

# A Quaker Work Camp in 1954

*Bernard Llewellyn and Beryl Roach, two Quaker Friends were looking after the activities of a Quaker Centre in the old part of Dhaka. Dhaka was then the capital city of East Pakistan, and it was also known as provincial city of Pakistan. The city was politically agitated following a bigoted statement of the head of the government. Students indulged themselves in antagonistic attitude against the government. Llewellyn and Roach thought talking about politics was immaterial to understanding the core of society. They considered Work Camp might facilitate this opportunity. They organised a work camp for some college and university students in a remote village. The work camp lacked success. Yet they set an extraordinary example by facing difficulties patiently in travelling to select the venue in a remote village, in encouraging the students to become participants and in running day to day activities in the camp. This example could be valuable lesson to NGOs which endeavour to inspire young people to initiate development and peace activities with a clear understanding and friendship at grassroots level.*

In 1954, Bernard Llewellyn and Beryl Roach used to organise meetings, discussions and workshops on social, religious, peace and any non-political issues at Dhaka Quaker Centre. The participants were college and university students, and government officials. While generally Llewellyn and Roach were satisfied with the involvement in the discussions of most participants, they were concerned about the unmindful involvement of the students. The obvious reason of the inattentiveness was due to the prevailed political discontent among the students, which also spilled over all people in East Pakistan.

The root of the discontent went back to 21 March in 1948. On the day, just after one year of the independence, the first Governor General of Pakistan, Muhammad Ali Jinnah had announced that the national language of Pakistan would be Urdu, not considering almost all people in East Pakistan spoke in Bengali. The students of Dhaka University opposed the decision and on 21 February 1952, they demonstrated on the street while the national assembly was in progress. The police opened fire, killing several students. This recurrent incident as well an imminent local election kept the students' mind preoccupied.

According to Llewellyn and Roach the political influence on students was overwhelming. This was not only keeping them preoccupied from concentrating in the organised discussions at the centre but also made them bound in city life. To Llewellyn and Roach knowing rural life that lived by most people with realities: backward communication, under utilised land, crop failure, life threatening disease, and poverty. They felt morally obliged and principally motivated that the students should get introduced to rural life and learn about its people and their culture, society and struggles, rather than arguing on politics confining themselves in city.

They planned to organise a work camp in Nabogram village in Manikganj sub-division and decided to make a preliminary visit to choose a place in the village, which was far from a pleasant experience. Although by car presently it takes about an hour from Dhaka to Manikganj, in the past it took them 6 hours by motor launch, only available means of travelling. When they came out of the motor launch, climbing down swaying plank, it was late evening, already 'pitch-dark', and they would have to find a reasonably far away 'dak-bungalow' to spend the night. They used a Tonga, a small box-shape cart pulled by a pony, not convenient for the two large size foreigners. With the light of a smoky lantern, the pony was dragging the Tonga along eroded river bank, across ploughed field and through thickets.

When Llewellyn and Roach arrived at the premises of the dak-bungalow, it was quite late night. They called out for caretaker to help them to enter the dak-bungalow. From a nearby shed, a young man came out with a lantern in hand. He was literally startled looking at two tall white people in the middle of the night. Without saying a word, he hurriedly opened the door and left leaving the lantern with them. They discovered two rooms with overgrown grass and creepers, dusty desk, a canvas covered bed and a broken chair. A common bathroom with a rusty bathtub and a tin-pot to scoop the water. They spent the rest of night sleepless in one room while another one left with rats and cockroaches.

To follow official procedure, before enter Nabogram village, they went to report about their arrival to local government authority. Considering them as government delegates, four officials escorted them to the village. Authoritatively, they called a meeting, inviting all village leaders. They told the villagers that Llewellyn and Roach would organise a work camp for the young boys from this village and Dhaka. They explained that as work, the boys would talk about social, economic and cultural aspects of this village and, as physical work, they would control pests and insects by spreading DDT in some houses. And, And, they would also work to fill in a broken part of a narrow road, which ran along a pond.

Llewellyn and Roach had no opportunity to talk in the meeting as they did not speak in Bengali, neither they were asked to do so with a help of interpreter. Not only them, none of the villagers responded to the talks of the government officials. A villager, however, came up with a suggestion that it was better to build a small bridge over the broken part of the road. He was stopped, and his suggestion was not taken on board. He was remarked as a 'cantankerous old man' by the officials. The dynamic of the meeting between the government officials and the villagers was typical, which is still common in Bangladesh.

The hard work of Llewellyn and Roach in organising work camp was not over by visiting the venue. More awaited in Dhaka. When they shared their experience in doing ground work for the work camp in Manikganj with the regular participating students in meetings at Quaker Centre, the students right away disagreed to travel to 'a remote

village in Manikganj' to be in work camp and discuss social, economic and cultural issues and doing manual work with 'The village boys'. This rejection put Llewellyn and Roach in desperation to find willing participants for the work camp.

As alternative plan, they contacted nearby college, which is now Jagannath University College. The Principal of the college appreciated their initiative. To help them, the principal asked interested students to attend a meeting. And 20 students came to attend the meeting. When Llewellyn and Roach explained the whole idea the work camp. All the students showed interest to travel to Manikganj and participate in the work camp. But on the day of departure to Manikganj, only 10 students turned up, which nevertheless, pleased Llewellyn and Roach.

With the full cooperation of the villagers work camp began. But they wanted to cancel the plan of repairing the broken part of the road running along a pond. Although about this particular issue the government officials had no interest, now the villagers somehow made Llewellyn and Roach understood the importance of the broken part of the road. According to them, the gap was a useful connection between the pond and the nearby field. During the monsoon, the open part brought fish into the field with water. And children enjoyed catching fish in shallow water in the field. The villagers thought lest the gap was repaired, the children would be deprived of a seasonal enjoyment, which apparently was their cultural right. Understanding the importance, Bernard Llewellyn and Beryl Roach cancelled repairing the broken part of the road. Only spreading DTT powder was kept in the manual activity programme.

The week-long Work-Camp could not make the city-boys happy. They filled in the camp-diary with their disappointments. They felt they were in a totally unfamiliar, awkward, social environment. Staying in the camp made them feel living in a 'hell' in 'suffering and hardship'. They had to leave many scheduled work undone. This happened, as they put it, due their continuous body-pain, cuts and scratches in hands. They did not find any common ground to mingle and exchange ideas with the participants from the village. They were waiting desperately to come back to Dhaka.

The initiative of Llewellyn and Roach was pioneering, given the modern trend of development work in developing countries. In the present time, doing development work, especially with NGOs, requires knowing society first. Llewellyn and Roach exactly 65 years ago demonstrated it, taking unprecedented trouble in choosing the work camp venue in a remote village. Here success of the camp is unimportant, but thinking and working to make it possible is most important.

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*I have curved out this article from the book 'From the backstreet of Bengal'. The book was written by Bernard Llewellyn documenting his experience of working and travelling in then East Pakistan and India, published in 1955, by Allen & Unwin, London.*