

Peasant Movement Constituting Life-affirming Communities in Bangladesh¹

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Led by small scale farming communities of Bangladesh, biodiversity-based ecological agriculture, known as Nayakrishi Andolon (New Agricultural Movement), has become popular as a peasant movement. It is not a 'traditional' farming practice in a static sense but aims at enhancing capacity of the farming communities to absorb advances in environmental, ecological and biological sciences and recent knowledge of increasing climatic variability. It is done without compromising the life affirming wisdom of popular culture of rural Bangladesh and without displacing the historical experience and capacity of the agrarian civilisation. The movement envisions an ecological civilization and by its agrarian practice intends to constitute life-affirming communities, which are at the same time a form of political resistance against destructive global-capitalist-industrial order. At the immediate level it has been developing a potential alternative, to increase productivity of agricultural systems through farmer-led research for innovation, management of natural and biological resources and maintenance of balance between cultivated and uncultivated spaces.

This peasant-led biodiversity-based ecological agricultural movement, Nayakrishi Andolon, is based on the principle known as 'Shahaj way to Ananda'. The words such as 'Shahaj' and 'Ananda' cannot easily be grasped by literal translation. The 'Shahaj' means to grow together in the world, to be with all our faculties in the unity of manifold. In the day to day Bangla language it means to understand something instantly, and therefore simply; this is possible when we remain engaged in the world with all our sensuousness and faculties, so that a particular sense organ or faculty does

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not get the privilege over the others. Secondly, we do not live in the world as if it exists merely as an object of sensuous intuition, understanding or rational manipulation, world also exists as imagination. Above all, world is not an 'object' separate from us as 'subject' – we are the world as well. So 'Shahaj' means engaging with this world in a way that dissolves our separation with the world. We rise from the world as an active 'subjects' only to be dissolved in it again as One. The literal meaning of 'Ananda' is joy. We reach the joyful life through 'Shahaj'. Nayakrishi Andolon therefore cultivates joy. It aims for joyful living.

These notions are very common and understood by the peasants fairly easily. Nayakrishi Andolon is grounded on the rich cultural and philosophical foundation of Bangladesh, however, critically. Nayakrishi does not accept any idea or notion simply because it is traditional. It lives in the present and interrogates the validity of an idea or notion in terms of the immediate needs and struggles of the community in the era of globalization that has brought us environmental and ecological destruction and climatic catastrophe.

Traditionally the farming community in Bangladesh has been pursuing a holistic production system matching the soil, plants, crops, animals, other attributes of environment and human life for centuries. Understanding the dynamic relationship of biodiversity and local food systems, allows us to question the inevitability and desirability of a transition to diets based entirely on cultivated diversity. Increases in the production of so-called "staple crops" can only be considered an increase in food production if they really make a net contribution to the availability of food at the household level.

Bangladesh is a country of small peasants. In Bangladesh, agriculture is the single largest producing sector of the economy comprising about 21% (as of 2010) of the country's GDP and employing around 48% of the total labor force. More than 55% of the total surface area is used for agriculture and 58% of holdings are in farming occupation in Bangladesh. The small-scale farmers (holding land between 0.05 – 2.49

acres) comprise 84.27%² of the total farming community.³ In this context, Nayakrishi not only works with the small farm holders but also creates an environment for the very poor, basically the landless peasants. These very poor people, mostly led by women, with no cultivable land and without any economically active men in the household, rely on uncultivated foods. Uncultivated food sources make up at least 40% of the daily diet during a time of the year when cultivated food sources are also relatively abundant. Far from being a minor supplement or simply a crisis food, the leafy greens, tubers and small fish collected by people from the lands and water bodies of their communities are a vital part of their daily diet. This particular aspect is a contribution of women to ensuring food security of the family and the community (Mazhar et al, 2008, p. 38 - 39).⁴

Nayakrishi starts from the premise that the evolution of an agricultural system is a biophysical phenomenon as well as a socio-cultural construct and therefore 'no single blueprint of sustainability will be found, as economic and social systems and ecological conditions differ widely not among countries but also between different agro-ecological zone and landscapes. Therefore, each nation will have to work out its own concrete policy implications' (WCED, 1987, p. 40)⁵ taking into account of agro-ecological variability. Nayakrishi intends to provide a context-specific opportunity to evaluate the inter-related ecological, economic and social dimensions of agricultural sustainability.

Historically the idea of economic system and related notions such as 'production', or 'production factors' developed prior to the notions related to environment and ecology. Till now notions such as 'production systems' remained extraneous to the notions of environment, ecology/ biodiversity, as if an ecosystem is not a 'production system' on

² Statistical Pocket Book Bangladesh 2010, BBS, GOB, February 2011

³ Farm holdings are divided into three categories: small, medium and large. A small farm holding has an operated area between 0.05 and 2.49 acres of land while a medium farm holding has it between 2.50 and 7.49 acres. A large farm holding is one having an operated area of 7.50 acres or above.

⁴ see Food Sovereignty and Uncultivated biodiversity in South Asia: Essays on the Poverty of Food policy and the Wealth of the Social Landscape by Farhad Mazhar, Daniel Buckles, P.V. Satheesh and Farida Akhter, IDRC published by Academy Foundation, New Delhi

⁵ World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987 "Our Common Future" Oxford University Press, Oxford

its own term. One of the major challenges of Nayakrishi is to demonstrate the economic and productivity performance of ecological agriculture to solve crisis of food and availability of safe water. The ability to address environmental degradation, ecological erosion, risk of pests attacks and diseases, health and nutrition problems, challenges of seasonal variability, natural disaster and climate change and livelihood of the people are inherent within the principle, strategies and operational culture of Nayakrishi. Overall result is immanently directed at the eradication of poverty and reach extremely vulnerable section of population that cannot be reached by any other development programme. Nayakrishi therefore strategically highlights the value of ecological production practices that are biodiversity-based to ensure higher yield and good economic return to farmer.

Nayakrishi Farmers are practicing 10 simple rules⁶ of biodiversity-based ecological agriculture to achieve joyful, prosperous, and secured life, particularly sovereignty over food, seed and knowledge practices. In addition to well-known practices of ecological agriculture Nayakrishi practice is based on biodiversity and the genetic resources in general and agro-biodiversity in particular as the strategic site to enhance agricultural performance. Nayakrishi attempts to design households, villages and unions as ecological production systems at various levels and scales. Innovative and diverse ecological designs and practices are promoted in order to achieve higher yield both in terms of individual species and varieties as well as system yield. Minimum general indicator to assess the performance of the system is to ensure the reproducibility of the systems, generally known as sustainability. However, the goal is always aimed at achieving qualitatively higher and complex designs or systems. The 'yield', 'services',

⁶ Ten Rules are: (1) absolutely no use of pesticide (2) in situ and ex situ conservation of seed and genetic resources, (3) production of healthy soil without external inputs, particularly chemical fertilizer, (4) Mixed cropping (5) production and management of both cultivated and uncultivated spaces (6) no extraction of ground water and conservation of water and efficient surface water use and management (7) learning to calculate the output both in terms of single species and varieties as well as system yield (8) Integrating livestock in the household to produce more complex household ecology to maximize benefits and well being of both humans and life forms (9) Integrating water and aquatic diversity to generate more ecological products and (10) integrating non-agricultural rural activities to ensure prosperity of the local communities as a whole.

'functions' or 'value' are assessed both in economic terms as well as by benefits of healthy environment and ecology and enhanced biological wealth and genetic resources in possession of the farming communities.

The central approach of Nayakrishi squarely lies in the conservation, management and use of local seed and genetic resources and adopting and improving production techniques suitable for farmers' seed. Thus hundreds of local varieties of rice, vegetables, fruit and timber crops, etc., have been reintroduced within a short period of time. For example, farmers in Nayakrishi area cultivate at least 3000 varieties of rice, and the number is increasing. The movement has been negotiating with the national gene bank to help them regenerate the collected germplasm and internalize the conservation of genetic resources as an in built operation of the movement.

At least 300,000 farmers in 19 districts of Bangladesh practice Nayakrishi. In all the farming households' women are the key persons to preserve seeds and therefore have taken up the lead in the movement. They have formed the Nayakrishi Seed Network in a systematic structure to involve women at different levels of their expertise.