

FOCUS

Poverty Count, Poverty Alleviation and Growth with Social Justice

by Md Anisur Rahman

FOR the last decade-and-a-half or so, expression of concern for poverty count and poverty alleviation have been rising in development thinking all around. Development thinking in Bangladesh is no exception. Recently the Bangladesh Institute for Development Studies has presented a major poverty study with a lot of intellect and labour. Such poverty thinking and research have appeared to me to be ideologically most reactionary, even inhuman. In the present discussion I shall elaborate my concerns and anxieties on this matter, shall try to indicate a direction for making the "poverty line" concept more humane, and shall invite economists and development thinkers to search for ways of achieving growth with social justice rather than "poverty alleviation", ways in which poverty will be alleviating itself without needing to be addressed as a separate concern.

Poverty Count

Poverty researchers are counting poverty mainly in two ways. One: by drawing two "poverty lines", one to delineate the "moderate poor", the other to delineate the "extreme poor", and counting heads under each line. Two: a composite index called the "FGT index" is being drawn to look compositely at how many persons are how much below the given "poverty line", with a view to measuring the "aggregate intensity of poverty".

The basic poverty line (moderate poor) — is being drawn by first costing the average nourishment (calorie and protein) needed to maintain the productive power of human beings, and adding a mark-up of 30 per cent to allow for the other "basic needs". The logic of this 30 per cent is being stated to be the empirical finding that people living in the neighbourhood of the "poverty line" spend about 70 per cent of their total expenditure on food items.

Two things are immediately fuzzy in this way of drawing the poverty line. One is circular reasoning: the poverty line is being defined on the basis of the proportion of total expenses that people in the neighbourhood of this line spend on food items, i.e. already presupposing the neighbourhood of the line itself to be defined. The second is the questionable implicit assumption that people in the neighbourhood of this line are actually spending their incomes to consume the pre-

People are not born to alleviate their poverty — they are born to express themselves in this life, to show their creativity, to fulfil their talents. Parents long to see the fulfilment of the talents of their children as well, for which they make great sacrifices, including if they are poor, starving themselves to help their children move forward. It is important for poverty researchers to understand this humanness of people.

scribed amount of nourishment and that they are spending on or are even able to command their other basic needs in some "prescribed" amounts with the remainder of their incomes. I shall discuss later that even if people are in the neighbourhood of the poverty line drawn by poverty researchers they may not be spending the income thus given for the researcher-defined "basic needs" in the "prescribed" amounts. However, either of these two fuzzinesses keeps the meaning of the resulting "poverty line" quite unclear, and the two together makes for quite a lack of clarity on the question.

Conception of the "Poverty Line"

So far about measuring the poverty line. What is really the conceptual meaning of the line that is being searched?

The calorie and protein counts are being done to maintain the productive power of people "to maintain a healthy productive life". The 30 per cent that is being added to this may possibly cover more or less some reasonable space for dwelling, some minimum clothing, and some cost of education and health care. These are also needed by every person in some amounts to maintain their productive power. Although poverty researchers are not defining their "poverty line" by including all these elements in precise quantities as they do for nutrition and have taken recourse to the fuzzy method of adding the 30 per cent to the nutrition costs, taking all these costs together the "poverty line" seems conceptually to be wanting to catch nothing very much more than the full cost of maintaining the productive power of the people (i.e. what old man Marx called the cost of maintaining the "labour power" of people). By defining the concept thus precisely it should have been possible to avoid the undesirable fuzziness if one had wanted it — the calorie and protein counts are already taken from the health science; the minimum quantities of the other "basic needs" could also have been determined by technical and/or cultural reasoning or by social consensus instead of submitting to circular reasoning. Be it as it may, it is still important to understand that conceptually the "poverty line" more or less represents a measure of the cost of maintaining the labour power of people (or, if it were intended to measure something else, this should have been made explicit for conceptual clarity). This is because such poverty count, and a concern for poverty alleviation essentially in this sense, suggests a particular standpoint in human and social ideology which merits explicit presentation so that its ethics can be defended openly.

The Ideology of Poverty Counts

Poverty counts as the above treat those who are thus identified as poor or those whose

poverty alleviation in the above sense is being enquired into, as little more than a kind of productive "domestic animals" (or "slaves"). Just as such domestic animals need to be given adequate nourishment, a shelter over their heads, health and medical care to prevent and treat diseases, some "training" (education) in certain matters, even to some, some clothing for protection against rain and cold so that their productive power is sustained, and just as such animals are not considered to have a right to the net incomes accruing from their products, it seems that a similar ideology is operating behind the above kind of poverty counts for human beings as well, consciously or unconsciously. These productive beings also need to be kept on or above the "poverty line" so that their productive power is sustained, and the net income (surplus) from their production may be enjoyed by the "masters", i.e. the elites in the society. In such an ideology the problem of poverty alleviation is essentially the problem of bringing all such producers above the "poverty line" thus conceived, and the faster this can be achieved the more admirable the "development effort", therefore is. It does not matter if other classes of the society move forward much faster by appropriating the full net income resulting from the efforts of the producers as well as by other means (e.g. use of foreign "development" assistance) — the "poverty alleviation" objective is being realized, what is there furthermore to worry about?

The FGT index that has been devised to measure the aggregate intensity of poverty is also consistent with such an ideology. This index is designed to compositely measure how many persons are how much below the "poverty line" irrespective of by how much the incomes of other classes in the society grow. There are also suggestions that income transfers from the moderately poor to the extremely poor would be desirable from the point of view of social welfare — it is not being suggested that income transfers from the extremely rich to the extremely poor would be far more desirable!

the power of people on this line to whom this income is being assigned with such specific objective. In such a situation one has to give these people an income higher than the "poverty line income" in order to ensure the maintenance of the people's productive power in view of the "human leakages" from people's incomes. In other words, the "poverty line" itself has to be drawn at a higher level in order to allow for such human leakages in order to be effective in maintaining the productive power of the people ("effective poverty line") — B.

In other words, even within

the framework of such reactionary ideology, the "effective poverty line" is not "A", but "B". The difference between these two lines, in one sense, measures the difference between free human beings and people as domestic animals (or slaves). (for drinking, bathing and washing dishes); good sanitation; security of personal movement; and security of women's movement without fear of molestation, all of which are income dependent. Besides, they have put down actual costs of children's education and of good health care, costs they may not be in a position to incur but without which they cannot give reasonable education to their children nor maintain their health properly. These also add to the meaningfulness of the villagers' implicit "poverty line" compared to that of conventional poverty research. The people are talking of their life rather than doing abstractions for academic research, so that there is no fuzziness in what they are talking about.

One could add more items in the "poverty line" which may not have been explicitly mentioned in the Shumunay research either, may be because these did not immediately occur in their dialogues time-bound as these were but which must be present behind their awareness of poverty, or which would give them or intensify their poverty awareness if they were to consider these e.g. safe maternity care; minimum marriage expenses for children; cost of reasonable service from the law-and-order and judicial systems — vis-a-vis getting cheated, looted, becoming a victim of terrorism, rape, women publicly stoned by religious fundamentalists, etc; and provision for meeting calamities; provision for living like human beings in old age even when one's productive power has dwindled; higher cost of old age medicare; etc.

In particular, conventional poverty counts are looking only at one's current income irrespective of one's reserves, and even if such reserves disappear or one even goes into debt to meet unforeseen calamities, a simple rise in one's income is being regarded as an improvement in one's poverty situation. The neglect of provision for old-age is particularly relevant to the reactionary ideology discussed above. That is to say, its objective remains basically only to preserve the productive power of people, tempered only to allow for some

sociality. The FGT index designed to measure the aggregate intensity of poverty and being suggested to be an index of aggregate welfare of the poor, lacks a sensitivity to this character of the dynamics of poverty. Until this can be handled in the index, an awareness of this important deficiency of the index should be explicit in order not to be complacent about any improvement in the FGT index associated with painful falls into deeper poverty of some members of the society while others move forward. Needless to say, this consideration is relevant for measuring the aggregate intensity of poverty in the context of any of three "poverty lines" that we have identified.

Poverty Alleviation Versus Growth with Social Justice

Even after adding all such considerations as the above to poverty counting we are still roaming in the arena of a reactionary social outlook devoid of any concern for social justice. Social justice is not ensured merely by poverty alleviation even if poverty is measured more humanely than it is conventionally being measured. Mere poverty alleviation is at best more than a humanitarian concern of those who have a sympathy for the poor. But social justice is not a question of sympathy — it is a question of human right. An ideology of lifting the poor in the society only above the "poverty line" by a few percentage points a year while the rich would get richer by any extent possible, has no awareness of social justice whatsoever. I would not have sat down to try to make the "poverty line" only a little bit more humane within the framework of such a reactionary ideology, as I have sought to do in the foregoing pages, if the mainstream of development thinking were not so aggressively vocal in favour of such "poverty alleviation", a trend against which one feels so powerless today. We all, of course want poverty alleviation; but is this all we should be wanting?

The tradition of development thinking in this country was much more progressive, and the constitution of this country has yet not discarded the principle of social justice. It is indeed unfortunate that the mainstream of today's economics profession in this country has nevertheless moved away from this principle and embraced a reactionary social and development philosophy. Our economists are talking today of transfer of incomes from the moderate poor to the extreme poor rather than from the rich to the poor. We are not hearing any more of the principle of income growth for the poor to be faster than income growth for the rich, which should have been recognized as an elementary principle of welfare economics. We are not hearing of concerns from our poverty researchers that the rich are getting richer by appropriating the surplus of the poor. Why should the poor be

left behind? The poor, the middle class, and the rich — the definitions of these three social categories are in the final analysis relative, and can be determined for social analysis purposes only by social consensus. Those in the society who are lagging far behind the average consumption standards in the society are poor; those who are in the neighbourhood of the average are middle; those who are much ahead are rich. To lag far behind in this sense is the basic source of one's self-identification as poor, and the basic cause of one's misery from a poverty-awareness, and it is this misery which needs to be alleviated of a human concern, a concern for social welfare, and for social stability.

Recently a research study by Atiur Rahman and his colleagues of the Shumunay Research Centre has presented valuable information in this regard. This study shows that 71 per cent of villagers in the society regard themselves as poor, compared to a figure of 51 per cent for this statistic as shown by the BIDS study. The truth is that, however poor they may be, the main aim of their life is not necessarily to maintain their productive power. A reason for such different results emerging for the same question, in two different studies seems to lie in the important methodological differences of the two studies. The BIDS study does not give any indication that it initiated any dialogue with the villagers on their questions nor enquired from them the reasons behind their answers. The research of Shumunay has applied the dialogical methodology as between the researchers and the people as well as among the people themselves. The dialogues have covered not only the question of poverty but also questions of general problems of life of the people, and on how the government's budgetary allocations in the different sectors may affect their lives. Some of the discussions with and among the people have been quite deep, with questions not merely on people's perceptions on various issues but probing on reasons for their perceptions. To any question to the people there may be an immediate answer which would be recorded by conventional (positivist) research as the "reality"; but such answers may be revised by deeper dialogues and searching for the reasons behind answers, and thus a different "reality" may be observed. In choosing between such different realities presented by different researches on the same question one might wish to consider which of these is backed by well-reflected reasons on the part of the interviewees being researched. From this point of view the Shumunay research may perhaps claim greater acceptability.

In the Shumunay research the villagers have listed as very important some of their needs which are generally not considered at all in conventional poverty research, e.g. safe water

lifted only above the "poverty line"; why shouldn't the poor producers get the major share of the value of their products? Is it not possible to adopt necessary principles and effective strategies toward such an objective?

This is certainly possible, if only desired. On a previous occasion I have indicated a direction for promoting such an objective, suggesting the idea of organizing the small producers into producers' cooperatives for initiating different kinds of joint enterprises including collective marketing taking over imports (of their inputs) as well as exports (of their products), so that the bulk of their surplus remain in their hands. I had also suggested that such small producers' cooperatives might be asked to save and reinvest at a high rate (30 per cent) from out of their increased incomes thus gained, and even required to do so as a condition of loan that might be extended to them to start their cooperative enterprises. (forced savings), so that they might become the principal growth agents in the country. We are not really seeing much by way of growth agentship in other quarters of the society who are appropriating the surpluses of the producers to spend them in austere consumption and capital transfers abroad. A policy of assisting the producer classes of the society to become growth agents could yield in one stroke economic growth, social justice and poverty alleviation. In particular, the need to be concerned separately with poverty alleviation would disappear — this would become a redundant objective.

This is a very risky business. It may result in kidney, damage or other blood-related hazards. In case of a mismatch of blood groups, death is inevitable.

Bone Marrow Transplantation is the only way to permanently cure this disease. But the treatment is not available in Bangladesh. This treatment is available abroad and is highly expensive. If she could manage at least US \$ 50,000, she might get a chance to survive. But this amount of money is far beyond her family's capacity to manage. Coming to know all this, her friends of the geography department decided to do their best to save the girl. They arranged a stall in the Bangla Academy book fair named "Mukul Jannyo". They informed the vice chancellor of the university of the matter and asked for help. They have been rallying on the campus for days praying for help. They contacted most of the newspapers of the city and many of the pa-

pers had donated advertising space for a pop music concert arranged in aid of Mukul. They have applied to Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina for her help. If the prime minister or the president of the country requests the King Faisal Hospital of Saudi Arabia, then her treatment can be possible free of cost.

Dhaka Day by Day

Friends in Need

by Abul Kashem

Only months ago Kamrunnah Mukul's physicians pronounced that living with Thalassemia is virtually impossible. She had lost all her hope then, but soon she got it back when her friends came forward to help her.

Mukul, 23, is a student of 3rd year Geography honours at the University of Dhaka. She has been suffering from Thalassemia, a deadly disease characterised by haemoglobin deficiency and popularly known as blood cancer, for the last 15 years.

Now her condition is worse. Every month she must have an infusion of A-positive blood. Taking blood regularly for a long time is a very risky business.

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Why Mukul's friends are doing all these? It is something like a war against a death foretold.

"We are doing all these out of a kind of sympathy, that could be understood well only by the victim", says Nadi, a first year geography student who has devoted most of her study hour to Mukul. "It breaks my heart when I think that such a lovely girl will perish in front of our eyes. We are trying to save her life", says Dr K Nizamuddin Chairman of the department.

Khush, a friend and roommate of Mukul's in the Shamsunnahar Hall said, "words cannot explain why we are working for her. We just feel that we must do something for her". Mukul said, "sometimes I think I am a very unfortunate girl. Because I have got a deadly disease in the prime of my life. But again, when I think about the sympathy of friends and many people, even unknown to me, I feel I am an exceptionally lucky person".

Everyone knows Dhaka University had lost scores of its students in gun fighting. It is a grim fact that tarnishes the image of an enlightened institution. But now Mukul's story reveals another side in mark contrast to the gun toting students of the university. This is to understand the value of life. They are learning how to convey love to someone who is in need of it.

Loud is Cheaper

TRUCK manufacturers in UK never had it so good. And all it took for their trucks to sell like never before were new EU guidelines on noise and emission requirements in commercial vehicles weighing more than 3.5 tonnes. The new guidelines — Euro-2 — were to come into effect on all such vehicles after October 1 last year.

The "month" of September thus saw a dramatic increase of 121 per cent in truck sales which slumped by nearly 40 per cent in October. Meeting Euro-2

Native drivers seem to have a fondness for Euro-1 models which complied with less stringent noise and emission standards.

Motor Marvel standards raises the cost of the truck by five per cent and this explains the sudden sales. Manufacturers, in order to clear the old stocks, were also offering discounts. According to David Thomas, director of commercial vehicles at Mercedes-Benz UK, the British and to a certain extent, the French transport industry, take some time to warm up to idea of new rules.

Native drivers seem to have a fondness for Euro-1 models which complied with less stringent noise and emission standards.

SONY ET cars using conventional internal combustion engines. However, the elaborate system which uses metal catalysts to remove harmful sulphur and carbon monoxide emissions, would cost 10 times more than the conventional engines. Chrysler hopes to launch a test vehicle within three years.

CSE/Down To Earth Features

10:30 Janmadin 10:35 Classical Music 11:00 Ghare Baire 11:30 Parliment Hour 12:30 Monarh Cabin (Serial) 1:30 Janmadin (Serial) 2:30 Trishna 2:00 6:30 Bismillah 2:30 Bakul (Serial) 2:30 Bakul Katha (Serial) 3:00 Aaleya (Serial) 3:30 Aamargeet (Serial) 5:05 Science Prog-Bigan Prasange 5:20 News 5:30 Employment News/Lalitkant 6:00 Palli Katha 6:30 Gaan Niya 7:00 Serial 7:30 Bangla Bakul Katha 7:55 Dininjan 8:00 Aaleya (Serial) 9:00 Monoroma Cabin (Serial) 10:00 Bengali Movie Club Film Show 1:00 Closed

10:30 News 11:00 Tara 11:30 Dastan 12:00 TVs Sa Re Ga Ma 12:30 Andaz 1:00 Chahat Aur Nafat 1:30 Raahat 2:00 9 Malabar Hill 2:30 TMM 4:00 Suhana Safer 4:30 Bournvita Quiz Contest 5:00 Suno Bhai Sadho 5:30 Jagran

8:00am Tiawat Aui: Tarjuma/Hamad/Nat 8:20 Cartoon 8:30 Khabrain 8:45 Beauty Care 8:50 Fun Kadha 9:10 Chanak & Health Tips 10:05 Haar Taa Hely Deepak 10:30 English Film Home Improvement 10:55 Milli Nagma 11:00 Knab罕 11:10 Anita (Serial) 12:00 Sports Hour 12:55pm Quran-e-Hakeem 1:02 Bismillah 1:15 The Science Show 2:00 Yeh Jahan (Music video) 2:25 Animated Classics 3:15 Geography & Sammar School 4:20 Mitti Sona 5:00 Allah Huma Labbae 5:25 Qabhi Mein Sochha Hoen (Drama Serial) 6:25 Aiou Courses 7:00 Dhankar 7:45 English News 8:15 UN Quiz 8:45 Jab (Drama Serial) 9:00 Break for Headline News 10:00 Khabarnama 11:20 VCD Top Ten (Pakistan Video Countdown) 12:30 Dr. Quin: Medicine Women (Jean Saymorn) 1:35 Khas Khas Khabrain/ Close down

7:30am Action: Cody 5. Fall From Grace 15 (Hindi Subtitles) 9:30 Classic: The Kennel Murder Case 12 (Arabic Subtitles) 12:00 Family: Father And Scout (Hindi Subtitles) 1:30 Oscar Winner -- Best Picture: The French Connection 15 (Hindi Subtitles) 3:30 Comedy: She Devil 15 (Hindi Subtitles) 7:30 Family: Last Battle For The Universe PG 9:30 Hollywood One On One 10:00 Action: F/X -- Murder By Illusion 10:30 ETV 11:00 Kate & Allie 12:30 Yan Cook 7:00 Janata 7:30 Star News (Hindi) 8:00 Small Wonder 8:30 Kya Baat Hai 9:00 Meri Awaz 9:30 Star News 10:00 Some Mothers Do Av 10:30 Space: Above and Beyond Pilot 12:30mn Independence Day: The Making of ID4 Invasion 1:00 Star News 1:30 Baywatch 2:30 Dynasty 3:30 Fantasy Island 4:30 The Oprah Winfrey Show 11:40 Close down