rupees, sir." How much is the soap? "Twelve annas, sir." The change comes from a fold in her sari. The basket goes back up. "Thank you, sir."

Along the road, past familiar fields and huts and one or two familiar faces. We come to Mohammed Ghanu Qazi's farm, where we began. He is standing there with the two sons. He has been waiting. He gives us a big green gourd, a present. "Peace be unto you." "And unto you be peace." We ride back to the city.