

# 'There are more inequalities now than there were in the 70s'

*Anthropologist Dr Jenneke Arens lived in Bangladesh from 1973 to 1975 to do a study of power relations between poor and rich peasants and the position of women in a village. She co-authored a book "Jhagrapur: Poor peasants and women in a village in Bangladesh" (1977). Twenty years later, she came to Bangladesh again to do a restudy of the same village. She completed the restudy in 2011 and her book "Women, land and power in Bangladesh: Jhagrapur revisited" came out in 2015. The study looked into the impact of women's land ownership on existing power relations in the household, family and society. In an interview with Naznin Tithi of The Daily Star, Dr Arens talks about the major changes that the village has gone through over the years in terms of power structure, economic prosperity, women's land ownership and empowerment..*

**What is the significance of the pseudonym 'Jhagrapur'? Why did you pick this particular Bangladeshi village for your research?**

We lived in the village for one year in 1974/75. At that time, the power relations between the rich and poor in the village were so intense and there was so much tension because of the economic condition of the people. There were a lot of fights too. During our stay in the village, one man was even killed in a fight over land disputes. For our book, we wanted to give the village a nickname so that it could not be identified and also the people of the village would not feel bad about certain things mentioned in the book. So we came up with the name "Jhagrapur".

There was no specific reason for picking this particular village. We didn't know the village but what we heard was that there were not many factions in the village. It was a very isolated village, like most of the villages in Bangladesh of that time. We had to go to Kushtia from Dhaka by bus, and then to Gangni by another bus. Then we had to walk for one hour to the village. The commute to the village was very difficult, especially in the rainy season, because all the roads were mud roads and quite slippery. We didn't know whether it was representative of other villages in Bangladesh but we thought that the village was very much similar to many villages in Bangladesh.

**Why do you think it is important to do ethnographic studies? What quality differences do ethnographic studies make compared to other social-science research methods?**

I used the data we collected when we lived in the village in the 1970s as a base situation. I started the restudy after a gap of 25 years and when I completed my research, it was a gap of 35 years. So there was no

alternative to an ethnographic study if we wanted to assess the transformation of that village. As much as it is important to see the changes from the development and economic perspectives, it is also similarly important to look at the transformation from a social perspective—to know and understand the changes as well as the factors that led to those changes.

I visited the village almost every year. During the restudy, sometimes I stayed for a few months at a stretch and sometimes for shorter durations.

**The first time you were in the village, the economic condition of the villagers was very poor, land disputes were common, and the majority of women did not have access to land. In the restudy, what major changes have you found in terms of social inequality and power relations?**

I have found that the number of poor peasants has increased. The number of those who do not have any land and are working as day labourers has gone up quite a bit. The number of small peasants, who have a little bit of land, has actually gone down. This means that more poor peasants have actually lost their land and more of them have come into the daily labour force, whereas the number of the rich as well as the middle peasants has not changed much. It means that there has been greater discrepancy between the poor and the rich peasants. There are more inequalities now than there were in the seventies. So, that is an important factor in the transformation of the village.

I have looked at the power structure of the village. The village leaders have lost much of their influence. Previously, people were scared of the land owners but not anymore. Also, the village courts are not functioning any more. So the power structure in the village has changed a lot.

I have also worked on the impact of the



Dr Jenneke Arens

Green Revolution. It has had a very important impact, especially at the women's level. Due to the Green Revolution which was introduced in the eighties in the village, a big transformation took place in the agricultural sector. There has been a huge increase in crop production and the output of agriculture. There are three crops a year now instead of the one crop or two in the 1970s. A lot of rice mills have been set up. Previously, there were no rice mills and the women would use "dheki" to husk the rice. But now all these works are done at the mills and mostly by men. So men have taken over the jobs of women and the poor women hardly have any source of income except for some jobs such as boiling and drying the paddy for traders and as domestic helpers. While day labourers and the landless men got much more opportunity to get an income, poor women who used to earn a living by husking rice, grinding wheat or by doing other small jobs

have lost their income earning possibilities totally. So there is now a bigger gap between men and women in income earning as well as between rich and poor peasant men. That's a big change.

Also, land has been more concentrated in the hands of the rich peasants. In 1974/5, 62 percent of the land was owned by the rich peasants who constituted about 22 percent of all households in the village, whereas in 1998 they constituted only 15 percent of all the households. So the gap in terms of land ownership has also increased between rich and poor peasants. Both gender and class inequalities have increased.

Another thing I have discovered during my restudy is that dowry has increased tremendously. In the seventies, there was hardly any dowry. But now poor peasants complain that if they do not pay Tk 20,000 to Tk 40,000, it is impossible to marry off their daughters. So some of the families with a lot of girls have become very much impoverished. I argued that this rise of dowry is very much a result of the Green Revolution and the agricultural transformation.

So there have been some positive changes and some negative changes. The inequality between the poor and the rich peasants has increased. The gap between men and women in income earning has also increased. But the people are not as poor as they were in the seventies. There was a lot of hunger at that time. There is not so much hunger any more. Now most people can eat at least one or two proper meals a day.

A positive change is that girls are getting more chance to go to high school which has really empowered them. They are now more empowered to delay their marriage. The mobility and visibility of women have also increased.

**What has changed in terms of women's land ownership? Have women been more**

**empowered through land ownership?**

Land is still an important source of income for people in Bangladesh and women do have an inheritance right. So if women could get their share of land, although unequal, the question was, if that would have an impact on their position in their household and in society. I have found that about one in three women do get their inheritance share of land, the same in the 1970s. But in the restudy, I have found no clear relation between women's land ownership and their empowerment. Because they have mostly no control over their land. Their lands are mostly controlled by their brothers in other villages (which are these women's native villages), or by their husbands (if they live in the same village after marriage or if the women's native villages are nearby). Sometimes their brothers and husbands sell their land without their knowledge. What I have seen is that more women who have married within the village or in the neighbouring villages have actually received land as their inheritance share than women who came from villages farther away from their husbands' villages. About 50 percent of the women who married within the village have received their inheritance share of land, whereas only 25 percent of the women from farther away villages got their share.

So I think it is very important that women are organised and motivated to control and cultivate their land collectively. The NGOs that are working in the villages can encourage women to get organised in small groups. Women will face less risk if they jointly cultivate their land or if they collectively lease land. Because usually, if women negotiate with labourers, they get stigmatised by statements such as "Oh, why are you talking to these men?" or "Women should not do this." So collectively cultivating and controlling their land will be much more beneficial for them. It will empower them more.

# Boots off the ground

SANKAR SEN

**P**RESIDENT Donald Trump's patience is apparently on the wane. Disagreeing with the views of some of his generals and strategic advisors, he intends to pull out of the unwinnable 17-year-old Afghan war. He has changed his previous calculation of retaining American troops in Afghanistan, without paying too heavy a political price. But if the situation deteriorates and the rate of American casualties is high, the domestic political opinion is bound to change. The situation is now changing for the worse, the Taliban offensive has become more vicious and violent, and the casualties among Afghan security forces are said to be disproportionately high.

The Afghanistan war has claimed more than 25,000 civilian lives since 2009. About 45,000 members of the security forces have died since 2014. As a result of the war, a bountiful country has become one of the poorest in the world.

The proportion of districts under government control and influence has fallen from 72 percent in 2015 to 50 percent now. A Taliban attack on a training base for pro-government militia claimed at least 43 lives, underlining the perilous security issue.

President Trump's decision to withdraw forces stationed in Afghanistan has evoked critical responses from many strategists and generals. A report authored by James Dobbins, former President George Bush's special envoy to Afghanistan, has clearly said that, in the event of a precipitous withdrawal, the government in Kabul will lose influence and legal legitimacy, and terror groups such as Al Qaida and ISIS would be encouraged to intensify their attacks on various US targets. Afghanistan will irreversibly slide into a wider civil war. There is also the danger that Pakistan may become more open in its backing of the Taliban insurgents.

Some US commentators have expressed the fear that Trump may withdraw the American forces even without an agreement with the Taliban because he strongly feels that important regional countries should come forward to create stable conditions in Afghanistan rather than the United States, which is 6,000 miles away. He has also criticised India for building libraries in Afghanistan, without providing troops on the ground. Trump's moves on Afghanistan and Syria have prompted the resignation of his Pentagon chief, Jim Mattis, who in a letter to Mr Trump wrote that the president should find a Defence Secretary who is better aligned to him.

The election of the President of Afghanistan is scheduled to be held soon. The present micromanaging president,



A group of US soldiers keeps an eye on the demarcation line during a security patrol outside Manbij, Syria. The photo was taken in 2018.

PHOTO: US ARMY/STAFF SGT TIMOTHY R KOSTER

Ashraf Ghani, has not inspired confidence. There are also other candidates in the fray. A credibly elected Head of State will strengthen the position of the government to negotiate with the Taliban. An Afghan president, with a strong mandate, would be in a better position to discuss contentious issues with the militants.

Peace negotiations between the US and Taliban have been held in Doha, Qatar. America is very keen to arrive at a political settlement with the Taliban. Washington's pointman on Afghanistan, Zalmay Khalil Zad, has expressed the hope that negotiations for a comprehensive ceasefire will be successful. The key sticking point is to persuade the Taliban insurgents to speak to the Afghan government, which they have condemned as an "American puppet". The Taliban will have to pledge that they will not allow international terrorist groups, notably the Al Qaida and ISIS, to use Afghanistan as a launching pad for attacks against America. The US Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo, has also said that the news from Doha was encouraging. America has also involved other stakeholders such as Pakistan, Russia and China. Taliban has appointed Mulla Baredar Akhund as its chief negotiator. Akhund is one of the top Taliban leaders who is expected to negotiate from an authoritarian position.

In view of President Trump's eagerness

to pull out American troops, and strike a deal with the Taliban, the insurgents are likely to make promises—which they have no intention to fulfil—on the assumption that America, after withdrawal, will be very reluctant to send troops again. Hence, it is likely that the peace agreement may not offer a durable settlement and may be only a fig-leaf to cover the retreat of American troops. India is one of the stakeholders in Afghanistan, but it has become marginalised in peace negotiations. Pakistan in its turn has given up the ambition of ruling Afghanistan as a puppet state, in its quest for "strategic depth." It realises that unless the situation is stabilised in Afghanistan, Pakistan's stability will be endangered.

Gen Dunford, Commander of US forces in Afghanistan, was spot-on when he said that if Pakistan provides sanctuary to terrorists, it will be the single biggest factor that would lead to the failure of the coalition. The neighbouring power, China, wants peace and stability in Afghanistan, so that there are no unsettling repercussions on Uyghurs in Xinjiang province. China and Russia are also interested in stability in Afghanistan.

Developments in Afghanistan will put India in a tight spot. If the Taliban strengthens its grip over the country, its influence could subsequently spread to

neighbouring Pakistan and Kashmir, a development that is bound to be greeted with consternation in India. It may be quite possible that Taliban will join hands with Pakistani militants to create safe havens for terrorists targeting India.

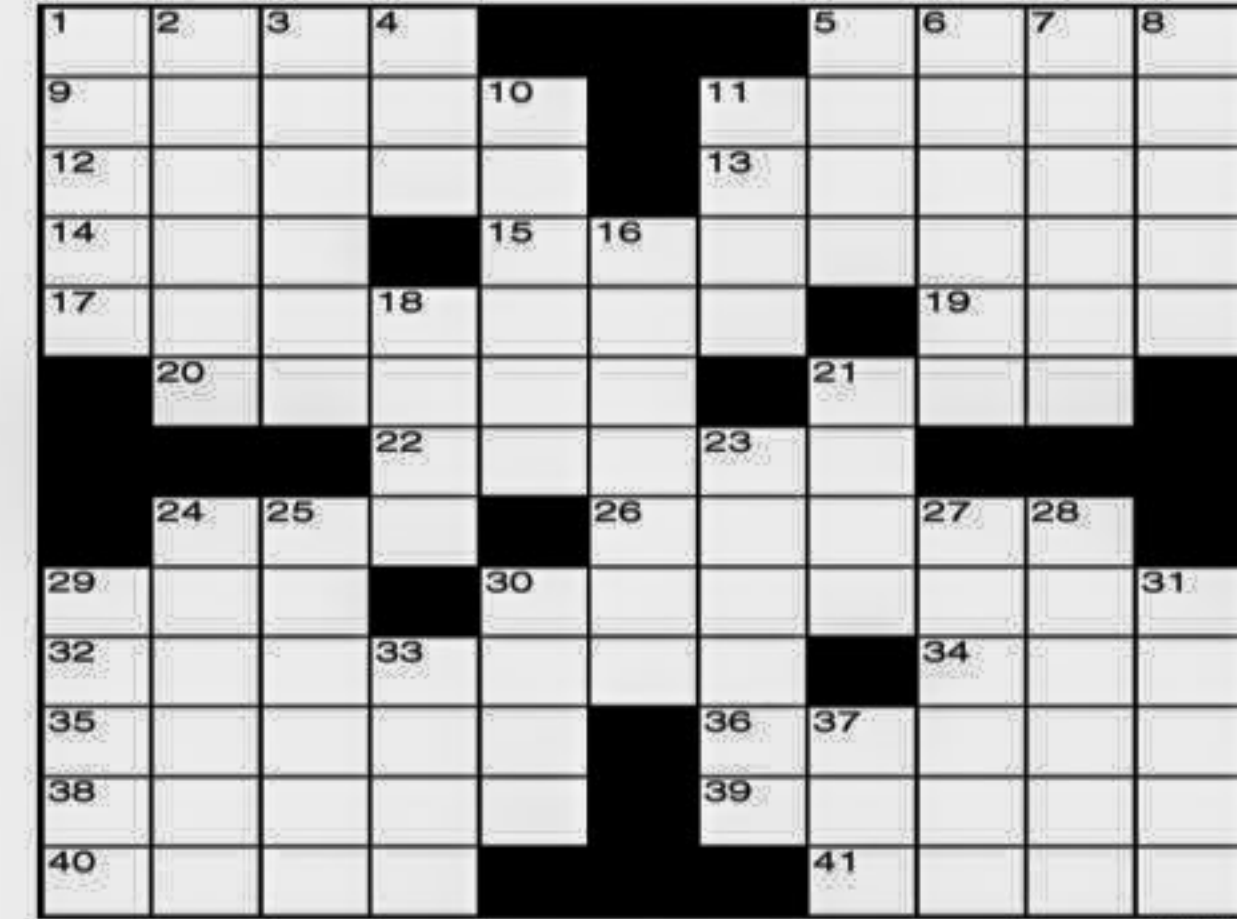
India has made huge investments in Afghanistan's development, having provided about USD three billion. The country's new parliament building, Salma Dam in Herat province and a highway to Iran's Chabahar port are among these major projects. At this stage when the scenario in Afghanistan is fluid, it is imperative for India to maintain close contact with all groups, including the Taliban. But this has to be done covertly. Trump's ill-conceived Afghan policy should prompt India to reconsider its perception that it enjoys the backing of the US in Afghanistan.

It is time for New Delhi to reassess its policy options and engage with the Taliban, as the Army chief, General Rawat, has suggested in order to safeguard its own interests. If Pakistan succeeds in keeping some people in the new Afghan government, who are hostile to India, it will seriously affect this country's interests and assets that it has built up there over the years.

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## CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

- |                             |                             |                              |
|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|------------------------------|
| <b>ACROSS</b>               | 29 Heir, often              | Hudson                       |
| 1 Mystery writer            | 30 Lifter's burden          | 7 Lassie, e.g.               |
| Woods                       | 32 Compact pooch            | 8 Ring                       |
| 5 Carpet fastener           | 34 "The Simpsons" bartender | 10 Slow movers               |
| 9 Salad green               | 35 Spring sign              | 11 Poet Sandburg             |
| 11 Two-dot character        | 36 "-- a Parade"            | 16 Criminal                  |
| 12 Amber, essentially       | 38 "I Am Woman" singer      | 18 "The Wizard of Oz" author |
| 13 Mosey along              | 39 Famous                   | 21 Invitation initials       |
| 14 First numero             | 40 Piano parts              | 23 European capital          |
| 15 Hoopster's complete miss | 41 Porgy's love             | 24 Evening bash              |
| 17 Tab                      | <b>DOWN</b>                 | 25 Sloppy                    |
| 19 Goose egg                | 1 Wash thoroughly           | 27 Couch potato's need       |
| 20 Barn section             | 2 Sports spots              | 28 Boxing need               |
| 21 Tourney pass             | 3 Tourist destination       | 29 Fire starter              |
| 22 Date on a product        | 4 "-- was saying..."        | 30 Hard at work              |
| 24 Total                    | 5 Archaeologist's find      | 31 Yorkshire city            |
| 26 Conductor Solti          | 6 Capital on the            | 33 Garden plots              |
|                             |                             | 37 Tennis hit                |



## YESTERDAY'S ANSWER

P A R I A H L A M A  
A M A N D A A L A S  
L I N C O L N P A R K  
J U S T R E N D  
C U R E A S S E R T  
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Y A W L S E R E N A

**CORRECTION**  
On February 18, 2019, the "On This Day" section of the Opinion page incorrectly mentioned 2004 instead of 2014 as the year when the Ukrainian revolution had started. We regret the error.

Write for us. Send us your opinion pieces to dsopinion@gmail.com.