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Formation of BRAC: A Historical Account

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Formation of BRAC: A Historical Account

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Born in 1971 as one of the most impoverished countries in the world, Bangladesh attained remarkable success in the last 50 years in reducing poverty, increasing food security, reducing child mortality, and improving gender equality, among other areas (Centre for Research and Information [CRI], 2021). For the past couple of decades, the country has been one of the fastest-growing economies and is now poised to enter the league of upper-middle-income countries (UMICs). Labelled as an “international basket case” after independence (N. Hossain, 2007, p. 34), Bangladesh has demonstrated how to be successful in human development amidst a series of disastrous calamities, both natural and man-made. The region’s history of development thus offers many useful lessons for the rest of the world, particularly the Global South. However, Bangladesh’s development lessons will be largely incomplete without the lessons from BRAC, the largest global non-governmental organization (NGO) based in Bangladesh, which employs a workforce of 100,000 people and serves an estimated 130 million people with operations running in 11 countries (Goldsmith, 2019).

Emerging in tandem with the nation, BRAC is one of the pioneers in the development field of Bangladesh. Starting as a humble attempt of volunteers to participate in the restructuring of post-war Bangladesh, BRAC would soon become the largest and possibly the most diversified non-government global

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entity, and its programs and approaches to development would receive attention from researchers, development organizations, and governments around the world.

BRAC, as a non-state actor in Bangladesh, has been navigating through the complex, challenging national and global contexts that are constantly changing. Learning how BRAC has navigated these contexts and continuously evolved in the process is crucial for understanding the extraordinary rise of this Southern NGO—a significant component of the history of international development. This understanding is equally important for taking the learnings of BRAC to the world.

BRAC History Project aims to meticulously document BRAC's lived experiences. By evaluating the organization's approaches to development, growth trajectory, and critical inflection points in the historical context and narrating the historical accounts of the organization's major development programs, the project attempts to draw the key lessons from BRAC's 50 years of journey. We take a historicizing approach because our goal is to investigate and theorize BRAC's navigation as well as sustainability within the context of changing socio-economic and political realities.

Researchers undertook a qualitative inquiry using archival documents and oral history collected through interviews. By establishing an inclusion criterion for documents, three categories of documents were identified—related to BRAC, the state, and donor agencies—and appropriate sources of data were located. Data on the state and donor agencies were collected for a context-based analysis of the findings on BRAC. Data sources included institutional libraries, digital libraries, archives, and other relevant, accessible platforms. Oral history interviews were recorded and analyzed thematically. Relevant literature was also reviewed.

BRAC History Project

The outputs of the Historicizing BRAC project will be published in a series of monographs, among other scholarly and public-focused outputs. This monograph, the first in the series, focuses on the history of BRAC's formation. Its publication coincides with the inauguration of the yearlong celebration of BRAC's 50th anniversary, rendering a greater significance to the monograph.

We believe the monograph will help us understand the essential BRAC philosophy and its fundamental approach to development, which have been crucial in BRAC's unparalleled success as a global development organization until now.

1. Formation: An Introduction

Born during the most significant juncture of the history of Bangladesh, a land withstanding centuries of neglect and oppression, BRAC's formation and the development of its foundational philosophy and approaches are deeply connected with the unique history of the land; one cannot be understood without understanding the other.

This monograph brings forth the critical history of BRAC's formative years, which is intertwined with the “vernacular humanitarianism”—humanitarian response of local actors based on the ecological, socio-political, and economic realities of the land—that emerged in the context of the Great Bhola Cyclone in 1970 and the Liberation War in 1971.

The monograph describes how the extraordinary human sufferings brought by the Bhola Cyclone—perhaps the most consequential natural calamity that took place at a critical moment in the history of Bangladesh, discussed at length later in the monograph—led to a collective response and gave rise to a radical historical episode of vernacular humanitarianism. It shows how responding to this humanitarian crisis also opened up a space for the local actors to walk into the catastrophe and, in the process, learn affectively from the surrounding landscape (Ingold, 2010).

The monograph further explains how these lived experiences of walking into the landscape left a lifelong imprint on the volunteers, their identities, and their social realities (Ingold, 2010; Mason, 2021) as they developed a new

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mental framework and carried forward the lessons learned. Many of them would continue to work for their people during the Liberation War and later for building their nation and advancing its people. One of them, Sir Fazle Hasan Abed, a corporate elite and aristocrat, would later go on to create BRAC to run relief and rebuilding operations in the war-torn, newly independent country.

As Abed's life-world became entwined with the people of Bangladesh since the traumatic events, including the Bhola Cyclone and the Liberation War, his reality, everyday activities, and life trajectory went through a profound transformation. This transformation played a fundamental role in the forming of the organization and its ethos, organizational culture, and its ways of knowing and practising development. Abed's single-minded focus on people would lead BRAC to work closely with and learn from the people. Its work would hinge on and simultaneously flourish the agency of the people. The Southern non-governmental development organization would eventually evolve into the world's largest NGO. Its innovative models, approaches, and practices would leave visible imprints in the global developmental landscape. And BRAC would significantly contribute to the *Southernization of development* against the widely-held notion of *development in the South driven by the North* (Escobar, 1995; Mawdsley, 2018).

As the literature suggests, there are multifaceted dialogues between diverse local and global actors, forces, events, and a multitude of humanitarian enactments that influenced the trajectory of Bangladeshi development (N. Hossain, 2018). However, unlike international humanitarianism, which has been rigorously analyzed, post-cyclone vernacular humanitarianism and its developmental contribution have not enjoyed much critical attention.

The mediated experience of the Third World's *Spectacle of Suffering* (Spierenburg, 2008) or *distant humanitarian crisis* (Boltanski, 1999) served as the moral reasoning for international altruism (Fassin, 2011; N. Hossain,

2020); international humanitarian actors felt a moral obligation to help the people affected by the Bhola Cyclone after learning only about their physical sufferings on the international media. In contrast, the evolving political trajectory, the resultant political consciousness that emerged in East Pakistan, and the desire among many to stand by their own people suffering tremendously were significant drivers of the surge of grassroots humanitarianism in Bangladesh. The differences are critical for Southern development discourse.

In brief, while the vernacular humanitarianism activities in the aftermath of the Bhola Cyclone did not operate in total isolation from the Northern aid industry or the geopolitics, in fundamental ways, they “interrupt and punctuate” (Chakrabarty, 2000, p. 67) the very logic of Western humanitarian emotion and practice.

This monograph draws on the political ecology framework (N. Hossain, 2018; Pelling, 2011), anthropological perspectives on dwelling, walking, and knowing (Ingold, 2010), and political geography of movement and identity formation (Mason, 2021) to explain the trajectory of post-cyclone vernacular humanitarianism. The term vernacular humanitarianism does not refer to just a set of non-state actors leading altruistic actions. Instead, following Naomi Hossain’s (2018, p. 190) conceptualization of the 1970 Bhola Cyclone within the frame of ecology, politics, and temporality, we identify it as a radical historical episode, “a set of circumstances,” that came about through the interweaving of civic engagement, humanitarian assistance, and political resistance against the Pakistani oppression during Bangladesh’s formative era. We present a historical narrative of the genesis of vernacular NGOs or the *other* history of humanitarianism and development (Brigg, 2002).

Before elaborating on BRAC’s official creation, we provide a brief account of the relevant historical events during the Pakistani period—the Bhola Cyclone in 1970 and the Liberation War in 1971—and discuss their implications on the organization’s emergence.

2. Growing Discontent and the Rise of a Regional Identity

After two centuries of British colonial rule, in 1947, India and Pakistan gained independence and emerged as sovereign nation-states on the principle of the Two-Nation theory, identifying Muslims and Hindus as two separate nations. Consequently, the affluent, Hindu-dominated West Bengal became integrated into the Republic of India, and the impoverished Eastern Bengal Delta, where Bengali Muslims formed the majority, became the eastern province of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan (1947–1971) (Owen, 1972). The separation—accompanied by spectres of communal riots, waves of displacement, and poverty and alienation—offered little room for celebrating the end of imperialism in this deltaic region (Sunderason, 2017).

The postcolonial state formation provoked discontent among different classes and societies of East Pakistan as the dominance of Punjabis of West Pakistan over Bengalis in East Pakistan was clearly visible in the central government and its every organ. Soon it became clear to East Pakistan's Bengali middle class that the real power lay in the Muslim League leadership based in West Pakistan (Umar, 2004). Then the declaration of Urdu as the only official language of Pakistan and the heavy-handed approach of the West Pakistan-based central government to stifle student protests against the declaration—an example of the self-fashioning of the nation—gave birth to the historic Language Movement of 1952. The event ushered in a renewed interest in

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the Bangla language and literature and the delta's riverine landscape among the urban activists, architects, artists, singers, musicians, and poets; it also politicized the differences between East and West Pakistan (Oldenburg, 1985). Every year, university students organized grand rallies and cultural events on *Ekushey* (21 February), in which women played an increasingly active role, to commemorate the martyrs of the Language Movement. On those occasions, women wore *sari* while men wore traditional *panjabi*, all white, and they sang the songs of Rabindranath Tagore, using their voices and bodies to mourn and simultaneously express their Bengali identity (Kabeer, 1991).

In contrast to the idea of a “cohesive” Muslim Ummah as the ideological foundation of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, the concept of a Bengali nation gained prominence that disregarded religious affiliations and rested on the ethnic, linguistic, and cultural characteristics of people and their bond with the deltaic region (Owen, 1972). Several historians identify the secular turn concerning the linguistic icon as the catalyst of Bengali's ethnic nationalism in East Pakistan (Shehabuddin, 2015). Others argue that Bengali's grievances against West Pakistan's discriminatory, resource extractive policies and the exploitation and marginalization of East Pakistan politicized the imagination of a regional identity among the Bengalis (Oldenburg, 1985).

Consequentially, East Pakistan's politics progressed dialectically in response to the hegemony of the West Pakistan-based political establishment. Prominent leaders like Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy, Abul Hashim, and others from the anti-*zamindar* and left-leaning faction of the Muslim League, who once had led the movement for Pakistan in East Bengal, established the Awami Muslim League in 1949 to challenge the domination by the West Pakistani politicians. In 1953, the party dropped the word “Muslim” from its name to become a secular platform and the mouthpiece of Bengali nationalism (Umar, 2004). In 1958, Abdul Hamid Khan Bhashani, the *Red Maulana* (Uddin, 2018), established the National Awami Party (NAP) to liberate the Bengali working class and the peasantry. The political trajectory of the deltaic region,

increasingly characterized by regional, secular, feminist, and leftist ethos, evolved against the grain of the Two Nations concept or religion-based nationalism.

Ayub Khan, a General who had seized power through a bloodless *coup d'état* in 1958 to lead Pakistan's first military dictatorship, saw East Pakistan's political development as a threat to Pakistan's political and ideological integrity. As an answer to the perceived danger to succession, Ayub reinvigorated the One-Unit policy, introduced by former Prime Minister Mohammad Ali Bogra in 1955. Its goal was to concentrate power, geographically and politically, into the West Pakistan-based centralized state. The military junta gained the wholehearted support of the United States (US), which had emerged as the world's superpower after World War II alongside the Soviet Union. A series of security agreements between the US and Pakistan solidified a geopolitical alliance in South Asia. Billions of dollars from the agreements and the lion's share of the nation's revenue budget dedicated to the defence sector led to an enormous growth of the Pakistan Army (Ahmed, 1998).

American funds that had been channelled into East Pakistan, five times less than the amount received by West Pakistan, were also invested towards community development programs (Brecher & Abbas, 1972). The Village Agricultural and Industrial Development (V-AID) Program, which started in 1953, was one such program that eventually evolved into the Bangladesh Academy for Rural Development (BARD) two years later in Comilla, East Pakistan (Bhuiyan et al., 2005). The founder-director of this training-cum-research institution, Akhter Hameed Khan, a development practitioner and social scientist from West Pakistan, believed in the idea of rural development through cooperative credit societies, provision of agricultural extension, adult literacy, distribution of birth control, and introduction of technology (Khan, 2011). The academy, however, failed to achieve its goal; instead, it soon became a tool for obtaining legitimacy in the rural areas, especially after the 1958 coup, while the government's authoritarian, top-down approach and little regard for

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local realities continued to increase the inequality between the Eastern and Western wings (van Schendel, 2009). The experiment was celebrated and showcased worldwide as an apparent success, and the military government extensively used this developmental rhetoric as the *raison d'être* (reason or justification) for the continuity of its undemocratic ruling (Ahmed, 1998). While there is much debate on its pros and cons, the model draws criticism for the limitation of its approach and its inability to reduce inequality (Ahmed, 1998; Ali, 2019; van Schendel, 2009) and demands further discussion, which lies beyond the scope of the monograph. However, the model provided an experience to be profited by later development practitioners—a lesson that the cooperative strategy could not work in rural Bangladesh—and Khan's commitment to rural development during the course of his association with the project remained a source of inspiration.

Amongst growing economic and political turbulence, the region was hit by at least three severe cyclonic storms that devastated the coastal areas during the first half of the 1960s. The last quarter of the decade met with a series of flooding that economically depressed the whole province (Frank & Husain, 1971). In the aftermath of the 1960 North Indian Ocean cyclone season, which killed at least 16,000 people in East Pakistan, Ayub was quick to display the government's intention to manage and mitigate the risks of natural hazards. The military junta contacted the American government for technical assistance. Gordon Dunn, the director of the National Hurricane Center (NHC) of the US, came to conduct a detailed study and devise strategies and programs for effective management of the cyclones. Ayub made great promises to construct a state-of-the-art early storm warning centre, ultra-modern dams, and cyclone shelters in coastal areas (Frank & Husain, 1971).

Nevertheless, the government-led development initiatives did little to contain agitations in East Pakistan amidst the increasing suffering of the Bengalis. In June 1961, at an academic conference, a group of young economists of Dhaka University, including Rehman Sobhan and Nurul Islam, presented

the famous Two-Economy theory—a political-economic analysis of the systematic economic exploitation of East Pakistan. The commentary echoed the memory of British colonialism that impoverished and exploited East Bengal and rendered the region a subordinate of West Bengal. The dream of freedom from colonization faded away as the Bengalis in East Pakistan witnessed the continuity of the fate of their region as a site of resource extraction, this time by the Punjabi elites who dominated the politics of Pakistan. East Pakistani Bangla and English newspapers widely published the synopsis of the Two-Economy theory, making Dr Sobhan one of the most significant intellectuals of Bengalis’ cause. “Uneven development” became a popular political discourse in the captivating voices of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, who led the secularization of the Awami League (Sobhan, 2017).

As President Ayub Khan was preparing to celebrate his tenure described as a decade of development in 1968, a mass revolt surged in the country against his regime (Biswas & Daly, 2020). Leftist and nationalist activists—led primarily by Serajul Alam Khan of the Chatra League, the Awami League’s student front—allied with agitated peasants and industrial workers in numerous events of *gheraos* (aggressive encirclement of state officials) and *hartals* (strikes). The burgeoning women’s activism was another defining force in the movement, leading to the birth of Bangladesh Mahila Parishad, the country’s most influential women’s organization, intrinsically connected with the watershed moments in politics and humanitarianism in this land. The respected activist and poet Begum Sufia Kamal, along with author and academic Maleka Begum, became the organization’s President and General Secretary, respectively (Hoque, 2022). Abdul Hamid Khan Bhashani, more popularly known as Maulana Bhashani, identified the Mass Upsurge of 1969 as the struggle between the oppressor and the oppressed. The campaign brought a “moment of truth in its ability to radicalize the East Pakistani society” (Biswas & Daly, 2020, p. 12).

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Eventually, Ayub Khan had no option but to resign from the presidential office. Yahya Khan, Pakistan Army's Commander-in-Chief, took over the presidency with a promise to end the martial law and hold a national parliamentary election in July 1970. In early July, the boiling political turbulence caught up with the onset of the monsoon in East Pakistan. The water overflowed from the mighty Padma and Brahmaputra rivers to submerge nearly half of the deltaic province. Consequently, the military administration postponed the election to reschedule the poll date for 7 December (Oldenburg, 1985). But, happening only a few weeks before the election date, the Bhola Cyclone would redefine the political trajectory of the region and its people.

3. The Final Straw: Bhola and Its Aftermath

On 12 November, less than a month before the much-anticipated national poll (N. Hossain, 2018), “history’s deadliest storm” (Carney & Miklian, 2022) struck the coastal regions of the Bengal Delta (Pelling, 2011). Coinciding with the full moon, when tides rise to their highest point, the Bhola Cyclone generated a tsunami-like oceanic upsurge from the Bay of Bengal. A wall of water as high as 35 feet crashed into the coastal region and offshore islands with deafening roars and forked lightning. The storm killed nearly half a million people, 10 million cattle, crops, and a large number of houses, farms, and villages (Frank & Husain, 1971).

Although not the strongest cyclone in intensity scales, the Bhola Cyclone was perhaps the most lethal tropical cyclone in recorded history and one of the greatest natural calamities (Tikkanen, 2021). The hardest hit were the most isolated communities of remote islands made of sediments, namely Sandwip, Hatiya, and Manpura, scattered across the shoreline of the Bay of Bengal and the humongous river mouths. The volunteers and activists who had rushed to the scene to help the people ravaged by the storm witnessed the extreme human sufferings, which transformed their lives and inspired them to become pioneers of development in the country.

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The next few sections elaborate on how the critical events surrounding the Bhola Cyclone forged a new trajectory for Bangladesh and draw attention to the vernacular humanitarianism that emerged in the process and solidified the region's developmental history.

3.1. Criminal Neglect and a Site of Distant Suffering

Deadly storms occurred in the coastal region of East Pakistan twice a year, on average, between 1959 and 1969. But the Bhola Cyclone was particularly dangerous. In the few weeks before it hit, local and international weather forecasters had issued red alerts of a cyclone brewing in the Bay of Bengal. Yet there was little sense of urgency within the state apparatus, reflected in its complete lack of preparation for the impending calamity (H. Hossain, 1970). According to the account of Dr Hameeda Hossain, a renowned human rights activist and academic who was working as a journalist for a local English publication called the *Forum* in Dhaka (then Dacca), a bizarre “festive mood” among the government officials prevailed for two days before the storm as high-ranking bureaucrats from every district of East Pakistan congregated in the city and prepared for the grand Second Asian Highway Motor Rally (H. Hossain, 1970).

The devastation was met with a torturous silence and sluggish relief efforts by the government. Several calls by Maulana Bhashani for declaring a state of national emergency, two days after the cyclone, were ignored (“In Demand for Emergency,” 1970). The army was not deployed despite mounting concerns for immediate relief, and the requests by East Pakistan's governor for more helicopters to distribute relief were also refused (“Relief Goods Pile Up in Lahore,” 1970). Even 10 days after the disaster, help did not reach the more remote islands, and much of the relief goods were left at the Lahore airport

or, even after reaching the distribution points, remained undistributed for days (“Relief Goods Pile Up in Lahore,” 1970; Rohde, 2014).

Occurring during the heydays of international journalism in the postcolonial world, the storm became the most headline-grabbing event of the year. Journalists, humanitarian organizations, and volunteers from all over the world flew to Pakistan’s marginalized and murky province, Bengal (Rohde, 2014). Owing to the extensive media coverage of the devastation, the deltaic region came out of the shadows of geopolitically significant Pakistani and Indian nation-states for the first time and caught the world’s attention (N. Hossain, 2020). One of the salient features of this journalistic reporting was its focus on the mere biological existence of living and dead in this part of the world in detail. Hence, instead of tradition, culture, politics, or history, singularly disturbing tales and imagery of physical suffering rendered a mediated knowledge of “distant suffering” about the region among the Western audience (Boltanski, 1999).

Wealthy Northern countries, international aid organizations, and neighbouring and non-Western countries responded to the crisis swiftly and generously. Much before Pakistan, its arch-rival India pledged relief for the victims. A group of French doctors, who would later establish Médecins Sans Frontières, the much-celebrated non-governmental international medical-humanitarian organization, came to treat the injured and sick (N. Hossain, 2020). The US, the United Kingdom (UK), West Germany, Belgium, Turkey, and Switzerland ran enormous rescue operations, equipped with a fleet of cruisers, aircraft, and helicopters to supply food, water, and medicine to cyclone-affected areas. The Soviet choppers ensured their active presence in the high-profile post-disaster humanitarian scene during the height of the Cold War.

Dhaka airport suddenly became the world’s busiest airport, and the presence of a sole Pakistani relief plane among the hundreds of aid flights flown from almost half of the world’s countries was a glaring display of the Pakistani

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state's apathy in post-disaster response (Khondker, 1995). The government drew fierce criticism from the local and international press for its slow pace of aid efforts, lack of cooperation, mismanagement, and mishandling of emergency relief (Biswas & Daly, 2020).

The Bhola Cyclone turned into a worldwide phenomenon. Even Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, the last *Shah* of Iran, declared a day of mourning, but no such declaration came from Pakistan's presidential office. When the cyclone struck, the president was on a state visit to China with a large convoy. Farooq Chowdhury, a young Bengali diplomat, was a member of the convoy. According to Chowdhury's account from 1969 published in the *Shampratik Deshkal*, the day after the storm, a plane waited for Yahya to bring him to Dhaka ("Bhola Cyclone: The Cyclone That Changed the Politics of Pakistan 50 Years Ago," 2020). Nevertheless, the flight got cancelled as the president felt lazy and decided to spend the day relaxing. Yahya did arrive in East Pakistan the following day, but just for a day out. His apathy can be summarized in the words of Archer Blood, the American Foreign Service officer: "It was almost as if they just did not care" (Bass, 2013, p. 20).

The reaction of General Yahya Khan, then President of Pakistan, epitomized the attitude of the Pakistani rulers towards the Bengalis—that their lives mattered little. His obvious lack of concern and his refusal to talk to the victims during the greatest humanitarian crisis in the country's backwater signalled a widespread apathy among West Pakistan-based ruling elites towards the lives of Bengali (Bass, 2013).

The shocking human devastation, heroic international humanitarianism, and the Pakistani government's sluggish relief efforts were the three major takeaways of the global media treatment of the cyclone. Voices of foreign journalists and saviours dominated the narratives, while starved, violated, distressed, and helpless survivors appeared on the silver screen as mute subjects (ThamesTv, 1970).

Western perceptions of the region grew in tandem with the emerging narrative from the North. The image of East Pakistan was painted with the brushstrokes of the “moral economy” of international humanitarianism and how it regarded the sufferings of the cyclone victims (Fassin, 2011; N. Hossain, 2020). The Bhola Cyclone thus made the deltaic region recognizable to the world map merely as a space of “bare life,” one that existed in vulnerability and in the absence of techniques, institutions, or machinery—features of modern statehood essential for administering and safeguarding people’s biological life (Foucault, 1982). The complex political and historical events interwoven with these extreme human conditions were left aside in the narratives of the ivory tower of global aid and media industries, influencing how historical narratives were drawn.

The series of events taking place post-Bhola did shape the region’s place in international aid relationships and triggered multifaceted dialogues between diverse local and global actors. The interests of a diverse set of actors, involving foreign donors, national elites, and the masses, were interweaved in producing a moral economy of protecting people from life-threatening external shocks and subsistence crises (N. Hossain, 2017). And, what happened in the space of international humanitarianism in the wake of the cyclone is well documented and analyzed.

On the other hand, the *other* history of the post-cyclone vernacular volunteerism, the focus of the next section, did not enjoy enough critical attention. Moreover, less attention was given to the differences and diversities in humanitarian politics within the aid industry, risking the portrayal of Northern donors and humanitarian actors as a monolithic block and providing an inadequate narrative of what actually took place.

The 1970’s local wave of volunteerism among educated, urban folks for assisting the cyclone-affected poor people coincided with the most critical phase of the region’s political history, and thus it demands much closer

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inspection. The following section attempts to bring forth the local efforts that were deeply entwined with people's intensifying political consciousness for autonomy, efforts that defined the course of the region's future developmental trajectory.

3.2. Vernacular Humanitarianism and the Emergence of a Nation

In contrast to the state's apathy, the human suffering sparked a deep, collective humanitarian consciousness, and gave rise to a critical alliance of rural peasantry and urban elites in their political and humanitarian response. Political organizations and people-led groups based in East Pakistan immediately mobilized, and scores of local journalists, politicians, professionals, students, women activists, artists, singers, musicians, foreign reporters, volunteers, and a handful of foreign expatriates took the long, dangerous river route to reach the coastal islands.

They walked the ground, breathed the air, attended to the surroundings, and engaged and corresponded with cyclone survivors. A "scene of utter devastation" (N. Hossain, 2020, p. 5) is clearly visible in their recollections. Yet their accounts offer more profound observations, insights, and feelings than what is allowed by the "bird's eye" view of cyclone-affected regions only as a space of *bare life* (Ingold, 2010), the view provided by the international media, as discussed in the previous sub-section.

The region's emerging political consciousness, as discussed in Section 2, was critical in influencing local humanitarian actors' life-world and affective experiences. In the most densely populated, impoverished, and fragile land on earth, landless and destitute Bengalis had no option but to move deep into the south coast and dwell in the disaster-prone offshore islands (Oldenburg, 1985). West Pakistan's ruling elites did not consider those lives valuable or

worth saving. Contrary to the uncaring attitudes of government officials and prominent politicians of West Pakistan, the misery of poor people dwelling at the margins of the state (Das & Poole, 2004) captivated East Pakistan's collective imagination.

In an autobiographical book, *Beyond the Century*, Haider Akbar Khan Rono, the leader of the Communist Party of Bangladesh, offers insights into the emotional state of Bengali nationalist and leftist politicians in the aftermath of the cyclone. Bhashani, the enigmatic "Red Maulana," then 85 years old, was undergoing medical treatment at a clinic in Dhaka. Although ill and bedridden, he decided to undertake the lengthy and challenging journey to reach the cyclone-affected islands. The senior, grey-bearded politician walked, with his stick, across dozens of devastated habitations through piles of dead bodies for days (Rono, 2005). Tofail Ahmed, an emerging leader of the Awami League, was Bhola's League-appointed local contestant in the Pakistan National Assembly election. Sheikh Mujibur Rahman went to the cyclone-affected areas and engaged Ahmed and other local Awami League leaders to organize relief operations among the survivors. Like Bhashani and Mujib, numerous political, cultural, and sports organizations and agitated and compassionate individuals rushed to the affected areas.

In a recent interview, prominent gender activist Shireen Huq describes her experience of participating in a collective altruistic mission during the humanitarian crisis. The poet Sufia Kamal and Dr Sultana Sarwat Ara Zaman, a professor at the University of Dhaka at that time, organized a boat trip from Dhaka to distribute relief in the cyclone-affected remote islands (Huq, 2021). The organizers already had a rich experience in political activism for Bengali's political right of self-rule, cultural autonomy, and women's rights.

The leadership of the politically conscious Bengalis in the relief operation is a testament to the intersection of the emerging social space of vernacular volunteerism with the critical time and temporality of the region's political

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landscape. For a figure like Begum Sufia Kamal, the desire for freedom from Pakistani colonial rule was inseparable from her moral striving to help the victims of natural catastrophes. Huq, who was a 17-year-old student at that time, reminisces the notable presence of poets, writers, feminists, political activists, and many young girls and boys among the volunteers. She vividly recalls a young artist, a student of painter Zainul Abedin, relentlessly drawing the scene of devastation (Huq, 2021). The moment shows how witnessing, illustrating, documenting human tragedy became “an act of collective struggle” against the autocratic colonial regime, as art historian Sanjukta Sunderason points out in the case of Zainul Abedin’s *Monpura’70* (Sunderason, 2017, p. 17), a scroll painting of human sufferings of the Bhola Cyclone on a 28-foot canvas.

Huq’s recollections also give insight into the vernacular understandings of the traumatic event and the multidimensional pattern of subjective experiences (Huq, 2021). She offers an account of the human devastation from the vantage point of “walking on the ground, in the landscapes of real-life” as opposed to a bird’s-eye view. Her accounts are in tune with the aesthetic sensibilities of the Bengal Delta in Jibanananda Das’ poetry, derived from a way of knowing through the means of dwelling and walking in the “weather world” (Ingold, 2010, p. 133). Beyond a material or symbolic reality, landscape embodies vernacular, relational, and storied connections between the territory and its inhabitants. This political geography of walking (Mason, 2021) thus distinguishes vernacular from the international humanitarianism.

Shireen Huq also contemplates that participation in grassroots volunteerism and solidarity work during 1970 had a visible effect in radically altering the lives of activists and volunteers. Later, they played pioneering roles in the history of rebuilding Bangladesh and demonstrated profound attentiveness and critical knowledge of their surroundings and greater responsiveness to the cues of emergency response, poverty reduction, social development, women empowerment, and social justice movements (Huq, 2021).

According to the eyewitness accounts of numerous local volunteers, the humanitarian crisis exposed the emptiness of the grand rhetoric of Ayubian development. In her voyage, human rights activist Hameeda Hossain saw the presence of only one two-storied cyclone centre in Sandwip and not more than two in Bhola. The event also revealed the inefficiency of the top-down approach to development, characteristic of modernization theory, often planned out by foreign experts (H. Hossain, 1970). As economist Rehman Sobhan observed, cyclone centres were built in the middle of islands, far from the coasts where the most vulnerable people dwelled. There were some dams, but they got broken very quickly in the face of tidal waves and proved useless as a means of protection. The warning centre was high-tech, but it had negligible impacts on the lives of the poorest, who could not afford to access radios, weather information, and official warnings (Sobhan, 1970).

Kamal Hossain, the first law minister of Bangladesh and publisher of the *Forum* magazine at the time, discovered deep mistrust and confusion about the newly installed warning system among a rural community. Previously, villagers received a “Great Danger” alert without specifying any Warning Signal Number. However, on previous occasions, the Bay of Bengal remained calm despite the “Great Danger” alert. Thus, the community had learned not to take a danger signal too seriously when the numerical status of danger remained unspecified. They received a similar alert during the Bhola Cyclone and thus did not prepare for it. A Union Chairman told Hossain the traumatic story of losing most of his family members because of the prevailing miscommunication between the scientific and rural communities (K. Hossain, 1970).

The Pakistani rulers’ criminal neglect in safeguarding and rescuing the cyclone-affected people exposed their complete lack of regard for the lives of Bengalis, which unleashed a political tsunami in East Pakistan. The neglect aggravated Bengalis’ sense of alienation (Pelling, 2011). As Naomi Hossain, a political sociologist, remarks, remarkable was the political timing of the

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natural disaster (N. Hossain, 2017). The traumatic event validated the idea that if East Pakistan had the autonomy to rule itself, Bengalis would not have to rely on relief goods that travelled a thousand miles from the western wing of Pakistan (N. Hossain, 2018). It intensified the public rage against Pakistan's discriminatory policies and uncaring attitudes, brewing for decades (Pelling, 2011), and became the focus of the Awami League's electoral campaign (N. Hossain, 2018).

Eventually, the Awami League secured 160 out of 162 national assembly seats reserved for East Pakistan, "possibly the greatest victory of any party in a free and contested election anywhere" (Baxter, 1971, p. 212, as cited in N. Hossain, 2018, p. 195). In essence, the cyclone and its aftermath explicitly questioned government legitimacy, destabilized the existing state-citizen contract, and solidified the need for East Pakistan's autonomy (Pelling & Dill, 2010). It was the tipping point, after which separation of East Pakistan from the West became inevitable.

4. Abed Steps Into the World of Devastation: Mobilizing at Manpura

As discussed earlier, the *walking* of activists, volunteers, and politicians through the terrains of catastrophe at Bhola produced “experiential, lived, and embodied accounts of politics” (Ingold, 2010, p. 88). Consequently, their walking helped them explore the relationship between the nation-state, region, development, and identity, and had a visible effect in radically altering their lives.

Through engaged movement, the volunteers acquired, rather unknowingly, a distinct way of learning that helped them gain an increasingly keener awareness of their surroundings, enabling them to effectively respond to the real needs of the people and to play crucial pioneering roles in rebuilding Bangladesh. This section tells the story of HELP (Hatiya Emergency Lifesaving Project, later renamed to Heartland Emergency Lifesaving Project), one of the first volunteer efforts in response to Bhola, with members like Fazole Hasan Abed and Viqar Chowdhury, who would later create the Bangladesh Rehabilitation Assistance Committee (BRAC).

At the time of the Bhola Cyclone, 35-year-old Abed lived in the southern port city of Chattogram, not far from the cyclone-affected regions. After living in the West for 17 years, he recently returned home to join East Pakistan Shell

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Oil Company as a senior accountant. Before entering the corporate world of Shell in 1969, Abed had a spell of a relatively easy-going life in North London (Smillie, 2009).

Coming from a highborn family, Abed came to Great Britain in 1954 for better education, following his elder brother's footsteps. Abed embarked on a four-year-long study program at the University of Glasgow, which he completed without much difficulty. The person who had grown up in a hot, wet, and humid tropical climate came to experience the freezing European ocean during his internship in the open deck space. The chilling bodily feeling made him sceptical of his discipline, naval architecture. After realizing that living in Nordic countries would be his destiny if he wished to do well in his chosen career path, he discontinued the program at the end of the coursework. A good few years slipped by for Abed to realize that he was in the wrong place (Smillie, 2009).

With a sense of failure, Abed came back to London to try to fulfil his parents' expectations of his educational attainment. He assessed two options: law and accounting, as they were the most in-demand career-oriented academic routes during that time. Abed went for the latter not out of interest but because his elite, educated kinfolk had no shortage of lawyers (Smillie, 2009). He had little to say about the study program, which took seven years to complete. Nevertheless, in several autobiographical interviews, such as with Bangladeshi journalist Golam Mortoza, Abed fondly remembered his rich, dynamic social life. The buzzing metropolitan pulled him into a niche of sociality where the career question lost its significance for a moment (Mortoza, 2006).

Abed's London life can be split into two distinctive waves, stemming from his thirst for classical music and novels on the one hand, and exposure to Marxist and radical politics on the other. He cultivated a decadelong romantic affair with European classical literature, ranging from Shakespeare to Proust; it grew more robust with his growing intimacy with a young woman named

Marietta Prokopé. The pursuit of creative endeavours tied the life paths of two curious souls (Smillie, 2009).

In the Hampstead Heath area, where Karl Marx once lived and was buried, Abed met a group of leftists through Marietta. The meeting ushered in a change from his relatively apolitical world towards a political one. He participated in a regular study circle but had mixed opinions about his experience, calling the meetings of the “very marginalized lot” boring, if not idealistic (Smillie, 2009, p. 17). Nonetheless, Abed ardently campaigned in favour of his mate, the sole communist candidate of the constituency, although he knew that the effort would go in vain (Smillie, 2009).

In London, Abed was immersed in the social fabrics of his unorthodox British friends rather than the Bengali-speaking diaspora. Yet, Marietta knew that London was a temporary phase for Abed. In the mid-1960s, she visited Pakistan’s obscure and marginalized province, East Pakistan, to experience her future home first-hand. She was not impressed with what she saw, leading them to undertake different life destinations. Marietta headed to Cambridge to study philosophy, while Abed went to Canada to complete an executive financial course at the International Business Machines Corporation (IBM), the American tech giant (Smillie, 2009). When it was completed, he made his way home and experienced the two most formative years of his life.

In January of 1969, Abed joined Shell Oil, the Anglo-Dutch energy giant in Chattogram and earned two quick, consecutive promotions to become the Head of Finance, which made him one of the highest-earning professionals in East Pakistan (Harvard Business School, 2014). He lived in a heavily secured green zone when the Bhola Cyclone hit the shores of the Bay of Bengal. Only 90 kilometres away from his home, the coastal regions burst into a roaring inferno. However, the catastrophe barely impacted the rhythm of his daily life.

Martha Chen, an American scholar and social worker, played an instrumental role in the post-Bhola humanitarian activities of Abed. According to Martha,

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the day the news of the Bhola Cyclone reached Dhaka, three days after it struck the coast, she met with Cornelia Rohde—a poet and the wife of Jon Rohde, who was a public health specialist at the Cholera Research Laboratory in Dhaka—Runi Khan—wife of Viquar Chowdhury, a lawyer and political activist—and Runi's sister Putul, and they decided to mount a relief effort. Viquar and Bahar's brother Zakaria went to Bhola, where they knew a local schoolteacher who told them that Manpura Island was more badly affected than Bhola. The four women began to collect relief items and work with both the East Pakistan government and the Pakistan military for the relief operation. In the early days, it was probably the only relief operation on the ground, and they ended up coordinating airdrops of relief.

Initially, they used Abed's house, including the garage, to store the relief supplies. Abed did share the collective political consciousness that emerged in East Pakistan, as discussed later; however, it was not easy for Cornelia and Runi, who also happened to be Abed's friends, to convince him to use his Shell-provided luxury house as the base of a relief operation (Rohde, 2014). Abed was not against the idea of humanitarian initiatives. But he was concerned that the Shell officials, especially the country director, a former Pakistani Brigadier, would not like the activity (Rohde, 2014). Later events will validate the merit of Abed's hunch and his power to read the actual nature of the situation. It also proves how the post-cyclone vernacular humanitarianism became a matter of politics in the 1970s, both for the ruling elites and the agitated public, though in opposite directions. Thanks to the persuasive power of Runi, Abed turned his house inside the Shell compound into a temporary centre for volunteers and relief goods (Rohde, 2014).

The Rohde couple had a rich circle of Bangladeshi and ex-pat friends in Dhaka. Many of them enthusiastically responded to the call, including, among others, lawyer Viquar Chowdhury and Harvard-trained physician Lincoln Chen, the husband of Martha Chen, who all had become very close friends with Abed through the Rohde family. Father Dick Timm, a renowned biologist,

priest, and the principal of Notre Dame College, joined them with a group of his students (Mortoza, 2006; Rohde, 2014).

It was late Cornelia Rohde who came up with the plan of visiting cyclone-affected areas to run relief work (Rohde, 2014). Within a few days, Abed and Father Timm took a speedboat to reach Manpura, a triangle-shaped sandy coastal island that had lost two-thirds of its inhabitants. Abed invoked the traumatic memory of his first visit:

The scene was just horrendous—bodies strewn everywhere—humans, animals, everything. That shocked me to an extent that I felt that the kind of life I led hardly had any meaning in a kind of context in which these people lived—the fragility of the life of poor people (Harvard Business School, 2014, p. 2).

As mentioned earlier, the humanitarian experience in cyclone-affected regions turned out to be the occasion of a life-changing moment for many who walked the ground of a devastated world at the margins of the state (Das & Poole, 2004). Abed's life's path had never crossed anything like the human conditions of that destitute populace forced to dwell in perilous offshore islands. Nor did he encounter first-hand such an enormous scale of human devastation before. Ian Smillie, the author of *Freedom From Want: The Remarkable Success Story of BRAC*, remarked, "w[W]hat he [Abed] and Tim saw would stay with them the rest of their lives" (Smillie, 2009, p. 29). In the writings of Smillie, Naomi Hossain, and others, the incident has been illustrated as a formative moment in the life of Abed that radically transformed the texture and trajectory of his life. In his own words, as mentioned in an interview with Thomson Reuters Foundation, "The death and devastation that I saw happening in my country made my life as an executive in an oil company seem very inconsequential and meaningless" (Goldsmith, 2019, p. 1.)

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However, an in-depth analysis of the “life-changing” experience is rare in the literature. Was it an individual story or a collective phenomenon? Answering this question requires, first, a closer scrutiny of how Abed connected with the political history that underpinned the ecological and humanitarian trajectories in the deltaic region, and second, an understanding of his encounter with the human tragedy as a collective, shared experience rather than an individual’s story.

It was discussed earlier how the storm triggered a political tsunami in Pakistan’s backwater. Bhola Cyclone was not just a one-off event of ecological catastrophe but a series of interconnected situations in which “politics and ecology were deeply entwined” (N. Hossain, 2018, p. 190). Following the same logic, it can be said that what Abed and Timm saw did not concern only human tragedy. The sight was a visual manifestation of a massive social injustice. The cognitive horizons of vernacular humanitarian actors, we argue, cannot be grasped fully without considering the scent of the region’s political temporality. In an interview by the Harvard Business School, the interviewer asked Abed if the Bhola Cyclone constituted the formative experience. “Also the liberation war [against the Pakistani oppression],” Abed emphasized (Harvard Business School, 2014, p. 8). His statement is not at all surprising. It confirms the interlocking of ecology and politics in forming a distinctive pathway of humanitarianism in his homeland, devastated by “history’s greatest cyclone” and later by genocidal violence on its inhabitants by the Pakistani army.

Was Abed’s encounter with the post-Bhola tragedy an individual or collective experience? Just like Abedin’s drawing of *Monpura’70*, the act of humanitarianism became “an act of collective struggle,” in other words, political action during the time (Sunderason, 2017, p. 18). Abed recalled the Great Bhola Cyclone as an event that “tremendously shook the region’s collective consciousness” (Mortoza, 2006, p. 23). The way he reflected and contemplated the catastrophe indicates a shared horizon of consciousness—

collective opinions, embodied feelings, and moral outlooks, which unify a disparate group of individuals for renegotiating state-society relationships. Although Abed was away from his homeland during much of the turbulent Pakistan era, he shared the homegrown critical consciousness born out of the collective struggle and common grievances against the oppressive regime (Harvard Business School, 2014; Mertoza, 2006).

Huq observed some recognizable transformations in the personality traits and life courses among the post-cyclone volunteers (Huq, 2021). They all shared a strong moral striving for working with and for the well-being of ordinary folks. They demonstrated profound attentiveness, greater sensitivity, and critical knowledge of their surroundings. They had a greater capacity to respond to the country's emergencies "with judgment and precision" (Ingold, 2010, p. 134).

The post-cyclone life journey of Abed offers essential insights into the trajectory of vernacular humanitarianism. It concerns emotional, embodied, and sensorial relationships between people and the landscape, firmly grounded in the texture of local history. It concerns distinct ways of feeling, knowing, and acting compared to the international humanitarian missions.

4.1. Humanitarianism Emerging at the Intersection of Local and Global: Creating HELP

The theoretical framework of Entangled History (EH) (Sönke & Maier, 2015), a trans-cultural perspective of historiography, underpins the monograph. EH grew as a response to the postcolonial critique of the Eurocentric narrative of development. It recognizes local-global interactions but challenges the temporal politics of European Historicism, "first in Europe and then elsewhere" (Chakrabarty, 2000, p. 8).

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Built on EH, the monograph interrogates the implication of the cyclone in transforming the individual life course and the life-world of Abed. The solo case reveals a larger story of vernacular humanitarianism, formed in the backdrop of local-global interactions. It helps us to recognize the *other* mode of solidarity work, the *other* ways of knowing, feeling, and doing, in short, the *other* history of humanitarianism, a rather neglected topic of development studies (Pacitto & Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 1993). The story is told from the vantage point of those walkers for whom the political desire for freedom was inseparable from their humanitarian impulse and ethics of care, shaping the trajectory of vernacular humanitarianism.

In November, a new organization was born, namely Hatiya Emergency Lifesaving Project (HELP),¹ initially to distribute relief to the survivors at Hatiya, one of the affected islands. It was one of the earliest post-cyclone non-governmental voluntary initiatives where Abed joined along with Cornelia Rohde, Martha Chen, Runi Khan, and Putul. Soon they enlisted Viquar Chowdhury, Jon Rohde, Lincoln Chen, and Kaiser Zaman, who was Abed's colleague at Shell Oil, in the effort (Personal communication with Chen, 2022; Rohde, 2014). Father Timm joined the group somewhat later.

Lincoln and Martha's neighbour John Smith, a Harvard Business School-trained consultant to East Pakistan Water and Power Development Authority, came over to their house in Gulshan to learn about their plan in Manpura. Smith drew a flow chart on a yellow legal pad of Martha's estimations of how much immediate relief support was needed and how many cows, ploughs, hoes, and kilos of seeds were needed to rehabilitate those who survived. His budget came to one million US dollars. The next day Jon and Lincoln met with a representative from Bread for the World, a Christian US-based organization that advocates for policy changes to end hunger, who had heard about their relief efforts, and the representative pledged to donate one million US dollars.

¹ Hatiya Emergency Lifesaving Project would be renamed to Heartland Emergency Lifesaving Project when the team centralized efforts to Manpura in the last week of November 1970.

When the founders of HELP learned that they were getting so much money, they decided to incorporate HELP as an NGO. Meanwhile, Martha had raised USD 10,000 from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). When HELP was registered, Abed became the Chairperson, and Martha was on the board. They invited Akbar Kabir, a former bureaucrat, to run the office.

Abed, Kabir, and Zaman jointly organized a fundraising meeting with Rotary and Lions Clubs members. Rotarians proposed donating to a poverty reduction project in the mainland, but Zaman emphasized Cornelia's wish to run relief work in the cyclone-affected remote areas (Rohde, 2014). The latter was undertaken, and HELP mobilized the effort.

There was no shortage of aid but reliable organizations to distribute them (Smillie, 2009). Knowing the interest of a German donor agency, Jon, Lincoln, and Abed, "the quintessential accountant" (Zaman, 2013, as cited in Rohde, 2014, p. 244), wrote a proposal. Shortly, the organization received a donation worth 0.3 million German Mark.

The organization's entry into the political economy of international aid indicates "the multiple and overlapping modes" (Pacitto & Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 1993, p. 26) through which different sets of Northern and Southern actors responded to the humanitarian crisis. Indeed, the post-war apparatus of foreign aid, the anti-politics machine (Ferguson, 1994), its will to improve (Li, 2007), and Northern development discourses (Escobar, 1995) played a significant role in the growth of a new generation of non-governmental humanitarian organizations like HELP. However, the aid economy should not mask the organization's genesis, firmly located within the ecological-cum-political history of the region, local consciousness, obligations, and traditions of volunteerism, in short, the historical trajectory of post-cyclone vernacular humanitarianism.

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HELP also set up an informal office in Dhaka for raising additional funds, where Akbar Kabir's daughter Khushi Kabir joined as a volunteer (Smillie, 2009). Fazle Abed, the Chairperson of HELP, wrote a letter to the governing body of Notre Dame College, requesting a six-month-long leave for Father Timm from the college duty. Timm returned to cyclone-affected islands with his students. Following the instruction of Abed, Kaiser Zaman resigned from Shell Oil to work full-time on behalf of HELP (Mortoza, 2006). However, Abed did not quit the corporate job. Instead, he used his professional identity and networks to generate more funds from local and international sources.

None of the team members of HELP had prior experience with volunteering or relief work. However, they started with doing what they could and, more importantly, observing what people needed and responding to their evolving needs promptly and strategically. The team would learn everything on the go— from mobilizing donor institutions, to constantly re-designing relief distribution mechanisms to reach more vulnerable people, to scrutinizing relief materials (Rohde, 2014).

Undivided attention to the needs of people kept them mindful of the impact of their work. And they learned that to provide more precise and effective support for long-term rehabilitation and development, a deeper understanding of Manpura's locality was crucial. So, they conducted a survey to determine the extent of damage as well as locals' needs (Rohde, 2014). A group of engineers arrived to test the salinity levels in the ponds and farmlands on the island. Based on the needs, they took several initiatives. They inaugurated a system of procuring, storing, and distributing food. They mobilized volunteers to help villagers rebuild their houses with bamboos. They distributed seeds, hoes, and ploughs among the farmers so that they could start winter cultivation and boats and nets among the fishers to restore their livelihoods (Rohde, 2014). The case of HELP wonderfully demonstrates the agency of "Other actors" and "Other modes of action" (Pacitto & Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 1993, p. 27).

Indeed, vernacular enactments of humanitarianism like HELP maintained close interdependent connections with the Northern actors-led, vastly institutionalized international aid regime. In HELP's formation, foreigners like Rohdes and Chens, who lived in East Pakistan and became close to its people, played instrumental roles alongside their Bengali friends. However, just like the emergency works by women activists, politicized youths, and artists, HELP did not arise as the by-product of the global aid industry. Instead, it was deeply embedded in the historical, political, and cultural landscapes of Bangladesh, determining the trajectory of *Southern humanitarianism* in this land.

4.2. Genocide, Ethnic Cleansing, and 1971

The manifesto of the Awami League's election campaign demanded greater regional autonomy and financial sovereignty of East Pakistan to reduce its development gap with West Pakistan. West Pakistan's popular leader Zulfikar Ali Bhutto was unwilling to accept the proposal and demanded modifying the demands of the Awami League. Otherwise, he threatened to boycott the Assembly scheduled on 3 March 1971. Yahya, the military dictator, postponed the Assembly indefinitely. Mujib responded to them by triggering a massive movement of non-cooperation. In response to the growing political unrest, Yahya declared to restart the Assembly on 25 March. In mid-March, Bhutto and Yahya came to Dhaka to dialogue with Mujib (Bass, 2013). However, it was a sham. On 25–26 March, the Pakistani military detained Sheikh Mujib and unleashed “an attack of genocidal intensity and intent” (N. Hossain, 2018, p. 187).

And, the nine-month-long brutal war began between the resourceful, mighty army of West Pakistan and the common citizens of East Pakistan turning into guerrilla fighters, largely with the leadership of a handful of Bengali officers defected from the Pakistan Army.

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It was a well-orchestrated genocidal campaign of ethnic cleansing (LaPorte, 1972). The *raison d'être* of the genocide steamed from Pakistan Army's beliefs that "the Bengalis, being Bengali [weak, unmartial, and cowardly], would quit their rebellion the moment they were chastised" (Oldenburg, 1985, p. 728). A particular target of the atrocity was the Hindu population, deemed Indian agents conspiring against Pakistan by radicalizing Bengali youths and funding separatist movements (Oldenburg, 1985).

As soon as the curfew was lifted, several foreigners in Dhaka went out to find out what had happened. Cornelia and Jon Rohde visited Dhaka University and Old Dhaka. They recorded evidence of gruesome violence, which they handed over to the American Consul-General Archer Blood (Rohde, 2014). Martha and Lincoln Chen visited Shankhari Bazaar, a faculty residence at Dhaka University, and the Hindu temple in the Ramna Park. Martha recalls seeing caked blood down the front steps and up the inner stairway of the faculty residence, ashes at the temple site, and ashes and smouldering bodies in Shankhari Bazaar. One person came towards them from the ashes at Shankhari Bazaar to ask whether they were going to write what they had seen for the media. They told him that, with others, they planned to write a White Paper for the US Congress, which they did (Personal communication with Chen, 2022).

Western governments mostly viewed the 1971 war as a domestic matter for the Pakistani government, an important Cold War ally of the US. The war was a major geopolitical episode in the rivalry between the US and the Soviet Union. On 28 March 1971, horrified by the Pakistani army-led onslaught, Archer Blood sent a confidential telegram titled "Selective Genocide" to Washington, D.C. (Bass, 2013). On the following day, Henry Kissinger, adviser of the US president, conveyed the news to Richard Nixon as the complete control of East Pakistan by Yahya. Nixon was pleased to hear the news. For the US administration, the *realpolitik* of opening the door to China through

the Pakistani dictator's brokerage was far more critical than the world's worst humanitarian crisis (Guhathakurta & van Schendel, 2013).

4.3. **Abed and Viqar in 1971 and the Politicization of Everyday Life**

Abed did not participate in protest movements since he came to East Pakistan in 1969. Nor did he maintain any direct political affiliation. His highbrow genealogy and prestigious social status as a corporate elite of a Northern energy giant allowed him relatively more protection than others. However, violence began to make inroads in the proximity of Abed's life, first through the departure of his uncle Saidul Hasan.

In autobiographical narratives, Abed cherished the fond memories of his uncle, Saidul Hasan. He remembered Mr Saidul for introducing him to the poems of Kazi Nazrul Islam, Rabindranath Tagore, and Jibanananda Das in the 1950s, whose poems, along with Abedin's drawings of rural Bengal, became vital for the public imaginations of a homeland that was *regional*, rather than *national* (Sunderason, 2017). From his recollection, it seems Abed was not outside the influence of this emerging collective identity. In the early 1960s, when Abed migrated to London after discontinuing his study program, Mr Saidul helped him settle down in the British metropolitan. At that time, Saidul Hasan worked as Pakistan's trade commissioner in London. In 1971, he happened to be in Bangladesh. Amidst the genocidal violence, he showed immense courage in visiting a Pakistani base. He intended to lobby for the security of his Hindu friends. But he never returned home (Smillie, 2009).

By April 1971, the Pakistani army had taken control over the city of Chattogram and severed all transportation to the capital. Owing to the benefits of his position at Pakistan Shell Oil, Fazle Hasan Abed travelled to Dhaka using a special flight that was reserved only for the privileged few. While in the capital,

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he was informed by the company's chairman of a new assignment: maintaining liaison with the oil and gas companies on behalf of the Pakistan Army. He agreed unwillingly, but within two days of his appointment, he decided that he could not work with the army masters anymore (Harvard Business School, 2014) as the new work among the military officers became increasingly suffocating and unbearable. He recalled a general constantly talking about the Bengalis in abusive, derogatory, and racist terms, claiming that the Bengalis were mighty under soft power but could be super submissive if treated with a heavy-handed approach (Mortaza, 2006). Abed had to escape the suffocating environment as soon as possible. He resolved to leave like many of his peers who left for either India or London.

In his interview with the Harvard Business School (2014), as well as with Mortaza (2006), he describes what happened next. As a military-appointed personal, Abed had a movement pass. The plan was to go to London, where he had lived for 17 years, so that he could “come to more use for Bangladesh's liberation war” (Harvard Business School, 2014, p. 5). But with no direct flight to Europe, he had to travel via Pakistan. Within a couple of days of reaching Islamabad, Inter-Services Intelligence, Pakistan's prime intelligence agency, brought him to a military headquarters for interrogation lasting two days. Abed soon realized a Shell colleague he bumped into in Karachi informed the chairman in Chattogram of his whereabouts, and the chairman wrote a letter to the governor of Punjab regarding his apprehension. He would be saved only with intervention from the British High Commissioner, as he had a British citizenship, which directed no harm to be done to a British citizen if there were no complaints. On release, he immediately headed towards Afghanistan. With multiple stops at Peshawar, Kabul, and then Istanbul, Abed finally reached London after several weeks. He announced his resignation at the Shell Headquarters right after reaching, denouncing how he was used by the chairman as a pawn while a war ensued. Suddenly unemployed, Abed

sold his share of the London flat, receiving roughly 6,000 pounds (Smillie, 2009).

He immediately contacted his friends, including Viqar Chowdhury, who had worked with him just months ago at Manpura. Together they created Action Bangladesh to tell the world of what was happening in Bangladesh and gain diplomatic support for independence (McVeigh, 2020; Mortoza, 2006). Through ads published in famous dailies, interviews given on television, and continued engagement with ministers and parliament members in London, Paris, Copenhagen, and the US, and representatives of the Mujibnagar Government in exile, Action Bangladesh invested in telling the story of Bangladesh's people. Questions about the possible country's ability to sustain, its reserves, and export possibilities, all received one answer: "if we are liberated, we will survive" (Mortaza, 2006, p. 32).

Fazle Abed and his friends' activities reveal the *other* history of humanitarianism—a mode of solidarity work evolving in the backdrop of Bangladesh's war of liberation from West Pakistan's neo-colonial oppression. Their ways of knowing, feeling, and doing manifested the entwinement of radical and humanitarian impulses, enactments of vernacular humanitarianism. Abed, a corporate elite turned into a political activist, remembered the difficulty of translating the pain and desire of Bengalis to the foreign journalists, politicians, and human rights activists in 1971, who saw the war through the lens of geopolitical rivalries between the US and the Soviet Union, between Pakistan and India. They knew little about Bengali's resistance, aka *Muktijuddho*, against Pakistani oppression. Moreover, like the Bhola Cyclone, the spectacle of suffering from the war attained centrality in how the country was imagined by the West.

As Action Bangladesh continued its efforts, refugees poured into the bordering areas of India in millions. Responding volunteer groups, relief agencies, and organizations had mobilized as early as March in the face of the crisis. Many of

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the refugees settled in areas near Kolkata (then Calcutta) in self-made shelters, while the Indian government and the Corporation of the City of Calcutta assigned designated land for camps (Ashmore et al., 2008). Basic supplies and administrative support were provided primarily by the Indian army, and a host of volunteer agencies assisted in the process. Priority was given to sanitation and public health issues, and then subsequently to the emotional and social well-being of the traumatized refugees. Camp construction took place in three phases, beginning with the provision of basic needs, followed by sustainable upgrading of the shelters, and maintenance (Ashmore et al., 2008). The refugee program saw a cost of over USD one million a day; while India had proven itself as the strongest supporter, the amount would soon prove too difficult to provide.

Oxfam, a large charitable organization at the time, played a major role, supporting up to 600,000 refugees at the camps up until repatriation. Raymond Cournoyer, Oxfam's representative for Eastern India and East Pakistan, who would later play an integral role in rehabilitation efforts after independence, acted quickly to pass a plan for the spatial division of relief activities (Francis, 2021b).

Raymond and his team were persistent in supporting local efforts for relief provision at the camps (and later rehabilitation of Bangladeshis). While other agencies were flying in expatriate teams to run their programs, Raymond—with strong support from Julian Francis, who was an Oxfam volunteer at that time—was quite sure that all the trained manpower they needed was available in India as well as at the refugee camps. The plan they drafted was also focused on the areas outside Kolkata because foreign agencies and their personnel were concentrated in Kolkata. Oxfam's locally based team thus focused on the border areas where they had links with Mission hospitals and Gandhian organizations for ongoing relief operations (Francis, 2021a).

However, their decisions regarding how to implement operations as well as which organizations to fund as the new nation emerged conflicted with the views of more bureaucratic senior management in London, as Francis recalls from his days in 1971:

Raymond Cournoyer was appointed as the Field Director to Eastern India and East Pakistan in early 1971. Within a few weeks of his arrival, the Liberation War got under way and streams of refugees starting [started] entering India. Raymond warned Oxfam that up to 10 million refugees could come to India, a figure the Oxfam management in Oxford laughed at. A few of us had been working on what was, at that time, Oxfam's single largest ever rural development project in Bihar. Raymond lost no time in asking us to come to Calcutta and set up the administration of a relief operation that eventually, at that time, became the largest relief operation with which Oxfam had ever been involved. Raymond soon showed that he was 'different' and his approach to the operations almost cost him his position (Francis, 2021a, p. 1).

Francis elaborates, "Oxfam Headquarters preferred someone who would listen to their way of working which was not always the case with Raymond. He was called back in the middle of the operations at the camps to be dismissed by Oxfam, UK" (Francis, 2021a, p. 2).

Francis played an important role in bringing the media attention to the work that Raymond was trying to do. In his words:

The world's media then was at the lobby of the Grand Hotel. Assessing the situation, I immediately reached out to them and informed of Raymond's visit to the UK emphasizing on

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the fact that he was the one who had spoken directly to the refugees in Bangla, spent considerable time at the camps and that he was the one to interview for credible information (Francis, 2021a, p. 2).

A flock of journalists awaited Raymond's arrival at Oxfam headquarters. Accompanied by the Field Secretary for Asia who had received him at London Airport, Raymond would have to enter the office through the backdoor to avoid meeting the huge crowd waiting at the front door. By the time the pair met with the Executive Director at the time, the management had realized that there was no way they could dismiss Raymond. He was already on Oxfam Radio and continued to have interviews with global media houses in Canada, the UK, and the US (Francis, 2021a). Operations thus continued, and Oxfam ended up having a huge program involving doctors from Kolkata and Mumbai (then Bombay) medical colleges and hundreds of volunteers.

While relief agencies, volunteers, and the Indian government worked ardently round the clock to keep alive as many as they could and prevent the situation from spiralling out of control, the United Nations (UN) remained silent, which played on its cards of diplomacy.

Meanwhile, Action Bangladesh worked relentlessly to make the Pakistani army's genocidal campaign known to the world. The organization led many activities, including publishing a significant advertisement on the Pakistani atrocity in the well-known *London Times* and lobbying with British and European parliament members. Its campaign intensified after Justice Abu Sayeed Chowdhury, who served as the vice-chancellor of Dhaka University during the Liberation War, arrived in London in June. He played a significant role in building diplomatic ties with both fronts of geopolitical rivalry in favour of the Liberation War (Mortoza, 2006).

Abed and Chowdhury also went to the Embassy of the Soviet Union in the British metropolitan. They had a long discussion with the diplomats about how the Soviet Union could increase its assistance in the Liberation War against Pakistan. Then, Abed and his mates organized a street theatre in front of the US Embassy in London. The play displayed the Pakistani atrocity in detail, live televised by a British media outlet. Instead of professional actors, activists and volunteers of Action Bangladesh and HELP Bangladesh acted in the drama. The workings and joint ventures of these two organizations ratified the central tenet of vernacular humanitarianism—the inseparability of the political aspiration of freedom from the humanitarian impulse to save lives (Mortoza, 2006).

In London, Fazole Abed also bumped into Dr Zafrullah Chowdhury, who, with the help of some renowned physicians, including cardiac surgeon M A Mobin and Dr Kazi Kamruzzaman, set up the 480-bed Bangladesh Field Hospital. Operating in the area of Sector Commander Khaled Mosharraf, the objective of this hospital was to treat wounded freedom fighters (Mortoza, 2006). In a recent online conference, Dr Kazi Kamruzzaman remembered the mass participation of Bengali-speaking doctors, based in Bangladesh and abroad, in the vernacular initiatives of medical humanitarianism. “It was a very different time when people did not possess a strong sense of individuality and private property,” Dr Zaman contemplated (Muktijuddho - Bangladesh Liberation War-71, 2021).

In August, an article in the *Daily News Week* published frightening news of no *Aman* crop cultivation that year in East Pakistan, signalling a famine. Only areas in control of the Pakistani army would have food distributed, while areas that had been liberated would not be helped. On reading the news, Action Bangladesh’s team made the quick decision to expand efforts beyond awareness and start gathering donations for relief. HELP Bangladesh (which was independent of the organization HELP created at Manpura) was created

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for the sole purpose of gathering relief and creating food warehouses to prevent starvation (Mortoza, 2006).

Next month, Viquar and Abed travelled to Kolkata and met with Tajuddin Ahmed, the Prime Minister of the government in exile, General Ziaur Rahman, student leader Rashed Khan Menon, and others to discuss how they could contribute more directly to the war. Out of anger and desperation, implausible plans, for example, attacking the Pakistani army with bombs, were proposed but later dismissed (Mortoza, 2006). Tajuddin stressed on the urgent need for relief, and with the donations collected, HELP Bangladesh provided sweaters, binoculars, and other relief materials for freedom fighters. Abed returned to London and continued fundraising. Viquar stayed in Kolkata, where he had successful meetings with representatives of the Indian government. With their support, he set up several food warehouses, which provided food for the liberated areas in the last few weeks till independence (Mortoza, 2006).

The onslaught of the Pakistani army continued, displacing and killing millions of people. Since July 1971, the *mukti bahini* (freedom fighters), a more organized force with active support from India and the Soviet Union, operated a series of successful strikes. They began to gain the upper hand by November. After a pre-emptive Pakistani airstrike on North India, India joined the war on 3 December 1971, and the defeat of the Pakistani forces seemed imminent. On 6 December 1971, the Washington Special Actions Group (WSAG) held a high-level crisis meeting. In the meeting, U. Alexis Johnson, an Under Secretary of State, and Henry Kissinger, the US president's adviser for national security affairs, tagged Bangladesh as a "basket case"—a term that originated in the First World War to refer to a soldier who had lost all four limbs and was deemed helpless (N. Hossain, 2017, p. 34). They did so after pondering about the bleak future of this emerging nation, impoverished and war-torn. The day, 6 December, was one of the most memorable days of Fazle Abed for a very different reason:

I was in Copenhagen, and I was interviewed by Copenhagen television. I said, we got recognition from India. How about Denmark recognizing us? Then the next morning I went to see the Foreign Minister of Denmark. I went to the Foreign Ministry and gave my name as a Bangladesh liberation fighter who wanted to see the Foreign Minister. Surprisingly, he said yes, come and see me. I got an appointment immediately. The reason was that he had seen the television program the night before, and he said, I might as well find out what's going on. We briefed him about what was going on, and we said that we'd like Denmark to recognize us, now that India had done that. He said, I can't quite do that yet. You need to be completely independent of Pakistan, but then, I can assure you that we'll be the first country to recognize you as soon as Bangladesh becomes independent (Harvard Business School, 2014, p. 8).

On 16 December, Bangladesh was liberated. In the largest repatriation operation of the post-Second World War era, by the end of January 1972, some six million refugees returned home (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR], 2000). With them walked Viqar as he made his way to Sulla, soon to be joined by Abed, in the fateful land that would see the birth of the Bangladesh Rehabilitation Assistance Committee (BRAC).

Vernacular humanitarian was “an act of collective struggle,” evolving through the intermingling of political and humanitarian concerns, as manifested in the activities of Abed and his friends. The vernacular enactments of charitable activities after the Bhola Cyclone and during the Liberation War paved the way for forming a new generation of non-governmental development organizations in post-independent Bangladesh, as exemplified by the creation of BRAC and Gonoshasthaya Kendra, amongst others.

5. From Assam to Sulla: Creating Bangladesh Rehabilitation Assistance Committee

The history of Bangladesh is entangled with rain, rivers, and the sea. Monsoons bring rain, nourishing the thirsty land, feeding a thousand rivers crisscrossing the land. Invigorated by the rainwater and the water from the melted ice of the Himalayas, rivers rush to the sea, depositing fertile silt on both sides on their way. Freshwater and fertile soil brought by the monsoon sustain life in this land. Winters see the shrinking of rivers, drying of the land, and a calmer weather. Summer shows turbulence with powerful storms and occasional rain. A continuous dance between calm and chaos, the people of Bangladesh remember a history that is nature's. Dwelling in this environment means experiencing a perennially dynamic frontier between earth and water that dominates the *longue durée* of the region's history (van Schendel, 2009).

Covering a vast area of northeast Bangladesh, *haors* are bowl-shaped shallow depressions filled with water in the monsoon that become dry in winter. Villages within the wet ecosystems are tiny islands that are barely connected with the outside world, by boat during the monsoon and on foot in the dry season, on uneven, dusty fields that emerge as the water dries out.

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Tucked deep into the remoteness on the river Surma, Sulla, a predominantly Hindu fishing community in Sunamganj, stretches roughly 50 miles in radius. With the hills of Assam to the north, Sulla is surrounded by depressed wetlands of the haor that goes on for miles. Reaching the people in this region from Dhaka in 1972 involved crossing 180 miles by rail and road and then 30 more miles over water: a total of two days of travel (Chen, 1986). In *A Quiet Revolution*, Marty Chen describes:

Imagine a saucer of land 50 miles in radius. Each year, this saucer fills to its brim with water from the hills to the north before it overflows its banks onto the plains and waterways of the south. For six months each year, this area becomes an inland sea...during these months their villages become marooned, looking like logs floating in an endless sea from above. During the other six months of the year, when the water recedes and the fields emerge, people grow one bumper crop of rice (Chen, 1986, p. 2).

Within the villages, people walk along small dikes, embankments, or ankle-deep mud through the pathless terrain.

As Viquar walked from Shillong, Assam, to Sylhet, led by refugees, he heard about the devastation in Sulla; the villages had borne a terrible brunt of the war. The land was left barren with no sign of life; trees were burnt, animals slaughtered or left to die, and entire crops destroyed. Men, women, and children, tired from the long journey back from the refugee camps, sat quietly under trees—the only remaining shelters—trying to understand how they would build back homes and lives with nothing (Mortoza, 2006). Abed returned to Bangladesh on 17 January to join Viquar. In his interview with Mortoza, he reflected on his first trip to Sulla two months later:

Memories of the first day staying at Sulla will never leave me. We travelled to the area in March but to a place with nowhere to stay. We didn't even know where we would sleep. We found a shop at the local bazaar and slept on a *macha*. It stormed all night, and we were left drenched, sleepless. I was 36 then. We then had to walk to reach the villages (Mortoza, 2006, p. 41).

A pathless journey of 17 miles and with no proper routes nor small roads to depend on for direction, Abed, Viquar, and the team set afoot to reach the villages they would work with (Mortoza, 2006); their feet creating the route in the muddy, riverine land to their destinations.

Working abroad for months to liberate their nation, they would finally be able to work for a country they could call their own. This euphoria of freedom and the energy of a newly formed national identity was palpable everywhere. As Willem van Schendel mentions, "The immediate post-war period was a time of national jubilation. In 1972 and 1973, anything seemed possible. The nation had finally won its state and could now design its future" (van Schendel, 2009, p. 183). Drawing from Abed's own words, "The lands then were very different. We all only thought of how to save our people. The circumstances then inspired us to work" (Mortoza, 2006, p. 18).

Friends who had collectively experienced the extreme neglect of a region and yet continued to hope for independence would come together in a commitment to work for the poor, helpless, and dispossessed. Within a month of Abed's return, Bangladesh Rehabilitation Assistance Committee (Mortaza, 2006) was created in February 1972 to provide an institutional structure to the work that was being planned.

"We [Abed and Viquar] needed a board to create the organization so we reached out to people we knew," expressed Abed in his account with Mortoza

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(Mortoza, 2006, p. 37). One by one, individuals who shared a similar ethos of building Bangladesh were brought together. Akbar Kabir, who was previously with HELP at Manpura, poet and feminist activist Begum Sufia Kamal, Professor Abdur Razzak, retired government official Kazi Fazlur Rahman, and S R Hossain, who was a senior officer at a renowned oil company at that time and had assisted Viqar in Kolkata—all agreed to be part of the board of directors with Viqar and Abed. With the chairmanship of Begum Sufia Kamal, the first governing body of BRAC was formed (Mortza, 2006; Rohde, 2014).

Most of the money raised through Action Bangladesh had been allotted to the Mujibnagar Government in Kolkata as the war ensued. Viqar had about 25,000 rupees in his account in Kolkata, and roughly 6,000 pounds was at Abed's disposal from the sale of his apartment. The money was utilized as the first-ever institutional fund for BRAC. However, to be able to continue their work, they would need more funds. "I knew it would make no sense to go to a donor and simply ask for money. I'd have to do it with a proposal," mentioned Abed (Harvard Business School, 2014, p. 11). The team took its first step to carry out a survey and outlined the exact needs and amount of money that would be necessary. They then set out to hire people.

Ten to 12 university graduates and some students who had just passed their Secondary School Certificate (SSC) examinations were given relatively lucrative daily rates of BDT 10 and BDT 5, respectively, for the task. The questions that needed an immediate understanding included the number of houses that had been destroyed, the occupation of the villagers before the war, the kind of work they could do now, how many livestock had been killed, and how many children had survived (Mortoza, 2006).

With just humble notebooks and pens for notes, the 40 young students travelled first by boat through the vast waters and then on foot from village to village, engaging with each household and noting down how entire villages

experienced the war in the ruin of homes and lost livelihoods. A month passed. Teachers with a couple of graduates from the statistics and economics departments at the University of Dhaka assisted with the analysis that formed the basis of BRAC's first proposal for Sulla. With not enough resources for an office at the time, Viquar's law chamber at 95 Motijheel, Dhaka, would suffice for two secretaries and Abed to begin the administrative work and collection of materials (Mortoza, 2006).

To ensure more funds for their work, Abed joined a series of meetings that took place between Oxfam, other voluntary agency representatives, UN officials, and the newly formed government (Oxfam, 1971).

The discussion focused on what rehabilitation programs could be immediately undertaken (Oxfam, 1971) to help the Bangladeshi people. The decision on who to fund in the new country though caused considerable conflict within Oxfam's management, even in the weeks before independence (Francis, 2021a). When it was clear that the emergence of an independent Bangladesh was merely a matter of time, Raymond was the obvious choice as Oxfam's first Field Director in Bangladesh for his experience in the region. However, it was again not so simple. He told Oxfam UK that he wanted *carte blanche* or complete freedom regarding the development activities to be supported in Bangladesh and that he did not want to have any part in distributing mere relief supplies (Francis, 2021a). "Give them to CARITAS or Mother Teresa!" he thundered, "I want to invest for the long-term in young Bangladeshis with vision" (Francis, 2021a, p. 3). His stand of investing in development activities went against the more traditional approach of Oxfam—the distribution of relief. With much debate, Raymond was able to influence the decision to support new and emerging NGOs. Oxfam thus became BRAC's first international donor.

BRAC's detailed plan with supporting evidence gathered from the surveys had convinced the Oxfam representatives seeking local organizations to

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partner with BRAC. Francis, in his documentation of Oxfam activities in the newly liberated state, mentioned:

A good number of these Bengali volunteers returned with the refugees to run a relief program in Sylhet district. At the same time, they have done an enormous amount of work in surveying the worst affected areas and have adopted a scheme for rehabilitation and development. The only hold up before it can be put into operation is the money to buy the necessary supplies (Oxfam, 1972b, section 17, para. 2).

Oxfam's Overseas Aid Director Ken Bennett highlighted the spatial significance of the project area as he explained Oxfam's decision to fund BRAC:

BRAC is in the course of being registered in Bangladesh, and there is no reason to think this will not soon have been accomplished. A comprehensive rehabilitation program for the Sulla Thana in the Northeast has been drawn up, with a considerable amount of supporting material as a result of surveys carried out. It is a remote part of the country and because of this has attracted very little relief assistance. It takes two days from Dacca by rail, road and motor launch to reach the northern corner of the Sulla project area and then, within the area, journeys must be made on foot in winter and by country boat in summer (Oxfam, 1972a, p. 4).

The first plan drafted was budgeted at USD 430,000 at the time. BRAC's initial plan was to help the villagers build their houses, get high-protein food for their frail children, and cultivate their land. Between February and October, Abed and volunteers travelled multiple times every month between India

and Bangladesh and brought power tillers—to till large tracts of previously uncultivated land—seeds, galvanized iron sheets, wood, and bamboo (Mortoza, 2006; Smillie, 2009). Speaking with the Chief Minister of Assam, Abed was also able to obtain permission to take bamboo down the rivers to Sulla. Through persistent conversations with anyone who could help source materials, the team also managed to import iron sheets from Japan and other materials from Bangladesh’s new government (BRAC, 1972; Mortoza, 2006; Smillie, 2009). With materials ready, they would now have to be taken to Sulla’s people.

Flowing from the hills of eastern India and making its way from Assam to Sylhet, the Kushiya river travels 160 kilometres before joining Surma, eventually joining Meghna in the south. During monsoon, the river rises up, and its strong currents break over banks to flow over several hundred square miles of fields (Chen, 1986). Through this river route in monsoon, more than a dozen BRAC volunteers transported millions of bamboo rafts and wood, which spanned roughly three miles across the waters, carefully steering their way through rains and the sharp turns of the turbulent river en route to Sulla (Harvard Business School, 2014).

The BRAC team was immersed in the land that they were building; the landscape and Sulla’s people built BRAC in return. Volunteers at the main camp of Markuli, Sulla, were young and enthusiastic university graduates keen on repairing the nation. Their work started with the break of dawn and ended late in the evenings. With no fixed accommodations yet, they spent nights on moist floors of small street-side shops or in abandoned shacks discovered with the help of locals, often with torrential rain that continued for days (BRAC, 2021).

Depending on the seasons, the volunteers made way to their projects on foot or by boat, occasional water hyacinth sometimes delaying their journey on the water. Their route depended on whatever was allowed by the plains and

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the skies. As the first field worker of BRAC, Moyazzem Hasan mentions in his account from 1972,

One would not understand how inaccessible the area is unless they visit it themselves. A season of rains, of boats. During the monsoon, there was immense happiness in setting sail and being the sole captain of the boat! I now wonder whether the same is felt as journeys are made in the comfort of cars. During the dry season, the only way was on foot (BRAC, 2021, p. 3).

They always carried a trusted *gamcha* to cross the rivers. It proved useful when they had to swim to reach the camps that were scattered across roughly 150 square miles of land, water, and an enormous sky (Chen, 1986). Tin-shed houses were set up bit by bit, volunteers resting at times on the tin sheets under the open sky. Carrying muds on their heads, shovelling the land, and creating canals for water to reach the farms, the youth built a dam at the mouth of the Kushiara (BRAC, 2021). They created entire farms with the villagers, sowing seeds with their bare hands, each perfectly distanced from the next. Moyazzem reflected on the zeal they had at the time, “Our youth drove us to leave footprints of new life” (BRAC, 2021, p. 5).

BRAC staff, volunteers, and locals meandered through the turbulent terrain, creating their own paths with each walk. Through the collective efforts of the organization and the villagers, little by little, villages with functioning systems of agriculture, irrigation, and markets emerged from what was an empty land devoid of life (BRAC, 1972; Mortoza, 2006). When questioned about the vision they had at the time though, Abed said, “I didn’t have much of a vision at that time. It just was a question of survival” (Harvard Business School, 2014, p. 9).

Therefore, following the journeys of Fazle Abed and others, who walked the myriad perilous paths during the most catastrophic and radical time of the country, the concept of “life-changing experience” is not an individual but a collective phenomenon, critical in comprehending the history of Bangladeshi NGOs. It is not surprising that the founders of some key NGOs formed right after independence were also intimately involved in the post-cyclone humanitarianism and the Liberation War.

The monograph demonstrates how people's intense aspirations for freedom from the neo-colonial subjugation and needs for protection and necessities of life intersected to constitute a radical episode of humanitarianism and a distinctive development pathway. The history of Bangladesh and BRAC's co-creation thus deepens and broadens the social scientific inquiries of humanitarianism and development.

6. Conclusion: Learning From Sulla

After roughly a year of rehabilitation and relief work in the first phase of the activities at Sulla, BRAC realized that development would not follow if people and villages were not made self-reliant (BRAC, 1974; Mortoza, 2006). The team thus shifted to phase two and adopted an “Integrated Model of Development,” emphasizing the development of human and institutional infrastructure (BRAC, 1974).

BRAC did not have any specific theory or existing model of development at the time. Thus it borrowed a strategy, namely “adult literacy materials and the two-tier cooperative structure from the national integrated rural development program” (Chen, 1986, p. 6), which was based on the model of development initiated by the Academy for Rural Development in Cumilla (then Comilla). Popularly known as the Comilla Model, the approach advocated for the creation of cooperative credit societies, provision of agricultural extension, adult literacy, distribution of birth control, and introduction of technology to advance villages as homogenous units of development. BRAC assumed that demonstration in certain sectors and extension in others would suffice to motivate the village community as a whole (Chen, 1986). However, the strategy had several shortcomings, and development would not follow (BRAC, 1988; Chen, 1986; Smillie, 2009).

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Through reflections on the field, learnings from the 1974 famine, research findings, and close discussions with villagers and field workers across projects, BRAC realized that the village as a unit of development would not function; it was not homogenous but comprised of smaller subgroups that shared differing and conflicting interests (BRAC, 1988; Chen, 1986). Through experimentation in Sulla phase two, they also realized that women could be more effective agents of development (Chen, 1986; Mortoza, 2006).

BRAC's methods till phase two also failed to bring any change to the structural constraints that stood as barriers to the elimination of poverty in rural societies (Lovell, 1992). BRAC took a step back to analyze its role in the larger context of national development strategies as well as how to operate in the rural power structures.

Based on continued research and attendance and engagement with the villagers, BRAC would sharpen its lens and understanding of poverty and the poor. By the end of its first decade, the organization would come up with not only a new set of assumptions on poverty as a deeply social phenomenon but also a new methodological approach to organizing the poorest of the poor.

BRAC would shift away from community-based development and focus on the most vulnerable groups. It would take much inspiration from the concentrated and targeted approach to rural development through educational enlightenment or the "critical self-awareness of the oppressed" that emerged in Latin America with Paulo Freire's idea of conscientization. According to Freire (2013), conscientization or critical consciousness is the ability to intervene in reality in order to change it. It is a process in which one becomes aware of their social reality so they may break through the prevailing oppressive norms and barriers. With the concept of conscientization serving as a source of inspiration, the method adopted by BRAC was *Institution Building* or the *Conscientization Approach* that began with Functional Education (FE) followed by awareness, self-motivation, critical awareness, and finally, self-

reliant development (BRAC, 1988). In this approach, direct and active local participation is prioritized, and investment is made in developing a class consciousness and awareness of oppression within one's socio-political environment. BRAC identified the poorest of the poor and worked together with them so they would be organized and further mobilized for real change. The yearlong emphasis of the method on institution building soon brought forth visible change. It was observed that women were "already becoming quite strong," with many groups "in a position to ensure survival without BRAC support" (BRAC, 1988, p. 6). In other words, they had developed critical consciousness.

Sulla thus taught BRAC that development had to be done through a rigorous method of observing, attending, and responding; it showed that experimentation leads the way to sustainability and that learning from failures can lead to success. From relief to a community-based model, BRAC would refine and sharpen its lens.

The next monograph will elaborate on how the team would continue to experiment with models of development, and how a humble beginning in Sulla in the 1970s would become the world's largest development effort in the present day.

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