

Co-operatives and Contraceptives: Family Planning and Theories of Rural Development in Comilla, East Pakistan

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Abstract

Why did Pakistan (including both present-day Pakistan and Bangladesh) emerge as a crucial site for global population control programs? Operating at multiple scales of analysis, my project explores the motivations for advocating family planning programs by different groups in Pakistan from the early 1950s to 1971 - these included social scientists, Islamic modernists, women social workers, and politicians and bureaucrats. It also examines the interactions between these local groups and global actors on questions of population control. I look at the implementation of both research and action-oriented family planning projects, and explore their attempts to organize and reconfigure social and economic relations. The friction arising from the planning and implementation of these projects provides fruitful ground for examining debates over foreign aid, modernization, the role of Islam, and state-formation in a decolonizing society.

Family planning schemes operated at different scales; some were pilot projects at the village level, while others were provincial or national in scope. However, they were all transnational enterprises, and sites of interaction between local and global ideas, actors, and institutions. This research report focuses on the Pakistan Academy for Rural Development at Comilla as a site for examining the relationship between family planning and rural development.

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In 1955, the prime minister of Pakistan, Mohammad Ali Bogra, requested Ford Foundation (FF) assistance in changing what he labelled as the “administrative infrastructure of colonialism.”¹ According to Bogra, the British Raj had left behind civil servants who administered with a focus on law and order. But he envisioned something different - for him, postcolonial Pakistan would be run along the lines of welfare and development, and with a particular focus on its rural population. The Ford Foundation quickly went to work on this request to link public administration with rural development, and asked social scientists from Michigan State University (MSU) to make exploratory trips to Pakistan. Reports from these advisors helped establish the Pakistan Academies for Rural Development in 1959.

The Government of Pakistan provided most of the operational budget for the academies, with the Ford Foundation and MSU provided technical assistance in the form of advisors, training, and equipment. The academies were located in both wings of the country - one in Peshawar in West Pakistan, and one in Comilla in East Pakistan. While the main focus of the academies was to train a new generation of civil servants in rural administration, Akhter Hameed Khan, the dynamic director of the Academy at Comilla, was also able to negotiate the designation of the area surrounding Comilla as a development laboratory for pilot projects.

So where in the world is Comilla? Before moving on to the rural development projects being carried out at the Academy, let me take a brief detour and provide a quick snapshot of Comilla. It is an area of roughly a hundred square miles, centered around the small city of Comilla, located about thirty miles north of the Bay of Bengal. Primarily a rice growing area, MSU advisors described it as being “green, hot, cut by waterways, and in the rainy season soggy wet.”² The

population of the area was about a quarter million in the late 1950s, with a density more than twice as much as other areas of East Pakistan.

The Academy's director, Akhter Hameed Khan, originally from North India, was no stranger to Comilla. As a member of the Indian Civil Service, he had been posted to rural East Bengal during the great famine of 1943, and had witnessed firsthand the destruction it caused.³ He had resigned from the Civil Service during this time, in protest over British policies during the famine. By the time he was appointed as director of the Academy at Comilla in 1959, the biggest puzzles confronting him were connected issues of agricultural productivity and population growth.⁴ Questions of self-sufficiency in food had become a public obsession in Pakistan soon after independence in 1947, so much so that Khwaja Nazimuddin, the second prime minister, was dubbed as *quaid-e-qillat* - which loosely translates to leader of the food scarcity. There were periodic food shortages throughout the 1950s and when Ayub Khan became president in 1958, he was acutely aware of both the explosive and appeasing qualities that food production possessed.

In Ayub's eyes, food self-sufficiency could not be attained without curtailing Pakistan's high population growth rate. His views were informed in large part by the work of social scientists in Pakistan, many of them part of the Harvard Advisory Group, who worried that economic gains made under the new (and highly prized) Second Five Year Plan would be eroded by population growth. Ayub Khan, not one to be scared off easily by conservative elements in society (at least not at this point in his tenure), told Pakistanis in no uncertain terms that if they wanted to eat more, they had to be less prolific. He also directed the leaders of his so-called "nation building departments" to focus their energies on population control.

As part of Ayub's nation building enterprise, the Academy was responsible for training all newly recruited family planning officers for the government. In March 1961, it also started an independent family planning project in Comilla. The pilot project had two components: an attitudinal survey and other research surveys, and an action project based on Comilla's distinctive organizer approach.

The Academy implemented its rural development programs by establishing a network of co-operative village societies. A central co-operative society was housed at the Academy's headquarters, and it oversaw various primary village cooperative societies by training village organizers, acting as a savings and lending institute, and providing skills development and equipment. Akhter Hameed went at great lengths to argue how the organizer approach he developed at Comilla, was different from earlier iterations of community development and village-aid projects in South Asia, which by this time were coming under greater scrutiny. He remarked that while "out of all the rainbows seen in the 1950s, community development was the brightest;" it inserted workers into the village from outside. He argued that, in the past, community development workers ended up establishing relations and distributing patronage to mostly well-to-do clients, leaving out tenant farmers and landless laborers in the process.⁵

The organizer approach at Comilla, on the other hand, would make villagers the agents for their own development. Villagers were asked to form a primary interest group and elect or appoint a leader. This organizer would come to the Academy each week for training, and would discuss the ideas and problems of each co-operative. Flows of information were conceptualized as two-sided, with the organizer acting as a mediator aiding both the Academy and village groups in learning from each other. Akhter Hameed Khan considered the organizer approach one of the defining features of Comilla, so when the Family Planning Pilot Project was introduced in 1961, it was done through this model.

The Academy approached the organizers of village co-operatives and asked them to nominate female representatives as family planning agents. In the first year, only six village societies agreed to join. Under this program, the female agent, who was usually the wife or relative of the co-operative organizer, came to the Academy once a week for training. She was provided basic education in maternal and child health, hygiene, and contraceptive methods. She was also provided with contraceptive supplies, which included condoms and foams tablets, and a register to keep client history and sales records.

A few months into this program, the Academy started worrying about the low number of village societies which had joined. It felt that the co-operatives did not

recognize the importance of family planning to programs of economic development - a link that the Academy and the Pakistani state were keen to establish. To give the family planning program a larger base and disseminate its message more broadly, it was combined with the Women's Education and Home Development program that was being rolled out in 1962. A Peace Corps volunteer, Florence E. McCarthy, worked closely with Khan in developing the program. It was envisioned as "an evolving process of "teaching women how to be more effective and contributing members of society."⁶

It is important to note that the women's program evolved over time as it came into contact with more women through training and incorporated their feedback. However, at the outset, it was initially designed by the team at Comilla which included Akhter Hameed Khan, Florence McCarthy, and former village-aid workers - a few of whom were women. The program was critical of how women in Comilla's villages were treated and the prevailing *purdah* system, with Akhter Hameed Khan remarking once that "a farmer is prepared to spend more on his cow than his wife." While the program was revolutionary for its time in Pakistan, due to an unprecedented focus on rural women, it still thought of them in terms of economic agents, and the contribution they could make to the economy.

In January 1962, the women's program was started; it included training women in health, literacy, spinning, and family planning, among other subjects. Women from 23 co-operative societies joined, and in conversations many of them noted that this was the first time they were traveling for training or work. On the first day, as Akhter Hameed Khan stood by watching them pass, he remarked "I could tell people this was happening, but they wouldn't believe me. So we will wait and in time they will come and see for themselves." Within a year, over 500 women had been trained.

The family planning program continued to expand alongside over the next few years, and also included dais (midwives) and paraprofessional village doctors as agents. By 1964, the number of village co-operatives in the program had risen from 6 to 45, and there was a steady increase in the number of families using contraceptives. The Ford Foundation spoke glowingly about both women's and

family planning program. Not only were more women coming to the Academy, but there was also a change from - and I'll quote again, the "shy, burqa-clad, non-communicative women of yesterday to a serious, articulate, woman of tomorrow. The change is typified by a young [B]engali mother, a [f]amily planning organizer, leaving the academy with a child in one arm and a metal sign under the other - reading family planning supplies sold here."⁷ In the eyes of American advisors at Comilla, which at this point included MSU, Ford Foundation, and Population Council representatives, the family planning program was essential in moving women along their continuum of modernization.

When Akhter Hameed Khan had first presented his idea of model co-operative societies for rural development in the late 1950s, he had his fair share of detractors. At a time when Pakistan was chasing dreams of big industry, high level officials made fun of Khan's focus on rural welfare and development. However, tables turned quickly; by 1963, Comilla was hosting everyone from John D. Rockefeller 3rd to Ayub Khan, the latter commenting that the real salvation of Pakistan lay in putting Akhter Hameed Khan's experience in Comilla into practice.⁸ Bureaucrats in East Pakistan also began to speak of Akhter Hameed as "our man at Comilla," and how all new programs were tested there before being implemented in other parts of the country.⁹ Donald Bogue, a noted sociologist at the University of Chicago, wrote about his trip to Comilla excitedly to the president of the Population Council, with a hunch that the family planning program was "on the track of a real breakthrough."¹⁰

These glowing testimonials did not mean that the Academy's programs were immune from growing pains. At the outset, the Academy was seen as an extension of the state into the everyday life of Comilla's rural citizens, and brought its fair share of apprehensions. When surveyors went out to gather information on family planning knowledge and preferences, rumors arose that they had come to give injections to prevent people from having more children. Others thought that they were there to increase land taxes or seize crops from people who had a good harvest.¹¹ Over time, some level of trust was established between the Academy and the people of Comilla, but there were still organizational hurdles to the family planning program - it was hard to find literate female agents, who could keep a record of family histories and sales. In a couple of instances, the program was

halted for months at a time in villages where the agent migrated to India following communitarian tensions.

To overcome some of these problems, a commercial aspect was also added to the family planning program. This increased the points of supplies for conventional contraceptives, and included shopkeepers and tea stall vendors as salesmen. The commercial program was based again on an attempt to make agents out of people with whom the villagers would come in regular contact, and also provided an anonymous point of supply for those who wanted privacy and were not part of the co-operative program. The commercial approach further boosted contraceptive sales and usage. Up till 1965, the program remained strictly non-medical. Akhter Hameed Khan strongly advocated for the suitability of such an approach for East Pakistan, based on both the ease of replicability and also as a solution for the dearth of medically trained professionals in rural areas.

When Pakistan's National Family Planning Scheme was introduced as part of the Third Five Year Plan, it incorporated the commercial approach pioneered by the Academy in Comilla. While this was seen as an affirmation of the methods developed at Comilla, some social scientists were not entirely happy. Harvey Choldin, a Population Council advisor working at Comilla, noted that the government plan had ignored many operating details which were the essence of the program. At the same time, this National Scheme took over the Academy's already existing family planning projects; the Academy's staff was asked to work under the family planning officer appointed by the government. As government officials began to replace the social scientists in the mid-to-late 1960s, the rate of adoption and use of contraceptives also began to plateau. While a downward trend in fertility rates had been achieved in the previous few years, post 1965 contraceptive adoption rates started declining.

Effects on the program resulting from changing expertise were also compounded by external factors. The 1965 Indo-Pakistan War had a chilling effect on Pakistan's relations with the US. For the prior years, Pakistani officials had been constantly protesting over US military aid to India. While the United States maintained that the supply of such material was to help India ward off Chinese aggression,

Pakistani officials and press saw it as a stab in the back by a trusted friend and ally. They argued that such military material would also be used against Pakistan. In the court of public opinion in Pakistan, the 1965 war proved this point, and the presence of foreign aid missions in the country was examined critically. The Academy at Comilla was also under orders to proceed with this official line, and a Board of Governors meeting of the Academy in late 1965 requested for the first time that foreigners not be present. Robert D. Havener, an MSU advisor at Comilla, described the official posture at the time as one of “cool politeness.”¹² This resulting breakdown in communication severely limited the ability of American advisors at Comilla to participate actively in projects.

Along with this air of general distrust, the last few years of the 1960s were a period of momentous change in Pakistan, and its effect reverberated throughout Comilla. A loosely organized political opposition had formed against Ayub Khan, which included actors ranging from leftist trade union activists to right-wing religious groups. In the eastern wing of the country, this opposition was built upon years of feelings of being economic colony of West Pakistan. The opposition in both wings critiqued Ayub’s development policies, and his family planning program came under direct attack, especially from more conservative elements such as the Jamat-i-Islami. During the first half of 1969, family planning activities in Comilla remained suspended, as the East Pakistan Family Planning Board issued directives to not organize any meetings or publicity in the villages.

Years of mounting unrest finally culminated in the 1971 Civil War. The Academy at Comilla, seen as a manifestation of the state, came under attack as buildings and equipment were damaged. As political turmoil unfolded, Akhter Hameed Khan was forced to leave East Pakistan in April of that year.

Once hostilities ceased, the programs at Comilla continued - but now as the Bangladesh Academy for Rural Development. Shortly before the Civil War started, the Planning Commission had produced an Integrated Rural Development Program, based directly off the Comilla model. Soon after attaining independence, the Government of Bangladesh reaffirmed the implementation of this program, pointing towards the impact that Akhter Hameed Khan’s vision had left in its decade of existence.

Speaking at a rural development workshop in Addis in 1974, Akhter Hameed Khan reflected on the events that had transpired in the past few years. He remarked that in the past, much to his discomfort, people had called him “Mr. Comilla.” Looking back at how he was forced to flee, he felt that it was an act of poetic justice by the Gods “who had decreed that no more shall the people of Comilla be harassed by his antics, nor he be overwhelmed by their problems. He was now merely the ghost of Comilla.”¹³

1 Niehoff, Richard. “Ford Foundation Community Development Projects,” Catalogued Reports, Report 000755, Ford Foundation Records, Rockefeller Archive Center (RAC).

2 Ibid.

3 Akhter Hameed Khan, “Bengal Reminisces,” Catalogued Reports, Report 003969, Ford Foundation Records, RAC.

4 Ibid.

5 Ibid.

6 Florence E. McCarthy, *Women’s Development and Home Education Program: First Annual Report* (Comilla: Pakistan Academy for Rural Development, 1952).

7 See Raper, Arthur F., *Rural Development in Action: Comprehensive Experiment at Comilla, East Pakistan* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1970).

8 “Letter from Ayub Khan to Akhter Hameed Khan,” 22 March 1962, Reel 0870, Ford Foundation Records, RAC.

9 “Letter from Haldore Hanson to George Gant,” May 3, 1963. Reel 0870, Ford Foundation Records, RAC.

10 “Letter from Donald Bogue to Frank Notestein.” Reel 0870 Ford Foundation Records, RAC.

11 Harvey Choldin and Hosne Ara, “Field Work with Village Women,” Box 141, Folder 1336, Population Council Records, RAC.

12 R.D Havener, “Narrative Report Comilla,” Catalogued Reports, Report 008386, Ford Foundation Records, RAC.

13 Akhter Hameed Khan, “Comilla Projects: A Personal Account,” Catalogued Reports, Report 012115, Ford Foundation Records, RAC.