

The lingering trails of poverty in Bangladesh



Dr Geof Wood
is a development anthropologist and author of several books and numerous journal articles, with a regional focus on South Asia. He is also emeritus professor of international development at the University of Bath.

GEOF WOOD

"How has your analysis of poverty evolved over the last five decades?" I was asked recently. A simple question, but it requires a serious answer! I came to Bangladesh from NE Bihar, where poverty was firmly rooted in quasi-feudal, patron-client relations, reinforced by caste. The *mushar*—landless, untouchable labourers—were akin to serfs or even slaves in the early 70s. This did not prevent the *mushar* from receiving in-kind patronage in times of stress; after all, their labour had to be reproduced, not destroyed. Coming to Bangladesh meant initially the Dhaka-Cumilla minifundist belt where, in the village we studied intensively, there was poverty, but not really destitution. Because poverty was reflected in inequality and dependency, as well as specific family circumstances of morbidity, disabilities, high dependency ratios and land lost due to economic stress, it could still be understood significantly in class terms. However, it was not so stark as in NE Bihar or, as I was soon to learn, the districts of North Bengal (such as Dinajpur, Nilphamari, Thakurgaon and nearby such as Kurigram).

The work and friendship of Abu Abdullah at Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies (BIDS) was significant for any understanding I initially gained of agrarian political economy outside the Dhaka-Cumilla belt. Abu wrote a lot which never saw the light of day in publications. I was lucky to have access to that hidden writing (which is currently being assembled as a memoir). I could therefore see poverty in similar ways as in NE Bihar, and from what I was reading from West Bengal, as a function of stark class relations (landlords, tenant sharecroppers and landless labour of men and women) under conditions of low technologies and thus labour-intensive production. Such conditions to us Marxians are understood as intensifying the rate of surplus value of labour. In other words, appropriating the surplus value of labour through making it work harder and longer for the same returns, thereby intensifying the rate

of exploitation.

Inter alia, such understanding led me to write "Staying Secure, Staying Poor: The Faustian Bargain" (*World Development*, March 2003). Here, I argued, using case material, that the circumstances of poor people induced them to accept their dependency and inferiority as the price for some element of low-value security via client dependency when times were hard. In this way, they revealed an induced second preference for remaining in poverty in the longer term as the trade-off for short-term stress relief. This, together with the lack of control over their uncertain futures, meant they had a high discount rate of the future relative to richer classes who can save for and invest (e.g., via education of children) in their more certain futures. So beneath the general explanation of "class relations and exploitation" lies this socio-psychological detail. I have always been keen to go beyond the "what" question to the more intricate "how" question. Analysing deep structures, in other words.

More recently came the subject of "extreme poverty," which goes by other names too. The UK-DFID, as was, funded a large operational programme (Economic Empowerment of the Poorest, EEP-Shiree) for over eight years (2008-16), with a research element led by a few of us from the University of Bath in association with BIDS, especially Dr Zulfikar Ali. Was extreme poverty just worse than moderate poverty measured by income or qualitatively different? We had many internal debates and with friends in Brac and so on, which opened up to exchanges between Amartya Sen and senior Bangladeshi academics, like Rehman Sobhan. Sen agreed with us: there is a categorical distinction. We were also helped by Ravi Kanbur's authorship of the 2001 "World Bank Poverty Report," in which he distinguished between non-idiosyncratic and idiosyncratic poverty, the former "moderate" poverty being more systemic and amenable to class analysis as well as inter-sectional,

horizontal inequalities (e.g., gender, ethnic and religious minorities). "Extreme" poverty, in contrast to "moderate," can be more characterised by idiosyncratic explanations at the family level, entailing morbidity, disabilities, adverse dependency ratios, higher prevalence of female-headed households in patrilineal/patriarchal societies, etc. In his

This concerns what is measured (i.e., symptoms and indicators). If income or financial or asset wealth is measured using the HIES data, then one picture emerges both numerically and geographically. But income and wealth are only a means to an end—well-being, whereas capabilities to convert means into ends differ as a function of

in Bangladesh. According to the "Perspective Plan of Bangladesh" (GED, Planning Commission, March 2020), poverty was 20.5 percent in 2020, with extreme poverty at 10.5 percent, together with rising income inequality, indicated by a Gini coefficient measure close to 0.5. These translate into large numbers—36 million. Furthermore,

the ILO sense).

For me, then, it is unwise and premature to move away from poverty as a development priority in Bangladesh. And it can always return as in the UK, where it is presently climbing to 18 percent by domestic measures. While the term "development" can have many meanings, poverty remains a necessary issue for policy and action, which needs to reflect a useful understanding of socioeconomic processes and location. Any prospect of a linear downward trend in the incidence of poverty achieved through the magic of trickle-down capitalist economics and "leave no one behind" rhetoric is undermined by a set of uncertainties around: climate change; rising income and wealth inequalities associated with LMIC status; low comparative levels of tax revenues and public spending as a percent of GDP; the consequent woeful underinvestment in vocational skills and secondary education sector; preferentialism in the various forms of social protection provision despite digitalisation; the precarious comparative advantage of the country in the global economy including the "single point of business failure" through overreliance on RMG for foreign exchange; and dangerous dependence upon the confronting neighbouring superpowers of China and India.

In a transitioning country like Bangladesh, there is a further issue about the heightened awareness of being poor relative to others, the sense of relative deprivation. This is a function of urbanisation in the growth of megacities as well as the "rurbanisation" of the countryside, reinforced by the integrating variables of communications infrastructure, digital access, and physical mobility, including international labour migration. The poor are no longer isolated in their villages, trapped within localised clientelist dependency upon immediate patrons controlling their livelihood options. They can compare their conditions and life chances to others who really are enjoying the benefits of growth. They have a daily reminder of marginalisation and low ceilings to their own aspirations. Their lives are insecure and precarious as they experience new forms of exploitation at the hands of employers, rent-seekers, and *mastaan*. There are profound implications for political volatility, where such alienation can easily convert into millenarian sentiment.



SOURCE: UNDP

It is unwise and premature to move away from poverty as a development priority in Bangladesh.

foreword to our study for the Planning Commission in 2021, titled "Extreme Poverty: the Challenges of Inclusion in Bangladesh," Prof Wahiduddin Mahmud wrote, quoting Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*, "Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way"—i.e., it depends on "who they are." We identified a further categorical distinction between the moderate and extreme poor in terms of the security of their agency. The extreme poor do not have the same, or adequate, capabilities for counterpart social action when "participating" in external support programmes. Most NGOs in Bangladesh have worked with the moderate poor. You can see why.

But there is a further symptomatic aspect too, which is broadly shared by the moderate and extreme poor, while still remaining distinctive.

inequality, class, idiosyncrasies, and a present sense of security of agency. However, if we measure the actual experience of well-being through multidimensional indicators—from data in the multidimensional poverty index (MPI)—the picture is different both numerically and geographically. This analysis is laid out in our study for the Planning Commission mentioned above. Furthermore, with these MPI measures, we identify the poorest 20 upazilas, the next 20, and so on, because we disaggregated the data below the district level, which is rarely done and is misleading in terms of where poverty actually is and with what intensity. On this basis, we are critical of the World Bank's over-simplistic regional analysis that contrasts east and west of the country (2019 Poverty Assessment Report). Its diagnosis is misleading for policy.

Poverty significantly remains

the current poverty lines or thresholds reflecting international purchasing parity levels are unrealistically low for Bangladesh. If we move those thresholds up to a more realistic level to meet basic human needs and services, then the poverty reduction claims for Bangladesh look more precarious. The vulnerable strata above the present upper poverty line will quickly descend into poverty if a more realistic definition of poverty is applied, as was revealed starkly during Covid by the BIGD/PPRC findings. Add looming vulnerability to climate change, especially in the coastal belt, then we find there are no laurels to sit on. And relying upon trickle-down from economic growth is presently a very fragile dream given the current trends in the macroeconomy, not helped by global slowdowns, let alone if GSP sanctions are added in regard to labour rights and decent work (in

Keeping children under parental care must be a top priority



Dr Nawshad Ahmed,
an ex-UN official, is an economist, and urban planner.

NAWSHAD AHMED

A recent study conducted jointly by Unicef and the Bangladesh government shows that over 3.4 million children in the country are living on the streets without parental care. The National Child Labour Survey 2022 by the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS), on the other hand, found that 4.4 percent of all children aged five to 17 years—around 1.77 million—are engaged in child labour.

It is clear that these children are deprived of basic amenities of life, and need support on multiple levels with food, healthcare, education, shelter, and protection from abuse and exploitation.

Family is the most important social structure to ensure a child's growth in every respect. Article 27 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) accords every child the right to "a standard of living adequate for the child's physical, mental, spiritual, moral and social development" and requires that parents or those responsible for the child "secure, within their abilities and financial capabilities, the conditions of living necessary for the child's development." Additionally, Article 18 of the CRC states, "Parents or, as the case may be, legal guardians, have the primary responsibility for the upbringing and development of the child."

The harmful effects of children without parental care are well recognised. These children may be living on the streets or in alternative care arrangements that provide shelter, and there are ongoing global efforts by Unicef, development agencies, and governments to remove children from these situations. The goal is to place them with their families or with the people they love, such as under community-based and family-substitute care centres or with trusted and close relatives.

The UN Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children places heavy emphasis on preserving family ties and suggests removal from family care as a measure of last resort. Article 3 of these guidelines states, "The family is the fundamental group of society and the natural environment for the growth, well-being, and protection of children, efforts should primarily be directed to enabling the child to remain in or return to the care of his/her parents, or when appropriate, other close family members. The State should ensure that families have access to forms of support in the caregiving role." Article 14 says, "Removal of a child from the care of the family should be seen as a measure of last resort and should, whenever possible, be temporary and for the shortest possible duration. Removal decisions should be regularly reviewed and the child's return to parental care, once the original causes of removal have been resolved or have disappeared."

Despite the above international convention and guidelines, there are many situations in which parents in Bangladesh consider placing children under alternative care. They may be unable or unwilling to provide basic necessities due to poverty, lack of access, or other reasons, and place the children in institutions such as orphanages, school hostels, and NGO shelter homes. The other reasons may include natural disasters, the breakdown of the joint family system, death, separation, or migration of one parent. Disability is another important reason for the placement of children in institutions. Some children also opt out of parental care due to violence, exploitation, abuse, neglect, and trafficking. Some children are placed in residential care and temporary shelters after being rescued from the street and other places.

Family is the first line of care for children, and parents have the prime responsibility to protect and raise them. But in many cases, families do not or cannot fully protect the rights of their children. The family itself may violate the children's rights. For example, parents sometimes physically punish their children. Article 20 of the CRC stipulates that state parties are responsible for ensuring such care in situations where children are "temporarily or permanently deprived of his or her family environment."

In Bangladesh, there is no reliable data on children in alternative care. But we know that in many cases, infants between one and three years old are also in institutional care. Children in these situations may suffer irreversible damage to their brains, and it can severely impair their psychological development.

The children, especially the youngest ones in institutional care, may be affected by many types of psychosocial problems. They may suffer from depression, loss of concentration, stress, and mental disturbances. Some children also experience a deep sense of loss as a result of separation from siblings. Article 22 of the UN's alternative care guidelines states, "Following the predominant opinion of experts, alternative care for young children, especially those under the age of 3 years, should be provided in family-based settings. Exceptions to this principle may be warranted to prevent the separation of siblings and in cases where the placement is of an emergency nature or is for a predetermined and very limited duration, with planned family reintegration or other appropriate long-term care solution as its outcome."

Accordingly, there is a wide consensus in both the developed and developing world today that each country should take strong initiatives towards reducing the number of children without parental care. Whenever possible, children should be taken out of institutional care and reunited with their families.

As per the CRC, the state is responsible for protecting the child from violence, abuse, and neglect. No child should be removed from his or her family without good justification. In certain circumstances, like emergencies, persecution, violence in the home, health needs, or poor

financial situations, if children are deprived of their family environment, the state must protect the child and arrange appropriate alternative care.

There are many forms of institutionalisation of children in Bangladesh. However, there have been very limited efforts made so far to de-institutionalise child care by preventing family separation, promoting family reintegration, or using better family-based alternative care arrangements. The government should look into the entire gamut of alternative care systems for

children in the country and take necessary measures to reduce this practice and establish minimum standards for children's care. The Ministry of Social Welfare, Ministry of Women and Children Affairs, Department of Social Services, and NGOs should make serious efforts to promote early childhood development, strengthen and widen the government's social safety net programmes, and ensure basic education, healthcare, and other related facilities with a focus on the disadvantaged families so that these families can afford to provide parental care to their children.

 Biman Flight Catering Centre বিমান ফ্লাইট ক্যাটারিং সেন্টার			
INVITATION OF INTERNATIONAL TENDER NOTICE NO. 44/2024			
01	Agency	Biman Bangladesh Airlines Ltd.	
02	Invitation for	Procurement of Disposable Items (Foreign).	
03	Invitation for Ref:	30.34.0000.063.15.001.24	Dated: 19-02-2024
04	Tender document selling date	From 08-04-2024 to 14-05-2024 (During office hours).	
05	Tender receiving date and time	Date: 15-05-2024 Time: 12:00 Hrs BST	Note: The procuring entity reserves the right to accept or reject all tenders without assigning any reason thereof. If any unavoidable situation arises during specified date then tender selling/closing/opening date will be shifted to next (working) day without further notice.
06	Tender opening date and time	Date: 15-05-2024 Time: 15:00 Hrs BST	
07	Selling address of schedule (local)	(i) Address: a. Manager Finance, Biman Flight Catering Centre, Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport, Kurmitola, Dhaka. b. Manager Cash & Banking, Balaka Bhaban, Biman, Bangladesh Airlines, Dhaka.	
08	Selling tender document (foreign)	(ii) Address: Manager Finance, Biman at Dubai, Bangkok, Singapore, London, Jeddah, Riyadh and Kuala Lumpur.	
09	Receiving tender document	a. BFCC Main Security Gate, Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport, Kurmitola, Dhaka. b. Biman Balaka Bhaban, Security Counter Gate (Ground Floor), Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport, Kurmitola, Dhaka.	
10	Price of tender document (Tk)	USD 20.00 eqvt. BDT 2,000.00 (Two thousand) only per set (non-refundable).	
11		1) Location	2) Tender Security Amount (USD/BDT)
		BFCC/Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport, Kurmitola Dhaka	USD 3,200.00 eqvt. BDT. 3,50,000.00 (Three lac fifty thousand) only (refundable).
12	Procuring entity & fund	General Manager, BFCC, Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport, Kurmitola, Dhaka. BIMAN/BFCC's own fund.	
13	Official tender	Dy. General Manager, BFCC, Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport, Kurmitola, Dhaka. Phone: 880-2-8901760-64 Ext-13. Fax: 880-2-8901638	
14	Tender schedule and other related information will be available in Biman website: www.biman-airlines.com for ready reference.		
GD-558		Dy. General Manager, BFCC	