

Nayakrishi Andolon

The New Agricultural Movement

by Anne-Marie Zilliacus

Flying over Bangladesh, the land is flat, green and wet. Rivers spill over lush fields. The water comes very close to the runway of the small airport. And the airport is small, like Ottawa airport used to be when I was a kid. It's a crowded land, 130 million people in an area not much bigger than New Brunswick.

But what does crowded mean? If you had that many people in New Brunswick, could they live off the land in this harsh climate of ours? Someone said to me when I told them I had just returned from Bangladesh, "It must have been heartbreaking." What did that mean? Did they expect people to be starving in the streets, overwhelmed by one disaster after another? That's often the impression one has of the country because the only time it makes international news is when there is a flood or cyclone. But Bangladesh is a land of incredible fertility and the floods are vital for flood-plain eco-systems as well as rainfed agriculture. Water is the source of conserving biodiversity of plants and fish resources and a vital element in agricultural practice.

I was in Bangladesh visiting UBINIG, a policy, advocacy and research organisation that is leading the organic farming movement in Bangladesh. UBINIG is at the forefront of the ecological movement to bring us back to a healthy way of living and feeding ourselves. This is more than just organic farming. It is a movement by the farming communities to cultivate happy relations in life and the environment and create new ways to build communities. In the Bangla language this New Agricultural Movement is called Nayakrishi Andolon. UBINIG describes Nayakrishi this way: "It is based on a very basic principle. Observe and follow the processes of life and nature, the bounty and the diversity, in order to

interact with the external world, to be transformed in the act of participation, in order to open up the immense possibilities of joyful activities and happiness in and around us. This is a very simple principle because such participation is impossible unless we squarely challenge existing relations that assert hierarchy, control, destruction, exploitation, disintegration, fragmentation or, in other words, unsustainable practices."

Nayakrishi Andolon is taking a lead in the struggle we are all involved in, our collective struggle and resistance against the colonizing and homogenizing processes of globalization. In Canada we are just as involved in the life and death questions to ensure food, nutrition and environmental security. We are as much at risk of losing our popular knowledge, culture and practices as anyone in the Third World, perhaps more because of our daily exposure to propagandizing television and newspapers in a political system that is funded by financial contributions from big business and funds subsidies for business in return. Agriculture has become, not a way of life, but another business as family farms are taken over by agribusiness. When Farhad Mazhar, of UBINIG, was in Canada last year visiting organic farms in Quebec, one farmer proudly told him that there were 39 farmers in their organic movement and asked how many there were involved in Nayakrishi. "Fifty thousand," replied Farhad. And there will be two hundred thousand of them within five years because the movement towards organic farming is growing so fast.

This is possible because Nayakrishi is not simply an environmental movement. The farming communities are engaged in a struggle to transform and reorder local, regional and global economic and political relations. It has

grown out of the work that UBINIG did starting in the early 1980s, with a series of study circles held on issues concerning development and social change. Sharing information is the base, and Nayakrishi Andolon has spread all over Bangladesh through this sharing, and through training and exchange visits between farmers of different regions.

In the years before the Green Revolution introduced high yielding hybrid seeds that required pesticides and fertilizers in order to produce as advertized, Bangladeshi farmers grew over fifteen thousand varieties of rice.

Different rice seeds were planted at various times of year, and seeds varied depending on the eco-system they were planted in. Today only eight rice varieties are planted by the majority of Bangladeshi farmers. They require vast inputs of fertilizer and pesticides, inputs that destroy the uncultivated food that once made up 40% of the Bangladeshi diet and was also used for medicines and fodder for animals. The loss of uncultivated foods, available to the poorest of the poor, greatly increased hunger in the country. Nayakrishi farming practices are turning this around as multicropping and other old, familiar methods are used to retain and enhance soil fertility and to enhance productivity. People know the benefits. They do not become sick from ingesting pesticides and fertilizers when they follow Nayakrishi methods. And women the traditional custodians of seed varieties are regaining their position in the community and at the heart of agriculture. The Nayakrishi Seed Network, is composed primarily of women who share and exchange seeds among themselves, as well as the delicate wisdom of seed conservation and propagation.

Some Nayakrishi farmers will be in Canada in August 2002 when UBINIG brings a delegation of them to the 14th Organic World Congress held by the International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements in Victoria BC. The motto for this meeting is "Cultivating Communities," which is what UBINIG has been doing with Nayakrishi Andolon for some years now. If there are Quaker organic farmers who are interested in meeting with farmers from Bangladesh, please let me know as Inter Pares will be involved in their tour of some organic farms in Canada. The climate and many of the crops are very different, but Canadian and Bangladeshi organic farmers are both involved in the struggle to regenerate the life of their communities, not merely in food production. As UBINIG says, "Agriculture is a way of life, a cultural practice with all the implications of the word 'culture'."

It certainly wasn't heartbreaking in Bangladesh. It was heartening and encouraging to find that a land so often seen as dirt-poor, was rich with possibility. We need to go past the media images of Third World countries that portray them as hopeless places, and instead realize that they are creative and vital places from which we can learn many things. Certainly Bangladesh is such a place, a land of fertility and of strong spiritual values, where the value of life is celebrated daily. And certainly we can share UBINIG's objective: the need for all of us to ensure democratic participation by people, equitable distribution of social wealth and productive resources if our planet is to survive.

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