

## Poverty Alleviation — A Push Towards Unsustainability in Bangladesh?

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### Abstract

Social, economic, educational and infrastructure development programs in Bangladesh, including national and international aid and grants, focus on the agenda of 'poverty alleviation'. However, they are not performing well as social and environmental degradation is on the increase. The paper analyses the reasons for the failure of development programs from a sustainability point of view. Some explanations are provided through the views of Bangladeshi rural activists, including Baul philosophers. They cover: (1) exclusion of poor people from participation in development programs, especially in natural resource management; and (2) widespread corruption accompanying foreign aid.

'Moderate poverty' is seen in Bangladeshi culture as acceptable given the country's conditions. It actually promotes a more sustainable way of living. 'Poverty' should be seen as culturally embedded and within the context of population growth and sustainable consumerism. 'Poverty alleviation' as promoted in development projects in Bangladesh is neither possible nor desirable, as it is not coupled with the means to achieve sustainability.

The paper makes recommendations how to overcome poverty, using local knowledge and developmental wisdom. The outlined approaches relate to sustainability education, self-reliance and pro-sustainable ways of living.

### Keywords

Bauls, culture, development, environment, NGOs, sustainability

### Poverty in Bangladesh

Poverty is a condition of having little or no wealth (Brown 1993). Understood as deficiency in or relative lack of material possessions or money, 'poverty' is an unpleasant term in western values as it stifles production and consumption and hence, economic development. The poverty phenomenon however refers also to other types of deficiencies or relative lack, which relate to certain properties and qualities that are difficult to measure in monetary terms and which do not belong to the economic realm. A holistic view of the world and human life requires us to understand and recognise poverty in all its manifestations. However the West has been excessively obsessed with a value system that sees material poverty as an impediment to progress and development. By doing so, it encourages overproduction and overconsumption. Even within the material manifestation of poverty, there are different degrees of what is culturally desirable or acceptable, and the gap between the West and the

rest is often sizeable. What we argue in this paper is that such one-sided overemphasis on poverty espoused by numerous developmental policies and programs is in effect detrimental to the long-term sustainability of any country, and particularly in the case of Bangladesh, one of the world's most populous nations.

### ***Recognising poverty***

There is abundant evidence (e.g. Ehrlich and Ehrlich 2004; Diener and Diener 1995; Diener and Lucas 1998) that once basic biological needs for food, shelter, clothing and health care are met and a standard of living providing some leisure time and recreation is adopted, further consumption does not provide much increased satisfaction. Moreover, in Bangladeshi culture overconsumption and acquiring of non-essential goods are recognised as sinful acts<sup>1</sup>. Hence, in Bangladesh 'poverty' exists as an entity that keeps people off from non-essential consumption and consumerism. It is seen as an essential part and parcel for the socio-economic, spiritual and environmental sustainability of the country. Rural gurus, such as Aziz Shah Fakir (93) of Choraikole village in the Kushtia district of Bangladesh, a renowned Baul guru, assert that moderate poverty is to be recognised as a sustainability tool for Bangladesh.

The Bauls, the saintly mendicants of village life in Bengal, are often seen as being at the root of the Bengali culture. While mostly unlettered,<sup>2</sup> the Bauls, the singing philosophers of Bangladesh, show a full measure of poetic, musical, and philosophical talent. They come from both Muslim and Hindu backgrounds, and are environmentalist in their belief and practice. They are truly soul stirring (Dimock and Levertov 1968; Roy 1983; Rajneesh 1984; Hossain 1995) and take the listeners closest to nature (the divine)

The 144 million population country of Bangladesh covers 147,000 square kilometres where agricultural land is shrinking to cater for the growing housing and industrial accommodation for its increasing population, 90 per cent of whom are Muslim. Natural calamities such as floods, droughts and cyclones hit the country frequently destroying lives and wealth, and river migration leaves thousands of people homeless and destitute each year. In addition, massive corruption as practiced by both particular local<sup>3</sup> and foreign power groups<sup>4</sup> contributes to relative deprivation at the macro level.

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<sup>1</sup> For example, Quran 104:2-4 states: Who has amassed wealth and counted it. He thinks that his wealth would make him immortal. Nay; but he certainly be cast into the Hutama — the crushing fire.

<sup>2</sup> Bauls are 'illiterate' as judged within a written culture, but hearing their innumerable songs, one cannot but regard them as supreme Pundits (Haq 1975; Hossain 1990, 1995, 2001) and so, in Western terms, scholars. For example, Baul Fakir Lalon Shah has not read any religious books, but in discussing religion, displays an extraordinary knowledge of the Scriptures. Bauls do not believe in writing down their spontaneously composed songs. They sing as they go along, and as feelings come to them. The messages conveyed through their songs and music are of great relevance today.

<sup>3</sup> On the basis of information published in the media, the spokesman of the Transparency International Bangladesh stated that the law-enforcing agencies and the local government organisations have turned utterly corrupt. They have syphoned off over two billion Taka in 253 cases of corruption in the last six months (*The New Nation*, September 2004). Reportedly around 750

In the midst of these diversified social and environmental conditions, true poverty is considered to occur when village people, who constitute about 85 per cent of the total population, experience a living below the traditional subsistence level.<sup>5</sup> The tropical climate of Bangladesh and the nature of rural people's laborious work demand three meals per day. When people are unable to procure these three meals, due to shortage of food grain, money or other exchangeable items, they consider themselves to be in poverty. They also require non-food items and services to maintain their social norms. When they fail to meet these requirements, they are also in poverty. As Townsend sums it up, Bangladeshi villagers are in poverty whenever "a minimum nutritionally adequate diet plus essential non-food requirements are not affordable" (1993, p. 9). However, this also happens to many generally non-poor villagers who find themselves living below the above mentioned poverty line because of floods, droughts, wars, market recession, fires, theft or robbery, personal vendettas, litigation, court cases, illness, loss of a family member or livestock, social and marital obligations, to list but a few. Within this complex livelihood framework of village life in Bangladesh, poverty as a generic term is not easily comprehensible. Sen (1981, Preface) suggests: "But not everything about poverty is quite so simple ... Furthermore, to construct an overall picture of poverty, it is necessary to go well beyond identifying the poor". Yet, the village elders, such as Baul guru Aziz Shah Fakir, simply conceive that poor people are those who are recognised as poor by their own people and society.

### ***Culture of poverty***

Poverty is often recognised as a (natural) tool for sustainability management in the Bangladesh socio-cultural framework. Accordingly, Bangladeshis have a built-in spirituality to consider themselves "poor".<sup>6</sup> People instinctively reflect poverty in their spirituality and values. Even rich people humbly designate themselves as '*Garib*' (poor) when inviting other people to eat at their house. They say or write "please come to give dust of your feet at this poor person's place and eat rice with lentils or leafy vegetables". This cultural civility exists throughout Bangladesh. The teachings of a Sufi saint reflect that humankind is poor because of constant dependency on the other creation (nature and environment) of God. Whatever wealth people achieve is from God; nature and the efforts of mankind are pretexts only. Accordingly, some sections of the Bangladeshi society believe that acceptance of poverty as a way of life is seen positively by Islam (Haq 1975, p. 41). It is not a perjorative in

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government officials (20% of whom are top officials and only 7% clerical staff) have been involved in such corrupt practices.

<sup>4</sup> Although there is no open evidence against corruption among foreign aid staff, the Chittagong Chamber of Commerce and Industry (CCCI) President Saifuzzaman Chowdhury Javed recently stated: "[t]here is a general feeling that the bank [the World Bank] eats up half of the fund it gives to Bangladesh in the name of consultation or interest against the loans" (*The Daily Star*, 28 February, 2005.)

<sup>5</sup> Poverty below subsistence level generally occurs during famines. Bangladesh experienced famines in 1770, 1866, 1896–98, 1943 and 1974 (Banglapedia 2005). The total number of deaths during the 1943 famine, for example, was estimated at 3.5 million out of 42 million of total population.

<sup>6</sup> Most Bangladeshi people follow Islam. The Quran says: "... But God is Rich (Free of all wants), and you (mankind) are poor..." (47:38).

Bangladesh, for affluence or non-poverty for everyone in Bangladesh is neither possible (due to natural causes as indicated earlier) nor culturally desirable (for Bangladeshi culture recognises poverty as a condition to be happy with a 'little' excess). Harun Baul<sup>7</sup> sings:

<i>Chahidar beshi jodi ashe goriber ghote</i>	If a poor gets a little more than his/her basic needs,
<i>Tar shukher ullash bhuban kanpai.</i>	his/her pleasure shakes the earth.
<i>Ar sei dhonir kopal etoi mondo</i>	And unlucky is that rich who craves for happiness,
<i>Je shuker khoje jibon dai — tobu shukh nahi pai.</i>	but never experiences it.
<i>Duksha sara sukh, na pai kehai.</i>	Happiness is unknown to the people without the experience of sorrow.

The traditional culture of Bangladesh recognises Garib in terms of 'poverty' through several terms: *Ovabi* (poverty due to social and/or natural reasons), *Vikshuk* (beggar), and *Fakir* (naturalist mystic). In addition to these terms, the term '*Daridra*', signifying 'landless poor' is a nomenclature which is used by non-government organisations (NGOs) for 'poverty alleviation'. Farmers with less than 0.5 acres of land are treated as landless by the donor community including NGOs. They are creditworthy and accepted for NGO membership (as are people with more than 0.5 acres of land). However, the real landless poor, i.e. people with no land, are excluded from NGO membership and hence not eligible for help.

Poverty alleviation in Bangla is expressed by NGOs as '*Daridra Bimochan*'.<sup>8</sup> Poverty alleviation programs (PAPs) initiated by the donor community are dedicated to address the new poor '*Daridra*'. The *Daridra* people who are members of the donor funded NGO community receive microcredit<sup>9</sup> both in cash and in kind in order to alleviate their poverty. Holcombe (1995, p. 62) notes that: "By focusing on credit, this simple model [of the Grameen Bank] seems to say that poverty alleviation is measured chiefly in terms of income changes". Hence, microcredit is not for everyone, particularly for the poorest of the poor.

The traditional poor such as *ovabi*, *vikshuk* and *fakir* who are considered as the poorest neither approach NGOs for help nor do the NGOs welcome them because of a heavy risk of not getting the credit money back. These people seek alms for subsistence only when they are unable to meet their bare necessities by themselves. Under the Islamic culture, it is obligatory for the non-poor to help such people. However, the development programs fall short of including their needs.

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<sup>7</sup> Harun Baul (65) is a poet and singer. He composes a number of songs, especially environmental, every day. Harun is a disciple of Darvish Aziz Shah Fakir and they live in the same village of Choraikole in Kushtia district of Bangladesh. Darvish (saint/mystic) Aziz Shah Fakir (93) is a renowned Baul guru. He lives with his wife Laily at the tomb of his guru Darvish Kalu Shah Fakir (d. 1971).

<sup>8</sup> For comparison, in India 'poverty alleviation' is expressed both in Bangla and Hindi as "garibi hatao" or remove poverty (Kurien 1974, p. 78), i.e. referring to any poverty.

<sup>9</sup> Generally, the amount of microcredit starts from AUD\$25 and can go up to AUD\$500.

### **Poverty diversity**

The diversity of poverty in Bangladeshi is an expression of a wide range of problems which are rooted not solely in the social and economic structure of the society, but also highly dependent on the geographic and climatic conditions of the country. The richness of the language signifies the importance of these distinctions. They require a different approach to the one used continuously by aid organisations.

#### *Ovabi (poor/destitute)*

Families with deficit of food or money are *Ovabi*. This type of poverty is due to land erosion, bad harvest, indebtedness due to social reasons and natural calamities. Reports<sup>10</sup> show that thousands of hectares of land are eroded each year resulting in hundreds of thousands of people becoming landless and/or homeless. A bad harvest is generally caused by climatic conditions. Borrowing for agricultural purposes often throws the debtors into poverty if they fail to make enough money to cover their basic needs as well as repay the debt's principal and interest. Social obligations such as wedding ceremonial expenses including dowry,<sup>11</sup> treatment of illness of family member(s), and death ritual expenses also push many households into immediate poverty. Finally, the natural calamities of floods, cyclones and droughts, which are common in Bangladesh, force many people into poverty. However, most of the poor in the *Ovabi* category can potentially recover from poverty over a period of time as long as they are not repeatedly and frequently exposed to similar situations. Nevertheless, the poverty alleviation programs do not provide them with such opportunities.

#### *Vikshuk (Beggars)*

Some poor village widows with young children live by begging. Certain disabled people (male and female) live their lives begging. Semi-disabled elders can also beg trying to make additional income for their families. Many pursue begging as a means of self-reliance as well as because of dependency habits.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Reports on land erosion appear frequently in the Bangladeshi newspapers, because all the flowing rivers across the country break their banks at one place and build shoals (char land) elsewhere. For example, the *Daily Independent* of 30 June 2000 published a report under the heading "Erosion renders 20,000 homeless in 4 districts". The *Daily Star* of 3 July 2000 reports: "Erosion by Mohananda and Padma (rivers) takes serious turn". It again reports on 5 December 2000: "70,000 erosion victims yet to be rehabilitated".

<sup>11</sup> "Dowry has been identified as one of the main reasons for poverty", Shova Akhter, a housewife of Jamalpur district, told Christine Wallich, Country Director of World Bank Bangladesh, during her visit in Jamalpur (The *Daily Independent*, July 18, 2003). Shova Akhter added that many families became poor, as they paid dowry to marry their girls. Families have to spend up to Taka 30,000 (around AUD\$620) to each groom as dowry. Most marriages are 'arranged' and if a family is unable to provide dowry, even if the girl is educated, she is doomed to remain unmarried. The number of landless families is increasing due to dowry and almost 85 per cent of families have lost their land.

<sup>12</sup> Kabir Uddin (65) of Sreepur village in Pabna district who is popularly known as Chini Pagla (maddened for sugar/sweetmeats) is a disabled hunchback with still no grey in his hair and beard. His daughters are now married and sons grown up. When his children were young, Chini Pagla was forced to beg to meet the basic needs of his family. Now when his children are willing to support him and his wife, he cannot give up begging, for he has developed a habit of eating sweets every day.

On average, one per cent of the heads of village households support their families by begging and accepting alms. This occupation needs no cash investment. It is socially acceptable for poor widows, the old, the lame, the blind and the priests. Genuine beggars are even invited to visit non-poor households from time to time. As alms-giving in cash or kind is a Muslim religious obligation for the non-poor, without beggars and fakirs, the non-poor cannot perform this duty. Again, poverty alleviation programs do not touch on the needs of these layers of society.

#### *Fakir (mystic)*

A fakir is one who deliberately possesses nothing beyond bare necessities on socio-religious and spiritual grounds. Mendicant singers and their gurus are socially recognised as fakirs. They are naturalists. Bangladesh has many of them and a rough estimate would be around 10,000.

Fakirs have disciples who are also called fakirs. The gurus live pro-environmental lives; eat no meat, nor eggs; and observe asceticism. The fakirs who are not yet elderly, do not even drink milk.<sup>13</sup> They are well respected by most people, and jealously disrespected by some of the religious leaders and elite because of the fakirs' social and religious activism and praxis, which are labelled as heretic. In the present time of environmental degradation and illiteracy in Bangladesh, the NGOs and the government agencies value the fakirs as the social and environmental facilitators, educators and animators. The government of Bangladesh invites the renowned Baul Fakirs to broadcast on radio and television programs relating to environmental ethics, agriculture, fishing, food habits, population control, morality and literacy/schooling. Development programs have benefited from their wisdom but more can be done.

#### *Daridra (Landless poor)*

The Daridra are 'neo-poor' people who have received international attention. This group emerged after the country's liberation from Pakistan in the 1970s when relief and microcredit facilities started to

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Because of his physical disability, he used to be invited by people of the surrounding villages to attend socio-religious feasts and offerings that frequently take place in village Bangladesh. A sweet dish is a compulsory item for such functions.

In his youth, Chini Pagla could walk far and wide which enabled him to attend a ceremony almost every day. Now, he is old and weak, and can only move around in his village. As a sweet dish is uncommon on the every-day menu of village Bangladesh, his grown up children cannot give him sweets every day. He therefore goes from door to door every day, asking for sweets along with alms to satisfy his appetite for sweets as well as to support his wife. When he is asked by his children to stop begging, Chini Pagla refuses saying that a father is only to support his children, never to be supported. Chini Pagla once however disclosed the main reason of his begging — the habit of eating sweets.

<sup>13</sup> Aziz Shah Fakir has started drinking milk only recently; his wife Laily still does not. Both of them believe milk for every person in Bangladesh is neither necessary, nor sustainable in Bangladesh. Only children and elderly people need milk for respectively their growth and longevity. Milk-drinking by healthy people between childhood and old age is like pouring water into a glass already full of water. The Fakir says that Bangladesh does not have enough land to grow food for its people as well as to raise cows for everyone to drink milk.

be available through international aid organisations by the way of NGOs. Generally, a family which owns less than half an acre of land is designated as Daridra. Most of the Daridra people are clients of NGO groups. Their livelihood activities are diverse, but overwhelmingly limited to cash income, supplemented by relief and microcredit facilities provided by NGOs. Small business, cottage industries, fisheries, bee keeping, rickshaw pulling, homestead production, food-for-work, and relief are included in the livelihood of *Daridra*. The NGOs assist them with cash and commodity loans. Some NGOs also distribute food grains, clothing, tube wells, latrines, housing, seeds and fertilisers as relief to their members when it is available from international aid organisations in order to meet emergency situations caused by natural calamities.

How development programs contribute to the poverty alleviation in Bangladesh and the changes in people's lives is discussed in the remaining parts of the paper.

### **Development programs**

Development programs in Bangladesh include social, economic, educational and infrastructure development. All these programs are politically dedicated to poverty alleviation. National and international aid and grants are also focused on the agenda of poverty alleviation. Poverty alleviation programs (PAPs) however are not performing as expected, rather they are failing. Hulme and Mosley (1996, p. 138), in their case-study with the largest NGO namely BRAC (Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee), note that: "The ideal impact of BRAC borrowers 'graduating out of poverty' is not clearly observable in our survey results. While marginal income and household asset increases were in evidence, the expenditure patterns of the two borrower groups (and these patterns before and after the last loans) were remarkably similar".

Poverty alleviation programs consistently aim at economic development and by doing so are contributing to social changes which more often than not are overall negative. Lewis and Wallace (2000) argue that after decades of conventional development practice governed by this economic perspective, the level of economically defined poverty in the world has increased rather than decreased." The question arises how much "other " poverty we create when our goal is narrowly defined as the alleviation of economic poverty. When all values are subsumed to the economy, how much do we lose with respect to social values, to artistic values, to cultural and language diversity, to biodiversity" (Lewis and Wallace 2000, p. 35). The wide-spreading prevalence of the dowry system, high rate of population growth in the villages which remain inaccessible to the family planning workers during the rainy season, lower rate of intellectual growth because of excessively higher amount of students per teacher,<sup>14</sup> and mal-development<sup>15</sup> are clearly on the increase. Environmental

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<sup>14</sup> The average class size in rural areas is of 60 students in primary, secondary and higher secondary schools.

<sup>15</sup> Unplanned or/and ill-planned urbanisation, industrialisation, criss-cross mud-roads and flood control dams are found throughout Bangladesh.

degradation, including floods, droughts, desertification and biodiversity depletion, is also increasingly taking place because of the gradual shrinkage of wetlands and forestry resources.

Why do PAPs fail? The PAPs that do not recognise the environmental and cultural aspects of poverty as a tool of sustainability management of Bangladesh are doomed to fail. As indicated earlier, the poverty alleviation programs do not address the needs of the Ovabi, Vikhshuk and Fakir communities. Natural causes such as floods, cyclones, river erosion etc. and socio-cultural reasons such as dowry and wedding ceremonies, post mortal rituals, and the tradition of begging will continue to exist, for this poverty is of renewable nature in the Bangladesh environment and culture (Booth et al. 2004a and b). Therefore, rural activists assert that not only microcredit based PAPs, but PAPs of any sort are unlikely to alleviate poverty for all permanently (Hossain 2001; Hossain and Marinova 2004.)

The NGOs providing microcredit to their targeted Daridra community cannot also succeed with combating poverty. Baul guru Aziz Shah Fakir asserts that microcredit in cash money is bound to fail to generate sufficient profit, though most Daridra with continuing<sup>16</sup> credit facility look solvent on the surface. In reality, most of them are plunged into debt. That is why after three decades of microcredit-based PAPs, the number of hardcore poor<sup>17</sup> is still increasing. Most women Daridra who borrow money from the pro-women NGOs like the Grameen Bank, give money to their husbands for business. It was also found that men were the users of more than 60 per cent of women's loans (Rahman 1999, p. 75). Many husbands incur a loss.<sup>18</sup> The Fakir also asserts that cash money from NGOs cannot beget maximum profit because the mode of repayment of the loan is not designed to utilise the whole amount for the agreed period of loan. Loans are generally given to the Daridra for a period of one year or two, and repayment including interest is collected weekly starting from the third or fourth week after the disbursement. The collection system of weekly repayment is strictly adhered to by the NGO fieldworkers. A recipient Daridra must pay the instalments strictly on time. The guru reveals that the Daridrads keep a good amount of borrowed money aside to comply with the obligatory weekly repayment. Thus, the Daridra cannot use the whole amount of borrowed money for the loan period. Interest rate is also excessively high. Similar views often appear in the daily newspapers in Bangladesh (see Box A).

In terms of reaching the poorest Morduch and Haley (2001, pp. 2-3) found that:

- microfinance is not for everyone; especially it is not for the poorest
- the sick, mentally ill, destitute, etc. who form a minority of those living below the poverty line are typically not good candidates for microfinance

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<sup>16</sup> It is a usual practice of the NGOs that when a Daridra loanee incurs losses and cannot repay the loan, then a fresh loan is offered to pay off the existing loan.

<sup>17</sup> This includes Daridra who have lost their land and assets.

<sup>18</sup> Most of the Daridra households cannot be viewed as micro-enterprises or self-employed. They do not have a single source of livelihood support; rather depending on season, prices, health and other contingencies, they pursue a mix of activities that may include growing their own food, labouring for others and so on (Hulme and Mosley 1996, p. 108).



- even a well-designed microfinance programme is unlikely to have a positive impact on the poorest unless it specifically seeks to reach them through appropriate product design and targeting.

### **Sustainable natural Bangladesh and development programs**

The proverbial coat requires cutting to match the amount of cloth available to the tailor. This is true for the rural people of Bangladesh who have to regularly face natural renewal processes through natural

#### **Box A. Microcredit schemes**

##### **“Microcredit schemes fail to benefit ultra poor” (*The Daily Star*, 10 September 2004)**

Atiur identified high interest rates and rigid repayment systems as the two reasons behind the NGOs' failure to reach the ultra poor. "In many cases, poor people think that they may not follow the hardness of the repayment system."

##### **“NGOs exploiting hill people: Larma” (*The Daily Star*, 1 June 2004)**

The Parbattya Chattagram Jana Sanghati Samity (PCJSS) chief Jotirindriya Bodhipriya Larma alias Santu Larma on Sunday alleged that NGOs (non-government organisation) are "exploiting" the poor in Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT).

"I got complaints from people who failed to repay loan instalments", he told a discussion on Micro Credit Activities, held at the Hill District Council Auditorium at Rangamati.

"NGOs are being used to serve the purpose of vested quarters. I am personally opposed to the NGO theory," he said.

"Instead of developing human resources, the NGOs are busy in business", Larma said.

##### **“The Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD), a local think-tank, organised the dialogue in cooperation with IRRI at Cirdap auditorium in Dhaka” (*The Daily Star*, 27 May 2004)**

Chairing the dialogue, CPD Chairman Professor Rehman Sobhan said not a single area in Bangladesh could be freed from poverty even after 30 years of independence.

Mushfiqur Rahman, MP, said poverty exists in our country though many steps have been taken. Economist Binayak Sen said some areas in the country persistently remained in a poverty trap. He pointed out that none of the major NGOs had taken the responsibility of preventing 'monga' (famine) in northern districts though they operate in those areas.

Economist Atiur Rahman said even Sylhet region is not free from poverty though a huge amount of remittance comes from expatriates of this region.

"The money is used for unproductive sectors," he observed.

##### **“Top of the clientele” (*The Daily Star*, 5 February 2004)**

There is a strong tendency of the microfinance programmes to move to the top of the clientele group, and to give little attention to the needs of the poorest.

calamities of one kind or another. Under this hard reality in Bangladesh, a development program for the culture of moderate poverty with self-reliant sustainability is clearly a more pragmatic option than to try to push money and high-tech oriented development programs. Historically, and perennially Bangladesh has proved that poverty cannot be alleviated through a western model of development. According to Lewis and Wallace (2000), the western model of development has been generally understood as to assist 'underdeveloped' countries to become 'developed' in the sense of 'catching up' with 'developed' countries. It has been approached largely from an economist perspective, as the eradication, or at least the reduction, of poverty. This approach does not work. The above writers argue: "Many feel that the development project has failed. The gap between rich and poor has increased rather than decreased, and ecological and social problems begin to render our world unsustainable. Development theory has undergone many transformations over the years and today there is a growing body of thought that is beginning to question not only the various theories but the very validity of the development itself" (p. 29).

Sustainable or natural living in Bangladesh means a life-style comprising ecological housing (with thatched roof and mud wall and floor),<sup>19</sup> cotton clothing, regular diet comprising of rice, *dal* (pulses), and/or vegetables; and some meals with fish, eggs and milk. All these appear a sign of poverty to the outsiders. However, in the Bangladeshi culture people are happy and sustainable with this lifestyle. They prefer not to change their occupations or to adopt an alternative lifestyle. The descendants of weavers prefer to be weavers. This is widely applicable for other occupations: farmer, fisher, potter, smith, oil-maker.

In Bangladesh, the sense of social responsibility is strong. People share each other's joy and sorrow. The Baul-philosophers teach that: One's joy is doubled when shared by another person, and sorrow is halved when shared by another person. The spiritual practices of Baul Fakirs and their followers prevail as Sanatana (for all time). It was in the past as it is at present, and will remain vibrant in the future. Nevertheless, within this cultural characteristic and framework, upward mobility remains a desideratum. With all these the blue-print of natural Bangladesh is as follows:

<i>"Nadi vora jol</i>	Water in river,
<i>math vora sashay</i>	field full of crops,
<i>pukur vora maas</i>	pond full of fish,
<i>gohal vora garu</i>	cow in the cowshed,
<i>bari vora gaas</i>	homestead with trees,
<i>pakhir kolotan</i>	melodious tune of the birds,
<i>shisur koahol</i>	uproar of children,

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<sup>19</sup> People do not lose much in terms of money if their homes are destroyed or washed away by floods, river migration and cyclones.

*bauler o majheer gaan*  
*Rathe banya jantu O vuther voy."*

songs of Bauls and boatmen,  
fear of wild animals and ghosts at night.

This blueprint is constituted from Bangladeshi materials which are widely referred to by media, school texts books, Baul songs, folk stories and proverbs.

According to Baul guru Aziz Shah Fakir and his disciple Harun Baul (Hossain 2005, pers. comm., February), the sustainability icon for Bangladesh has physical and non-physical components. The physical components are natural resources, population and technologies including energy supply. Culture, poverty and political performance constitute the non-physical components. While the physical elements conjointly constitute a vehicle to progress, the transition toward a sustainable future of the country, the others generate 'values' that drive the vehicle. As the traditional values for sustainability management are gradually degrading because of the current state of the country's educational policy and political system, the physical components are not being appropriately or optimally explored. This is where sustainability problems prevail. In order to find a pathway to future sustainability, some aspects of the sustainability icon scenario are discussed in the following sections.

### **Emerging unsustainability in Bangladesh**

Any intervention into Bangladesh's historical sustainability scenarios, as depicted above, is seen by the village elders and gurus as an action toward unsustainability. Unsustainability is seen as a failure of development (and development intervention) to achieve sustainability aims, which provide an integral approach to social improvement, environmental protection and economic wellbeing. Amongst a number of unsustainable interventions such as the introduction of the agricultural practices with the Green Revolution Technologies (mono-cropping, chemical fertilisation, mechanical tilling and irrigation with ground water), afforestation and fisheries with alien species, flood control by building dams and criss-cross mud-roads in rural area, the intervention of PAPs for the Daridra through microcredit is also pushing the country towards unsustainability — socially, economically and environmentally.

Because of PAPs' failure in alleviating poverty, there is a growing agitation against NGOs and aid agencies in Bangladesh. It is asserted that it is because of aid organisations' continuous support that NGOs are surviving. Harun Baul claims that "no PAPs would have existed for the Daridra without NGOs, and no NGOs without the funding from international aid agencies." It is well known that the aid agencies not only finance NGOs for microcredit operation, they also finance all the interventions in the name of development for poverty alleviation. The aid agencies impose conditions for funding. The conditions are mostly anti-sustainability as viewed by Bangladeshi people (see examples in Box B).

In summary, it is clear that where poverty is natural in terms of the country's cultural, religio-spiritual and geo-environmental realities, the PAPs including microcredit have been only counter effective, affecting the country's sustainability. After a long three decades of development interventions

promoting unsustainability, social degradation, poverty, high rate of population growth, environmental degradation and overall mal-development are clearly on the increase. Why?

Harun Baul observes the exclusion of rural (poor) people's local knowledge and experience in development activities and lifestyle management as depicted. Going against the norms of people's natural resource management (which directly benefits them) with traditional practices is also at the root of the problem.

The results of poverty-alleviating efforts show that though poverty does exist in Bangladesh, it is not the key problem; problems lie rather with PAPs. The provision of imported relief food, chemical inputs to agriculture, the prevalent credit facilities for the Daridra, and random rural infrastructural development — all in the name of poverty alleviation — have mostly resulted in unsustainability.

#### **Box B: Unsustainable practices in Bangladesh**

##### **“World Bank urged not to impose tough conditions on Bangladesh” (*The Daily Star*, 28 February 2005)**

“Speakers at a seminar here yesterday urged the World Bank not to impose any tough terms and conditions on Bangladesh that are not commensurate with the country's socio-economic potential.

The seminar styled 'The World Bank in Bangladesh' was organised jointly by the bank and Chittagong Chamber of Commerce and Industry (CCCI) at the chamber auditorium.

Criticising the World Bank's loan system, CCCI President Saifuzzaman Chowdhury Javed urged the bank to offer soft lending.

The World Bank seems to have no hesitation to offer loan and grant to development projects, but the terms and conditions are stringent, said the chamber leader.

He was critical of the 'dictating attitude' of the World Bank while disbursing funds to certain development projects.

##### **“Saifur blasts donors' meddling in domestic affairs” (*The Independent*, 1 March 2005)**

Finance and Planning Minister M Saifur Rahman yesterday came down heavily on the donors for their propensity to interfere in the domestic affairs of the country. Talking to newsmen at the Zia International airport prior to his departure for Paris yesterday, a usually plain speaking Saifur did not mince his words in telling the donors that they could at best talk about issues relating to economic management, but did not have the right to interfere in the political management of the country. He said political management was the right of the electorate who have elected the government, and it is they who would decide what was right and what was wrong in the political arena.

##### **“Microcredit-Organisations get Money from Abroad in the Name of Poverty Alleviation” (viewed 12 June 2005, <[http://www.sos-arsenic.net/english/development/mcro\\_credit.html](http://www.sos-arsenic.net/english/development/mcro_credit.html)>)**

The Finance and Planning Minister has recently lashed out against a section of micro-credit organisations. He dubbed them 'peddler of poverty'. His arguments, as they appear in newspaper reports, rest on a number of pillars. First, these organisations get money from abroad in the name of poverty alleviation 'but we don't want to be peddler of poverty'.

The organisations involved in micro-credit charge high interest rates. This means that the poor borrowers tend to get trapped in the vicious cycle of poverty.

The arguments articulated by the Finance and Planning Minister may appear, at first sight, to be rather sweeping. Borrowing from external sources by the micro-credit organisations needs to be viewed in the context of the dependence on external aid by the government itself.

None of the above can contribute towards achieving self-reliance for Bangladesh; rather they do more sustained harm than any lasting good. Unnecessary imports of food for relief and the high price of chemical inputs to agriculture both affect farmers, who do not then get a proper price for their crops. Indiscriminate credit facilities for the poor make many of them even poorer (hardcore poor), for they do not know how to use capital in a profitable manner. Consequently, they lose the money they have borrowed and sink into debt. Most of the rural infrastructural development, especially in terms of the construction of mud roads and dams, are washed away during monsoons and this causes silting and water clogging.

The last three decades have seen many models of PAPs in village Bangladesh, including that of the Grameen Bank and NGOs which focus mainly on the microcredit model of poverty alleviation. Yet, according to a report on Bangladesh, the World Food Program revealed that 30 million ultra-poor have emerged within less than 30 years (*The Daily Star*, September 3, 1999). People now question the existing PAPs. In these circumstances, it is clear that proper poverty alleviation is unlikely unless the villagers are provided with more than just an economic encouragement. Affordable and adequate energy supply for home-scale productivity is essential, as are education in self-reliance, moderate consumption and preservation of the main cultural values which have made Bangladesh one of the happiest nations on Earth.

### **The way to happiness**

The paper argues that not all villagers are poor although they may appear to be so according to western standards. It is part of the Bangladeshi culture — perhaps adopted because of the country's tropical climatic conditions in one hand, and traditional naturalism<sup>20</sup> with moderate poverty, i.e. poverty that allows a household to meet its basic needs, on the other. It is a symbol of self-reliance for people and self-reliant sustainability for Bangladesh as a nation. Moderate poverty<sup>21</sup> is seen in Bangladeshi

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<sup>20</sup> Folk naturalists maintain that direct connection with the earth (soil) through walking barefooted or through wearing wooden sandals has two-fold secret: it energises body (i.e. keeps heart, eyes and mind as soft powerful and pure as soils); and shows respect to the nature — just as Hindus and Muslims take their shoes off when they stand before God (i.e. at the time of prayer).

<sup>21</sup> Moderate poverty is termed as 'sachsal garib' (solvent poor).

culture as acceptable in the country's social, economic and environmental conditions. It actually promotes a more sustainable way of living.

Many poor are proud of their poverty, perceiving that they can smile more readily than their fellow non-poor. Many non-poor envy the rural poor, perceiving that the poor can sleep better than non-poor people. The rural poor are more secure: no robbers come to rob them in the dark. In general, the rural poor are physically and spiritually stronger. They stay healthy, run their families well with the amount of money they have, which a non-poor cannot even countenance. In this way the majority of Bangladeshis living in poverty exclude themselves attitudinally from the life style of the minority rich — rural and urban dwellers. Problems such as obesity, immobility, social isolation or youth suicide which are some of the negative outcomes of the developed world, including Australia, are unknown in Bangladesh.

So, to explore the anthropology of poverty in village Bangladesh requires a value judgment from within the culture and the environmental conditions of this particular country. It also leads to the question of whether a judgment of Bangladesh rural poverty made by the experts of other cultures — without ethnographic research — can be accepted as accurate. The answer is 'no'; because the real Bangladeshi way of life is poverty-like. Only a few decades ago, when the population was less, per capita land and real income/purchasing capacity were higher, and the opportunity to access a more nutritious diet was available, rural Bengal used to look like thatched slums. The difference between the rural poor and non-poor was in terms of assets such as lands, livestock, fishponds and fruit/bamboo gardens. In the 1950s, the village women irrespective of their social status and creed, used to wear a cotton handloom sari made by the local weavers. Today, as a result of the transplantation of Western industrial cultural elements into the value-framework, intellectual traditions, moral and socio-political environment of Bangladesh, the lifestyle of some people is very different from the past. *Daridra* (poor) women go out of their homes to earn income, wear imported printed saris, mostly synthetic, while many non-poor (*boro loke* or *dhoni*) still maintain the old tradition of handloom saris.

To an outsider, the wearers of printed saris may look non-poor, and the wearers of traditional saris, poor — though the opposite is the case. Thus, the variance in culture and welfare within previously homogeneous groups is demonstrating "the effect of erasing local norms and levelling culture, since it is based on technology and international finance, not the natural world" (Shiva et al. 1994, p. 9). This is often misunderstood.

'Poverty' is a socially, economically and politically charged term and should be culturally embedded and contested. It should also be seen within the context of population growth and sustainable consumerism. 'Poverty alleviation' as promoted in Bangladesh is neither possible nor desirable, as it is devoid of cultural and environmental sustainability. The rural conceptualisation of poverty in Bangladesh emanates primarily from the geographical and cultural dynamics of its society. These

dynamics lead many people to live happily in so-called poverty while they actually have the capacity for, or access to, a higher standard of living, while others (Daridra), influenced by the same dynamics, strive to become better off. There are valid explanations for both types of values in the Bangladeshi context. However, poverty exists in villages as a tradition, and has social and environmental goodness in it. For example, the poverty of the Baul-fakirs including village *Kavirajas* (herbal medicos) helps maintain social cohesion and preserve medicinal plants. Deliberate poverty is the garb for folk naturalists<sup>22</sup> who cherish mother nature, keeping themselves in economic poverty; but unlike the general poor, maintain adequate body and spiritual energy.<sup>23</sup>

Whatever the conventional definitions or causes of poverty, Bangladeshi village people in poverty are culturally understood by traditional categories. As indicated, village poverty has geographic, cultural or humanistic associations, beyond those described by conventional deprivation theorists (Sen 1981). While geographical, cultural, economic and environmental characteristics that currently impact on agricultural and fishing villagers seldom allow a sustainable alleviation of village poverty, a traditional self-reliant livelihood appears to be a solution to their difficulties. The traditional self-reliant supplementary livelihood for village Bangladesh is unrelated to poverty or non-poverty. It is understood as a state of living that can meet the basic necessities from within household activities to earn a livelihood — albeit a supplementary livelihood. In other words, a self-reliant household is able to exchange its productivity to fulfil ongoing requirements for food, clothing, shelter and social obligations.

To keep poverty at moderate level, Bangladesh's renewable entities, e.g. thousands of rivers and marshy wetlands, mangrove forests etc. must be kept in order. Sustainable agricultural practices, and stock of indigenous fish and birds must be strengthened. Renewable energy sources must be exploited to meet the growing needs for energy use for home-scale industrial productivity and economic self-reliance. The development programs in order to alleviate poverty would end not only in vain, it would also promote unsustainability, provided they are devoid of addressing the natural renewable resource management efficiently. In the contrary, development programs that would help renew and/or complement the natural environment of Bangladesh are expected to be able to keep poverty limited in moderate consumption. This is what Bangladesh requires for its sustainability management.

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<sup>22</sup> Saints, Sanyasis, Fakirs and Bauls are the naturalists and deliberately live in poverty for socio-environmental syncretism (Hossain 1995).

<sup>23</sup> Folk Philosophers practise the experience of body-energy conservation through sexo-yogic practices or erotic mysticism. They do not experience ejaculation of semen (rasa for female), for it is the energy for physical strength and longevity; rather they frequently experience spiritual orgasm through ecstasy which increases body energy.

## Conclusion

In his recent visit (January 2005) to Bangladesh, Bill Thomas (retired State MP, Western Australia) was told by guru Aziz Shah Fakir in one of his discourse sessions that our foreign friends must believe that Bangladesh's sustainability is renewed as a result of the effect of entities which to westerners appear unsustainable. A Sufi<sup>24</sup> saying: "Truth lies in the opposite" applies to Bangladesh.

The poverty problem can be overcome in a sustainable way when development is combined with local knowledge and wisdom. Poverty alleviation programs in their current form have more potential to cause harm than help the long-term sustainability of Bangladesh. Firstly, they do not aim at those who are recognised as the most needy by the Bangladeshi society. Secondly, they do not encourage self-reliance and often create dependency. Finally, they introduce western values of consumerism, overproduction and competition. Development programs that could work should be built around education for sustainability, self-reliance tools and management approaches, moderate consumption and possession. Then Bangladesh can in fact prove that truth lies in the opposite.

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<sup>24</sup> Sufis are the (non-singer) Islamic mystics globally, while Bauls are the singing mystics of Bangladesh only (the Bauls come from both Muslim and Hindu background).



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