

The struggle to beat poverty

Shahid Alam takes a cynical look at a study on the poor

HOWEVER one may like to look at the situation with rose-tinted glasses, or however one may juggle with statistics and cleverly concocted spin to make the glass look just a bit more than half full at present, and not too far off from being full, even overflowing, the stark reality is that over half the population of Bangladesh lives below the poverty line, and this country does not seem like breaking out of the relatively less developed syndrome for the foreseeable future, say fifty years on. This last bit, in all probability, will draw some indignant remonstrations, but, unless I am proven otherwise, and I sincerely hope I am, I will stick to my guns and remain a cynic.

The research study under review, however, ends on an optimistic note about Bangladesh's struggle to beat poverty in the reasonably near future. The authors, led by Alistair Orr, a British agricultural economist, state their research objective to have been to "answer one question, namely, how households graduated from poverty." Having taken the position that quantitative methods would be inadequate to get a convincing answer, they have adopted a qualitative approach, one that is based on using household case studies, in the hope of making graduation and its relationship with other changes in the rural economy more understandable." Their effort has been a qualified success.

The authors adopt an interesting perspective. They question the efficacy of poverty elimination programmes that usually target those who are already living below the poverty line. Rather, they raise this question, which is at the heart of

their construct on the graduation process: "Why should these programmes target only those who were poor today (sic) and ignore those who might be poor tomorrow?" A cursory review of the literature has revealed the most likely answer, one that is full of cynicism about the Bangladeshi character: "...there has been a tendency to criminalize the process of graduation by focusing on cases where the transition from poverty was achieved through corruption, violence, or repression. Graduation was represented as moral suicide, a Faustian bargain where economic salvation had an unacceptable price. From this point of view, graduation was simply the reverse side of impoverishment and not a subject for serious study, still less for celebration."

The research study in three villages belonging to Comilla, Bogra and Barisal, three districts generously separated in distance from each other, reveals that graduation has, after all, not been a Faustian bargain, but the small sample size also precludes one from asserting that, indeed, this conclusion is applicable to the whole of Bangladesh. In fact, another study might very well show that there exists more than the token case of graduation through committing moral suicide in more than one village. For the record, the book does refer to a couple of such cases, but they were used as mere incidences to highlight the exploitative behaviour among the poor themselves, as much as what they perceive to be the key ingredients of successful graduation: the blending of economic, social and psychological variables. Their conceptual

model of graduation involves the 'hard' elements of household structure, livelihood strategies, savings, and the 'soft' elements of shared vision, support, and skills of a person graduating and his/her family.

In concrete terms, to the villagers, graduation from poverty is linked with natural capital (owning, rather than renting or mortgaging-in, land), physical capital (owning cows, better

model point to note is that the villagers' perspective is in consonance with, as well as supportive of, the authors' contention that, "The main exit route from poverty was no longer through land but through the non-farm economy." However, the authors are quick to point out that "demand for land will continue to grow despite its declining importance as a source of income." That can partly be explained by a particularly important psychological mindset of the individual villager: "Status, as much as the returns from agriculture, was the real motive behind many land purchases."

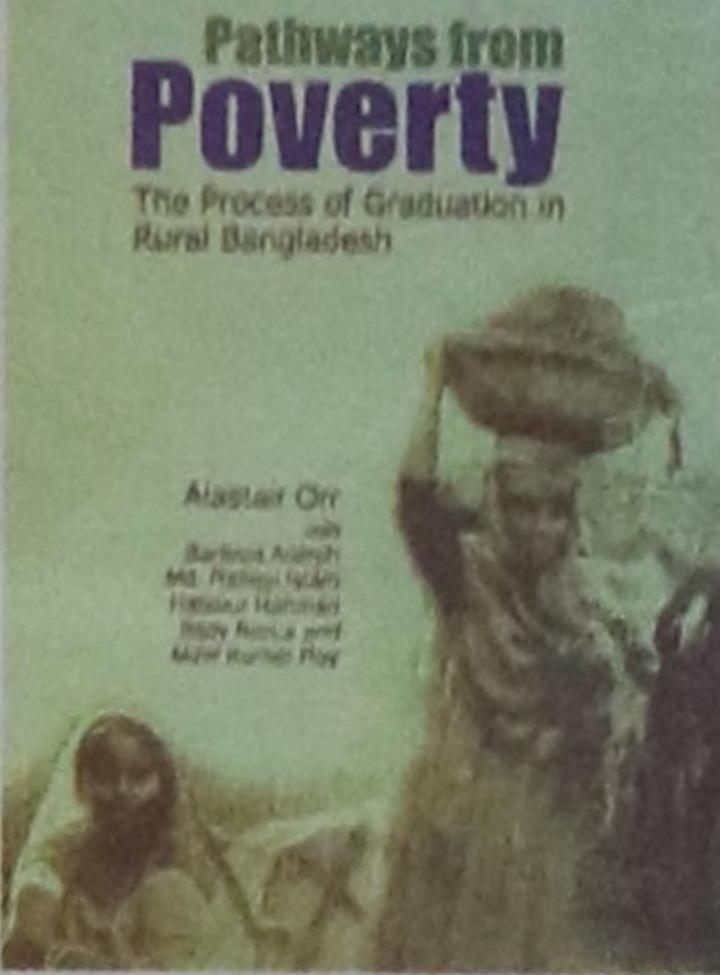
In the process of conducting their study, the authors discuss the impact of microfinance on poverty, and conclude that it has been limited in the graduation process. "Micro-credit helped households move up from extreme poverty, but was not seen as a major reason for upward mobility from moderate poverty." Orr, et al are at pains to point out that microfinance has inbuilt limitations as a graduation tool. Some borrowers they found to be mere channels for other, more affluent households which did not qualify for loans, while some households that could not be classified as poor also received microfinance. Therefore, microfinance is not the answer to the process of graduation. Again, this contention could be challenged by microfinance protagonists.

The authors spend much time on the subject of rice and its impact on poverty decline. In their view, "The challenge was no longer how to prevent poverty increasing but how to accelerate poverty decline." The introduction of new rice technology has contributed significantly to speeding

up poverty decline. Rice production has burgeoned significantly since the 1960s, leading to falling prices, which, in turn, have freed resources for investment in education, healthcare, and in non-farm jobs. Thus, new rice technology has had a momentous impact on the economics of graduation.

Orr, et al, depict the rising tide of consumerism manifested in the process of graduation: desire for, and acquisition of, furniture, textiles, ornaments, and electronic goods. They also believe that Bangladesh will eliminate poverty within 45 years from now. We will just have to wait and see, and hope it materializes. However, their drawing of parallel to the condition of village life in present-day Bangladesh and that of life in rural England in the 1960s, if accurate, and then concluding that Bangladesh would develop along that line could be misleading if another set of parallelism is resorted to. The economic development of then East Pakistan was at around the same stage as that of South Korea and Thailand in the early 1960s. And South Korea is now considered an advanced economy. Thailand is on the way towards becoming a middle income country and look where Bangladesh stands! And the characterization of Dhaka as "one of Asia's mega-cities." Glitzy mega-slum would probably describe our capital better! *Pathways from Poverty: The Process of Graduation in Rural Bangladesh* is a useful addition to the literature on development issues relating to Bangladesh.

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Pathways from Poverty: The Process of Graduation in Rural Bangladesh,
Alistair Orr, others
The United Press Limited

housing), financial capital (managing without loans), human capital (educating at least some of their children), livelihood strategies (reduced reliance on day-labour, regular income from outside agriculture), and outcomes (household food security, less stress, reduced workload for women). The signifi-

Vanishing forests and exploited workers

Audity Falguni studies the pain and agony of loss

LEAF Storm, the first novel by widely acclaimed author Gabriel Garcia Marquez, depicts the pain of native South Americans and the indigenous Red Indian people in the city of Arakataka, Colombia, against the backdrop of commercial banana plantation by the US based United Fruits Company. The novel narrates brutal oppression by the multinational company of local plantation workers and grabbing of their own land and forest resources for the sake of earning cash.

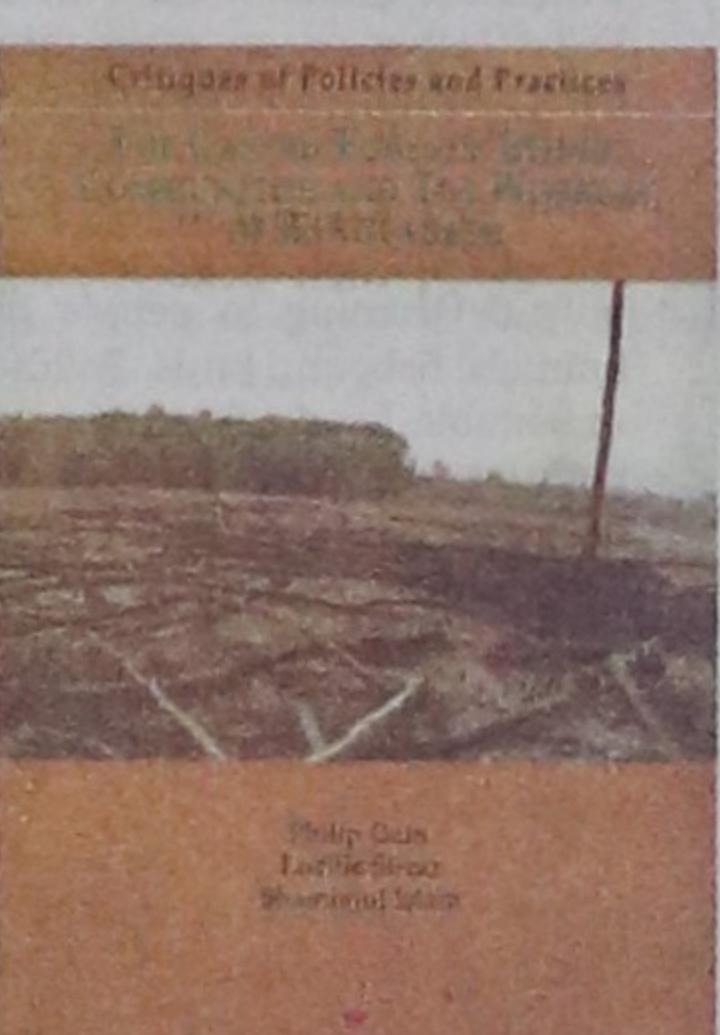
The novel reflects conditions in today's Bangladesh when commercial pineapple and banana plantations get expanded in the Modhupur sal forest, depriving the indigenous Garo and Koch people of their own land. Besides commercial fruit plantation, our government has actually established plantations of alien and exotic species like rubber, acacia and eucalyptus in the Modhupur sal forest (*shorea robusta*) with loans grants from the Asian Development Bank (ADB) and the World Bank (WB), causing severe consequences for ethnic communities.

It is owing to the "forest policy" prescribed to our government by large international organizations like WB or ADB that around 217,790.3 acres of land from 83 Mouzas in three hill districts were notified as reserved forests between 1990 and 1998 by the Ministry of Environment and Forest (MoEF). It turned thousands of indigenous people homeless and landless overnight. Sangthuima (age 24) and

Thuisangma (age 20), two Khyang sisters in a remote village in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT), thus had almost all of their three-acres of cropland and even their homesteads notified as reserved forests which they actually inherited from their father Teng Hla Prue. The land is still recorded in his name. They have implicitly become illegal on their own land. Around 2,343 Khyang people (according to the 1991 census report) were worst affected by the reservation.

Critiques of Policies and Practices: The Case of Forests, Ethnic Communities and Tea Workers of Bangladesh, jointly authored by Philip Gain, Lucille Sircar and Shamimul Islam, endeavours to offer policy critiques in two areas, namely forests and indigenous peoples and tea plantation workers.

Of the two large articles of the book, the first one, "Policies and Practices Concerning Forests and Ethnic Communities of Bangladesh" by Philip Gain, shows us the politics of "Forest Department" and so-called "Forest Policies" formulated by different international agencies which often tend to curb or reduce the access of indigenous communities to their birth place, i.e., the forests. In the words of the author himself: "It is the governments, international financial institutions (IFIs) and companies which are profiteers from plantations, try to establish that plantations are forests. They blame growing population, migration of landless people to the forestland, conversion of forestland to agricultural



Critiques of Policies and Practices
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Philip Gain, Lucille Sircar,
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Society for Environment and
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The author then discusses the categories (reserved forests, protected forests, privately owned forests and unclassified state forests- USF) and types (hill forests, sal forests and mangrove forests) in

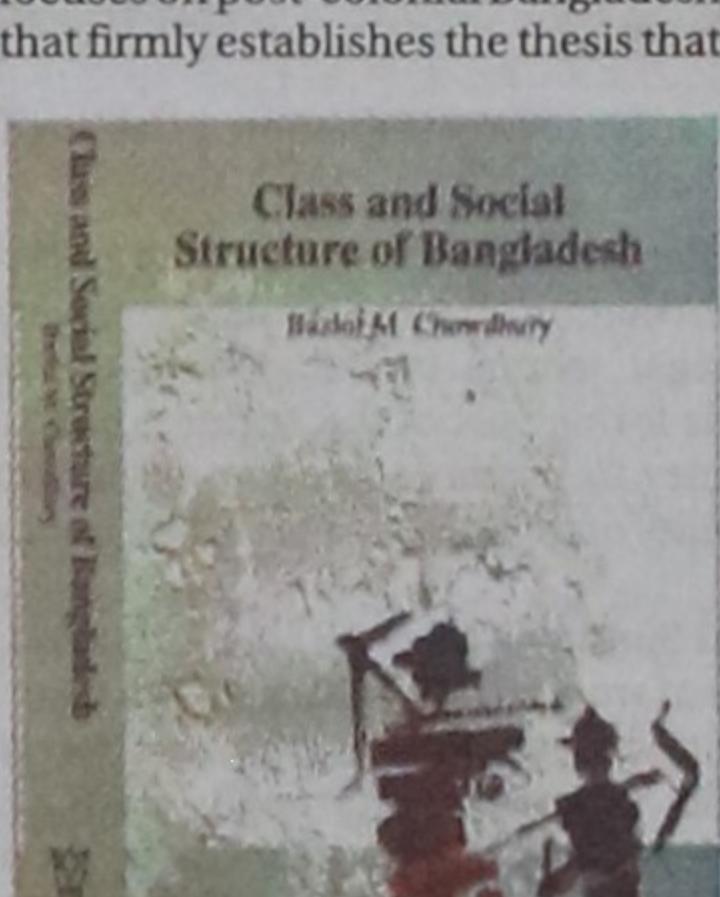
Bangladesh. We come to learn that reserved forests include the Sundarbans (mangroves) in the southwest (601,700 hectares), the CHT region in the southeast (323,331 ha) and the Modhupur tracts in the north-central region (17,107 ha). Again, three-fourths of the CHT are unclassified state forests or USF.

Hill forests include tropical evergreen or semi-evergreen forests (640,000 hectares) in the eastern districts of Chittagong, Cox's Bazar, Sylhet and the CHT. But severe deforestation has taken place in the hill forests largely owing to dam, pulp and paper mills, woodlot and agro-forestry, rubber plantations, tea monoculture, cash crops, militarization, settlement, slash-and-burn cultivation, etc.

Readers of the book will surely find the second article of the book, "The Case of Tea Workers in Bangladesh," by Lucille Sircar and Shamimul Islam with Philip Gain to be more human interest oriented. The article begins with the "captive" situation of 87,534 registered and 20,065 non-registered tea workers in 160 tea estates of Bangladesh. Most of the 160 tea estates in Bangladesh are located in Maulvi Bazar, Hobiganj, Sylhet and Brahmania districts. In 1854, when the tea workers (Santals, Oraons, Munda, Gonds, etc.) from different states of India first arrived, they each signed a four-year contract that eventually obliged them to stay on at the tea gardens for generations.² Tea plantation was introduced by the British colonial

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link with underdevelopment in the region. This, in turn, paved the way for siphoned off much needed surplus that was generated internally. In the last four chapters, Chowdhury focuses on post-colonial Bangladesh that firmly establishes the thesis that



introduced dynamism in a highly closed and stagnant society. This "stagnancy thesis", based on misreading Karl Marx's occasional journalistic and highly disjointed articles, tends to rationalize British rule in India. In the chapter, Chowdhury describes pre-colonial land ownership; how this unique land ownership pattern was linked with the Bengali peasantry and the role of a centralized state in its creation. Related to the "stagnancy thesis," this chapter deals with the question of self-sufficient village community. Scholars are divided into two camps on this issue. One view holds that pre-colonial villages were closed and self-sufficient, and the other that they were not quite closed and regular contact with the outside world was common. Chowdhury's argument on this issue is quite different. To him "(...) the pre-colonial Indian villages conditions of money economy and self-sufficiency existed side by side." In 1793, the British imposed the Permanent Settlement Act which paved the way for what Chowdhury calls the "beginning of the process of capitalist underdevelopment." Chapter two, titled "Second Colonial Era (1947-1971)", chronicles Pakistani colonial rule in Bangladesh. Here the author discusses the transformation of both rural and urban class structures and how these transformations

reinforce Bangladesh's underdevelopment. Theoretically, Chowdhury draws from the debate between Ralph Miliband (the current British Foreign Secretary, David Miliband's father) and Nicos Poulantzas on the capitalist state and from the theories of post-colonial state developed by Hamza Alavi and others. Following Poulantzas, Chowdhury argues that "... along with economic power, political power is also a principle determination of class differentiation." The last two chapters explain both internal and external constraints of Bangladesh's development. In these two chapters, the author connects various class forces and role of the state with development or lack thereof. The role of foreign aid and its negative effect on development is the topic of the last chapter.

Chowdhury's English is crisp and lucid. He has that uncanny ability to present abstract ideas in a straightforward English without losing either its rigor or analytical capability. This highly erudite book will be of great importance to anyone, both scholar and layperson, interested in Bangladesh and its place in the world.

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the question of underdevelopment must be located in double colonialism which the author describes in the first two chapters.

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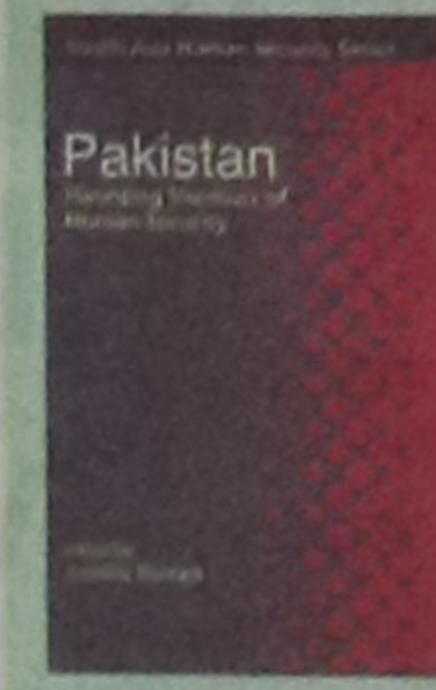
cessfully demolishes a long held view

that pre-colonial Bengal society was

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AT A GLANCE



Pakistan: Haunting Shadows of Human Security
Ed. Jennifer Bennett
The University Press Limited

With Pakistan seemingly coming apart at the seams, this volume promises to shed good light on the embattled country. For as long as one can remember, security for Pakistan as also for its citizens has been a major concern. Bennett does an excellent job of editing and the result is a thorough insight into the predicament that Pakistan faces today.

Adibashi Jibon Adibashi
Shongnoi Shrik
Hafiz Rashid Khan
Adorn Publication

This work happens to be of a kind quite unlike some others that have appeared in recent times. In it, the author combines prose with poetry to explain the dire straits in which Bangladesh's indigenous communities have been living for decades. The approach promises to project the communities in a new way.



Chhoraye Shoto Byaktyo
Ahmed Kaiser, Golam Nabi Parma
Edit. Nazrul Islam Nayeem
Anamika Prakashani

A celebration of illustrious individuals is what we have here. The authors have picked these men and women from the subcontinent and especially from Bangladesh as a way of highlighting their contributions to the making of history. Illustrated by sketches, the book surely will appeal to a wide body of readers.



Bigyaner Rajye
Proshno O Uttar
Abdul Qayum
The University Press Limited

Ah, the wonders of science! It is the details of it that Qayum deals with here. The food we eat, the questions that keep us focused on the stars, the many ways in which we can keep our health in working order, et al, are the themes he handles. In simple terms, science is made easier, to our delight.

Words, words, words

Syed Badrul Ahsan feels educated by a posthumous work

LANGUAGE is sometimes, when you are in the mood to be serious about it, a search for roots. You call it etymology. You call it going back to heritage. When you think of English, you think too of the inroads other languages have made into it. Indeed, you wonder at the many ways in which these languages, notably French, have enriched English, have given it the solidity it enjoys today.

And now, as this rich work from the late Shaikh Ghulam Maqsood Hilali demonstrates, there are the juicy morsels that have crept into Bengali from such sources as Persian and Arabic. Maybe you knew about these things all along, maybe you didn't. The bigger point is that with language being a dynamic affair (it dies if it is not that), Bengali too has had its fair share in accommodating words and terms from other languages.

Hilali's work, prepared well before his death in 1961 but subsequently brought out by his son (this is the fourth edition, the first having seen the light of day in 1967), is proof of that truth. Think of a term, *albat* (surely we employ in everyday life. Its roots lie in *albat*). Our *akaltra* springs from the Arabic *alqatra*, and *karavan* (or think of *Karwan* Bazar) has emerged from the Persian *karwan*. The French of course use the word *caravane*. The dogs will bark but the caravan moves on? Remember?

Adaptation is by and large enriching. The immensity of time and patience Hilali must have spent in deciphering the mystery of adaptation by Bengali of Perso-Arabic elements has surely paid off. He tells you that *jhamela*, meaning troublesome burden, comes from the Arabic *zamila*, overload or overcharge. And *jhol* has its origins in the Persian *julla* or *jula*. Think of *beram*, as in illness. You instantly are taken back to *be-aram*, meaning sick, in discomfort, in Persian. The hectic activity we define as *torjor* has half of it coming from the Persian *zor*. As for a gift you plan for someone, a *tofa*, the origins lie in the Arabic *tufha*, an excellent, rare object worthy of being presented to an individual. From *manand*, like or resembling in Persian, you have the Bengali antonym *bemanan*. Persian also gives us *bera*, fence, from *bara*, meaning walls or fortifications. The roots of *magaj*, or brain, are in the Persian *magz*. *Ruhani*, a term relating to the soul, has at its core the Arabic *ruhaniyy* as well as the Persian *ruhani*. Now think of



Perso-Arabic Elements in Bengali
Dr. Shaikh Ghulam Maqsood Hilali

problem in handling *lieutenant* or *juggernaut* in English (and they come from foreign tongues), you cannot really complain when you have similar stories being told about Bengali. The point is the language you speak and conduct your life in is a composite of elements flowing into it from outside. Or call it the chaos before creation. It will make things easier for you. Why do you use *jal* for water? Or *pani*? Has it ever occurred to you that your *bastabandi* is basically a Persian *bastabandi*, packed in a sack or bale?

Our debt to Hilali the polymath is huge. But for his son Humayun Khalid, this rich compendium would be lost to oblivion.

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