

Relevance of Genetic Information: Bangladesh Context

by Hasna Begum

In a developing country like Bangladesh only 10 per cent of the total population perhaps are educated enough to be able to comprehend fully the meaning and consequences of genetic information. Poverty is a disease, and to cure the people of this serious disease should be given primary importance. And related to poverty is providing opportunities for education.

RECENTLY Genome Research, with the aim of collecting genetic information for the purpose of preventing and correcting genetically transmitted diseases and disorders, is a much discussed issue in both the arenas of the sciences and bioethics. It is being discussed mostly because many controversial views have already been expressed about the motive behind the possible and actual use of information gathered/collected, that is, whether the planners and implementers will be dominated by their subjective inclinations and biases.

The academics in both developing and developed countries are sincerely concerned, and also quite apprehensive of this comparatively new scientific advancement in the field of genetics. They fear injustice and discrimination from the agencies who will procure genetic information and use them in their personal and national interest. They also fear that eugenics may be practiced globally to the disadvantage of individuals of particular ethnic groups.

As it is known, genetic information may be procured mainly through two methods: i) oral history together with medical examinations or tests of individuals; and ii) data gathered by gene analysis and Genome Mapping. Here at this point, it may be noted that in most developing countries of Asia and Africa and also in South and Central America 'genetic information' can only be collected through oral history recorded by medical personnel and pathological testing. This is because the condition of most of these countries is not conducive to gene analysis and Genome research. The problem with the first method is that the oral history is often unreliable and the results of pathological tests are faulty. The reasons for this condition are quite simple and easily understandable in the context of the social, political, economical and educational structures of the countries under consideration.

Due to the lack of education of about more than 80 per cent of the total population, in Bangladesh for instance, the persons who are thus interviewed do not have the epistemological mechanism to comprehend and also to understand

fully the meaning of the questions and the implications of the answers. Therefore, the genetic information thus procured often is mistaken and far from true pictures. Moreover, even when information is collected by medical tests and examinations it is also not valid and reliable. The reasons are: The tests are often done casually without taking proper precautions against possible errors; and the medical examinations are often also done without the required sincerity and attention to the person's needs and to the objectives of such examinations. The ethics and dedication of medical personnel are, in most cases, questionable.

II

The above scenario gives us a very bleak and hopeless picture indeed. The genetic information thus gathered may be used or is already being used by existing one or a few insurance companies. For instance, in Bangladesh there is only one insurance company, monopolizing the whole field, as there does not exist any parallel public and government owned health insurance system to compete with it. I believe most developing countries are having to face similar problem.

Here I would like to present some terms and conditions offered by an insurance company. In its declaration one of the captions reads: "Who can join?" And here it says that only people between the ages from 18 to 60 years are eligible to become its clients. It is quite important to note two points which clearly show discriminatory attitude and also are against the interest of the people who need health care most: i) age as an ethical aspect is playing a great role, which is not ethically acceptable by most contemporary minds; and ii) clients over 60 need the most health care assistance because of their natural decaying process, and to take care of the old is generally considered to be a very important social obligation. Both these points show the monopoly of the company with the end of profit making at the cost of neglecting the accepted value system.

Under another caption, namely, "what are the exclusions?" we note that "mental, emotional or psychotic disorders

der," "abortion or miscarriage or any such complication and/or sequel therefrom," "tuberculosis and its complications," "radiotherapy, chemotherapy," and "treatment of newborn child up to the age of one year." All these show that there is already existing discrimination against psychiatric patients, cancer patients, patients who have gone through miscarriage, patients who are suffering from treatable diseases like tuberculosis, and above all and ridiculously enough, children under one year are also excluded from the coverage! Children under one year need health care assistance the most. This exclusion is most unjust.

This scenario presents us with what is happening even in the absence of any scientifically procured genetic information: the condition is unfavourable to the people who need health insurance very much. If and when the above mentioned genetic information of the possible clients is available, the monopoly of the one and only private health insurance company in Bangladesh will surely include in its list of exclusion the individuals who will be proven vulnerable to have genetically transmittable diseases and disorders. So in cases like these, genetic information will go against the interest of the individuals who theoretically should have the choice to be covered by such insurance policies in order to reap benefits from the system when needed. In the absence of an adequate public health care system this is what is going to happen in developing countries, which is without question not at all coherent with any concept of an ethically acceptable situation.

Here it is relevant to mention that the average income is very low in developing countries. In Bangladesh the highest monthly income, according to the government pay scale, amounts to BDT 15,000 (less than US\$ 350) only. The yearly minimum premium fixed by the

insurance company for per person is BDT 600 to 2100 according to age attained. This is already too expensive for the highest paid salaried individuals. For the commoners it is not at all possible to pay this amount as premium and to become clients. Moreover, for all, except rich industrialists, businessmen and those who are working with the national and multinational commercial organizations, the initial charges for medical examinations and tests required for proving the eligibility are very expensive and beyond reach. Only the elite are able to reap the benefit of health insurance in the present situation.

III

However, apart from the above mentioned facts, the academics and other conscientious people in various field of studies, fear that if multinational companies set up laboratories and import experts from other developed countries, the interpretations may be racially biased. They are generally sceptical of any good will behind such possible projects, as they fear that the motive might be to show and to prove the genetic defect of the people, e.g. low IQ level, genetically susceptible to disabilities of different kinds, etc. This may bring in the issue of eugenics, which is highly controversial as well as against the Human Rights Charter declared by the United Nations Organization in its various declarations.

Possible genetic manipulation by the developed countries is not too unrealistic, at least conceptually. We do not have to go far back into history to see that "Hitler was proud of his originality in merging state and race, and Germany quickly deteriorated into a tyrannical and racist quasi-state. Nazis used to display films of parents who had to kill their genetically diseased children."

This fear was also expressed by thinkers like Paul Billings. He observes that tendency to-

wards and fascination for genetic research (with the possibilities of genetic discrimination) compelled policy-makers, early in this century, to execute legal sterilization of approximately sixty thousand people for traits like "imbecility" and "deviance" in the United States. He also fears that in future this kind of situation may occur or become manifest in other sophisticated ways. This fear is almost equivalent to the fear among the academics in our country, that eugenics may be overtly practiced in countries like ours by powerful countries of the world.

It is also interesting to note the remark by Professor Mat-subara: "The Human Genome projects run by different countries are different, as each project is strongly influenced by guarantors under influence of national interest, and by the personality of the scientific leaders." This apprehension supports the possibility of the vulnerable situation of developing countries in the hands of the scientifically advanced, rich and well-equipped first world countries, to be used as means through genetic infor-

mation of their people. Good will is always desirable, but often regarding good will the gap between theory and practice is absent.

In this context another important point deserves to be taken into account. In a developing country like Bangladesh the number of disabled persons is very high (0.52 of the total population of more than 120 million people), due to malnutrition and scarcity of proper health care facilities (as for 6169 persons there is only one physician and for 7390 persons there is one registered nurse). About 0.27 of under 14 year old total population are blind in Bangladesh. They are blind mostly because of unbalanced diet, a disability caused by the scarcity of food available for children and/or for the mothers during the time they are pregnant.

The issue of 'disability rights' should be focussed on now, when Genome Mapping is progressively becoming more and more exact in providing genetic information. In Bangladesh alone many of the disabled persons may be diagnosed as victims of genetically transmitted diseases.

This raises the question, especially a moral one, regarding the application of genetics to developing countries. With all fairness, it could be said equivocally perhaps that in a country like ours, due to the lack of education and, consequently, lack of conceptual understanding of the genetic information given to them, most are unable to choose, given the choice, because 'informed choice' is really absent in such cases.

Genetic information may be provided to them. But to about 80 per cent of the people the information carries no significance at all. They would rather prefer to believe in Providence, or rather would be more inclined to superstitions, such as during eclipses pregnant women's activities are responsible for disabilities, deformities and disorders in the children they are pregnant with.

IV

Even if we believe completely in the good will of the geneticists in particular and that of the scientists in general, and also of the power groups or individuals who have the relevant government licences, what good would genetic information bring to the poor, ignorant and superstitious people of developing countries? Very few comparatively solvent and enlightened individuals may be in a position to use freely and without any constraint their choice regarding genetic information

thus provided to them. But considering the issue from the interest of such a country as a whole this benefit is undoubtedly negligible. Whereas the risk of misunderstanding and misreading of the information by the people is so great that this plausible benefit loses its meaning and value.

In conclusion, in spite of such complete faith in genetic science it could be said that people of developing countries are first to be able to comprehend the information before they are expected to use them judiciously. Therefore, for such judicious use universal education is essential. In a developing country like Bangladesh only 10 per cent of the total population perhaps are educated enough to be able to comprehend fully the meaning and consequences of genetic information. Poverty is a disease, and to cure the people of this serious disease should be given primary importance. And related to poverty is providing opportunities for education.

Without education poverty cannot be gotten rid off, and also without getting rid of poverty it is difficult to get proper education. Unfortunately indeed, developing countries are going round and round this vicious circle.

The writer is Professor, Department of Philosophy, University of Dhaka.

Dice Heavily Loaded against Woman Bureaucrats

"The woman worker, assumed to have legitimate obligations like child-bearing, homekeeping which are other than those required by their job as an officer, does not fit into the role of a real worker."

An officer is always a gentleman, while a woman's rightful place is essentially at her home. This is what male bureaucrats in India and large field, a unique survey has revealed.

The survey, conducted by the Lal Bahadur Shastri National Academy of Administration for the government's Department of Administrative Reforms and Public Grievances, reveals the powerful prejudices that work against women members of the bureaucracy.

Throwing light on how the mind of the male officer works, the study said: "The woman worker, assumed to have legitimate obligations like child-bearing, homekeeping which are other than those required by their job as an officer, does not fit into the role of a real worker."

In what is billed as the first survey of its kind, the academy circled both male and female officers in the civil services. Though they are much less in number, more than 50 per cent of the responses came from women, a newspaper that carried the survey results reported.

Almost 90 per cent of the male officers were found to have had arranged marriages — those negotiated by their parents or guardians — with wives who were "not engaged in paid labour, that is housewives", said the *The Hindustan Times* quoting the survey.

The findings indicate that for the male officers, the ideal woman worker is one whose life centres on his own: she taking care of his daily needs and children while he goes out and earns bread for the family. The study points out that two of the all-India civil services — the Indian Police Service and the Indian Forest Service — were exclusively male territories that resisted any invasion by women for a long time.

It was only 25 years after independence that a woman officer — Kiran Bedi, who went on to win the prestigious Magsaysay award later — was allowed into the police service, the study said.

There also seems to be a pervasive feeling that the one incentive women have to enter the all-India civil services is to acquire a status. Yet, as the survey points out, this 'status' fails to provide any protection to them from prying male colleagues.

In fact, the paper said, the status and authority of a woman officer hardly ensures her dignity as a woman. The survey talks about the ways in which a senior male officer retaliates when his advances are spurned by a woman subordinate.

Among the most common "punishments" are ruining the lady's annual confidential report that qualifies her for promotions and salary increments, or shunting her to an unpleasant posting. The survey has reported instances of women officers suffering nervous breakdown after being molested by senior male officers.

A woman officer of the elite Indian Administrative Service (IAS) narrated her tale of sexual harassment in office from a very senior male colleague who made it a habit of asking me to come to his office on petty pretexts after seven in the evening," she said in her response.

"He suggested in an odd fashion that I accompany him on tours and drop an uninvited note to my flat on evening," she said. When she dared to snub the persistent officer, she was "shifted from a good post to a bad one".

Woman officers of the postal service spoke about an incident when a young probationer sul-

fered a nervous breakdown and finally quit her job after she was molested by a senior officer, the paper reported.

Sexual harassment at the workplace has been a major issue in the country ever since an unusually brave woman officer, Rupan Deol Bajaj, filed a case against a senior police officer.

K.P.S. Gill, for outraging her modesty at a party. Bajaj won the case, but not after a long, arduous battle stretching to about six years.

"The present system is ineffective and there is a tendency to brush these issues under the carpet," a study based on the academy's survey says. "In the

services also, a strong male network, superiority of the office of the culprit, unwillingness to judge a case of sexual harassment on its merit, and implicitly the idea that it is the woman's fault are factors which cloud the real issue at hand," it said.

— India Abroad News Service

Rendezvous on the Net

by Ekram Kabir

If we are more closely connected with Hollywood, Washington D. C. and London than we are with the districts of Khulna, Barisal, Chittagong etc., then we are completely dislodged from our own people.

TWENTY-two-year-old Labonya in Gulshan loses her head and falls in love with a man in Dhanmondi, ten years older than her. Her desperate parents try to stop her contacting the man, but that only makes the man more loving to her. Then the inevitable happens: in spite of all the efforts of her parents to prevent it, the girl runs off with her beau and heads for Mahakhali Kazi Office in Dhaka.

It's an everyday story. A minor tragedy that has been repeating itself for thousands of years. Yet the story of Labonya and Amit did cause stormy concern among the members of the two clans. The two families were at the logger heads for quite some time.

But why all this fuss? Simple: Labonya and Amit met on the Internet.

There's yet to be an attitude survey in Dhaka, and for that matter in Bangladesh, which can show people in Dhaka, who have access to the Internet, associate the technology with education, research, commerce, pornography and paedophilia. It's hardly surprising that this mundane story of this couple should have stirred up any sort of social hysteria.

"It's true that the Net, to an extent, has become a sexualised environment, but no more so than the average pub or disco in the developed West", says Amit with a cheeky smile, adding: "Our communication started with e-mails; and it took four months for us to take a bull look at each other; I know what

are you implicating at — yes, e-mails also can be a fantasy factory where normally reserved people often feel free to communicate more intimately than they might do on the phone or face to face."

Labonya blushes in her pink dress, sitting beside her husband, but says: "I heard they call it puppy love."

As far as the definition of this fantasy, to an English Department Professor Shoukat Hossain, who uses the Internet only for research purposes, "nothing happens on the Net that doesn't already happen in the real world."

Says he: "To some it's intimidating and to some it's essential; we tend to persist in a lie that anything — whether it be a teenage folly or financial fraud — that happens in cyberspace must be more troubling, more outrageous, more downright wrong than if it happens in the real life... on the one hand, we expect the wired world to be an Eden, and on the other, we condemn it as an electronic Satan."

However apart from newspapers in Dhaka having their own Web sites, Assistant Engineer Mohammed Nurul Huda of Information Network Service, a Dhaka-based server, is quite happy doing business with individuals as well as organisations. Huda computes 10,000 people have access to the Internet as clients of as many as eight service providers in Bangladesh capital. "We have more than 4,000 clients using the Internet in many ways; and majority of them are business

people and students," he confirms.

"As far as the paedophilia is concerned, it's the student who is active in the dead of the night — business people don't have that time in this connection," says Huda. He couldn't say much about Bangladesh going online like India did in August '95.

It was Abu Jar M Akkas, one of the news editors of Associated Press of Bangladesh, who could say something about it. After the work-hours Akkas, a zealous book-worm and a graduate about the Internet, searches for every new book that's dispatched on the Net from the English- and French-speaking countries.

The young news editor opines: "There's no such system now in Bangladesh — whether it's government-run or private-run. But the technology is here, and in order to implement that the country will need to create an internal network and connect the computers that are already here in the country with the help of some servers — and that's quite feasible in Bangladesh."

"For this Bangladesh doesn't need any Internet. It can be done right now; and as a matter of fact all these servers are enough for the purpose. And again, getting a server doesn't mean that the country is connected with the Internet," he says.

Then Akkas poses questions reminding the county's socio-economic development: "What do we do with the Internet? If the technology is all about ac-

quiring information, then do we really get what we need for our country?"

The answer? "No, we don't." Because if we are more closely connected with Hollywood, Washington D. C. and London than we are with the districts of Khulna, Barisal, Chittagong etc., then we are completely dislodged from our own people. For example, a woman in Dhaka is now able to know about late Princess Diana's lifestyle in the UK and women's activities in the US, but she wouldn't know what problems the women are facing right in our countryside only miles away from Dhaka.

As the Net has expanded to every horizon, it should be utilised in a planned manner: to be benefited, say, as Labonya and Amit have been.

The Net will remain as the most wonderful technology even if the Cyber boom goes bust. Before they met face to face they have had been honest to each other about themselves while communicating by e-mails; and there was nothing, as they say, which could imply that their relationship was abusive and exploitative. And before making any hysterical judgment, as there can be many in the offing, about the Internet, we should at least congratulate the couple and wish their happily-ever after life.

This was written as a part of British Council/Thomson Foundation-organised training course on Advance Reporting. The couple in the feature didn't want to be identified with their real names.



Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh
Office of the Executive Engineer
Local Government Engineering Department
129/A, Road No 3, East Nasirabad, Chittagong

Memo No XEN/LGED/CTG/1959 Dated : 6-7-98

Tender Notice

No 01/98-99

- The Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh has received a loan (No 631P) from OPEC fund towards the cost of Cyclone Rehabilitation Project (Cyclone Damaged Roads Rehabilitation Project) for the districts of Chittagong, Cox's Bazar, Laxmipur, Feni, Noakhali, Chandpur, Barisal, Jhalokati, Barguna, Patuakhali, Bhola, Pirojpur, Khulna, Bagerhat and Satkhira. It is intended that part of the proceeds of this loan will be applied to eligible payments under the contract for the following works:

Sl No	Package Code No	Name of thana	Name of schemes	Estimated amount	Earnest money (2.50%)	Completion time	Price of tender document	Class of contractor
1	01.22-Ctg/Ano/Shahid Noor/RR/98-99	Anowara	Improvement of Shaheed Engineer Noor Hossain Road by HBB.	12,00,000.00	30,000.00	60 days	500.00	A & special class

Additional Terms & Conditions:

- The Executive Engineer, Local Government Engineering Department (LGED), Chittagong now invites sealed tenders in prescribed form for construction/reconstruction and completion of the works mentioned above from Special of 'A' category contractors of LGED.
- Tenderers may obtain further information of the tender form and inspect the tender documents at the office of the undersigned as well as the Project Director, Cyclone Rehabilitation Project, House No 4, Road No 2/C, Pallabi, Mirpur, Dhaka-1221: The Executive Engineer, LGED, Cox's Bazar, Deputy Commissioner, Chittagong and Thana Engineer, LGED, all thanas (Except Sandwip), Chittagong.
- A complete set of tender document may be purchased by interested eligible tenderers upon payment of non-refundable fee as per table below from abovementioned offices and that mentioned in clause 9 on or before 19-07-98 during office hours.
- The tenderer shall quote their price at percent above/below/at par estimated amount provided in the bill of quantities both in figures and words in the stipulated paragraph of the "Tender Form" attached along with the bill of quantities (Volume-II). Erasing, overwriting or corrections of the quoted price without authorized signature shall not be accepted and the tender shall be outright rejected.
- The tenderer who found to have quoted more than 5% (five per cent) less than the submitted amount shall be outright rejected.
- The tenderer who found to have quoted more than 5% (five per cent) above the estimated amount shall have to submit analysis of itemwise rates. Erasing, overwriting, or corrections in the analysis, without authorized signature shall not be accepted and the tenders shall be rejected. Photocopy of the analysis shall not be accepted.
- Payment will be made against the scheme on receipt of fund.
- In order that the intending tenderers can easily and freely purchase the tender documents and can submit the same conveniently the following places are selected:
The places for purchasing and submitting the tender are as below:
A) Office of the Project Director, OPEC Funded Cyclone Damaged Road Rehabilitation Project, House No 4, Road No 2/C, Pallabi, Mirpur, Dhaka-1221.
B) Deputy Commissioner, Chittagong Division, Chittagong.
C) Executive Engineer, LGED, District : Chittagong/Cox's Bazar.
D) Thana Engineer, all thanas (Except Sandwip).
- All tenders must be accompanied by an earnest money of 2.5% (two point five per cent) of total tender price in the form of Bank Draft/Pay Order in favour of the Executive Engineer, LGED, Chittagong in the form of Bank Draft/Pay Order from any scheduled bank of Bangladesh. Earnest money from any non-scheduled bank or investment companies shall not be accepted and the tenders shall be outright reject.
- The tenders shall be received of the offices mentioned above on 20-07-98 before 1.00 PM and tenders shall be opened as the same offices at 1:30 PM on the same date.
- In the event be more than one lowest responsive tenders quoting the same rate, the contractor shall be selected by lottery. In that case the lottery will be held on 23-07-98 at 3:00 PM at LGED Hall room.
- The undersigned shall not be responsible for any costs of expenses incurred by tenderers in connection with the preparation or delivery of tenders, including cost and expenses related to visits to the site.
- Govt decisions related to VAT & Income Tax etc will be effective for the tenders according to the Govt circular. Certificate for Tax-payers identification number should be enclosed with the tender document & no tender will be accepted without it.
- In case of purchasing schedule it is not required to present physically or to show enlistment pre-qualification document and the contractors may purchase the schedule by any of their representatives. Name of work & seal & signature of issuing authority must be in the tender document (schedule). While submitting the tender contractors have to submit photocopy (duly attested) of enlistment/pre-qualification licence along with other required document stated in the tender notice, otherwise tender will be treated as cancelled.
- Tenders will submit receipt of purchased schedule with the tender document. Code number/name of works must be written clearly over the envelope.
- Tender may be submitted to the tender receiving offices by registered mail with AD. In this case tender must reach the concerned offices before the last time of receiving date & those received late will be returned unopened.
- All materials should be tested in the Laboratory of the undersigned. Payment of the work will be made subject to the satisfactory result of the Laboratory test. For the Laboratory test payment will be made by the contractors at his own cost.
- Security deposit will refund on year of the completion date.
- All other terms and conditions may be seen & obtained from the concerned offices during office hours.
- The authority reserves the right to accept or reject any or all the tenders whatsoever.
- Volume-1 (Technical Specification & Conditions) of contract is included with the document and to be signed by the contractor at the time of agreement.

Executive Engineer
Local Government Engineering Department
Chittagong

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