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Understanding—and misunderstanding—household: The case of Bangladesh

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Prologue

Many of the insights I have gained to write this paper are based both on my doctoral thesis and research experience on issues of migration in Bangladesh. My thesis was based on an extensive period of original field research (1995-1996) in the risk-prone coastal *charlands* of Noakhali. In this paper I have presented some of the materials from my thesis and argued that households are dynamic and changing, and therefore difficult to define clearly. The second research experience on which the paper is partially based was funded by DFID's DRC Migration, Poverty and Globalisation (held at the University of Sussex) (Ahmed 2006; Gardner and Ahmed 2006). The project involved a longitudinal study (2003-2004) of a Londoni village (which for reasons of confidentiality we shall call Jalalgao) in Biswanath Thana, Greater Sylhet.

Combining both experiences I argue that village households are fluid and changing, and therefore difficult to define as many commentators tend to ignore. In particular this paper looks at ways of conceptualising household in the context of Bangladesh. The first section examines two influential strands in current discussions. First, I look at official definitions of Governemnt of Bangladesh, which has used this definition in policy-related issues. Second, I examine the conceptualisation of household, paying special attention to some of the leading village studies in Bangladesh. My purpose here is to describe and explain how an individual's interest is diversified, rather than collapsing it into an undifferentiated 'unit of analysis (the household). I will show how the household is a deeply contested

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terrain in which different individuals have different interests in decision making.

The second section of this paper is divided into further two sub-sections. Using ethnographic data from Swadingram, I begin with the organisation of households and their fission/fusion, accompanied by a general discussion of the 'peasant household' in the Bangladesh literature. I argue that households are neither co-residential, nor bounded as most commentators assume. Rather, households are fluid and always changing in response to the wider context. The main aim of this section is to show how the household is a site of multiple interests among its constituent members. In the second sub-section, I present Biswanath experiences in order to understand the links between migration and flexibility of household. I pay close attention to two categories of respondents: the Londoni households and the in-migrants. I conclude by reviewing very briefly some main points which have a central bearing on the conceptualisation of household in the context of rural Bangladesh

The Conceptualisation of the Peasant Household

As I have shown elsewhere, an aggregated approaches that make generalisations about rural households is inadequate.[i] Some village studies in Bangladesh (e.g. Jansen 1987; Van Schendel 1981) assume that household forms tend to be co-residential and bounded units (Ahmed 1994; Sumon 2002; Akhtar 2006; Islam 2008). A link is made between poverty and household type by maintaining that poverty creates an enormous number of 'nuclear' families accompanied by land fragmentation. The assumption here is that the separation of the household is the same as the separation of land.

In Swadhingram, where livelihood is always uncertain, households may be physically divided but resources may be held and managed together. It is not necessary for brothers to divide households after the father dies. The land may be cultivated jointly. Ideology also plays a pivotal role in maintaining 'jointness'. One may ask why poor farmers in Swadhingram want their parent(s) to stay with them on a rotational basis according to their well-being, or why they farm together by sharing land, labour and other economic transactions jointly. In other words, it is not just economic factors which cause households to split or stay together as writers such as Jansen and

Van Schendel seem to assume; ideology also can play a pivotal role in maintaining 'jointness'.

I will demonstrate that rather than being in essentialist terms, coresidential and thus bounded, households in Swadhingram are highly flexible and responsive to the wider context. Their flexibility is associated with the transfer and flow of resources. The important thing is to find out how these resources are consumed, managed, held and distributed in order to understand the changing nature of households (Gittings 1993). Co-operation between Swadhingram and the place of origin from which villagers have migrated in terms of labour allocation and sharing of resources such as land, provide examples of this fluidity. In short, due to the contingent nature of livelihoods, exchanges and transfers between households are so common that it becomes difficult to define the household as an empirical unit.[ii] Before exploring data from Swadhingram, however, it is necessary to discuss how the peasant household is conceptualised in both official definitions and village studies in Bangladesh.

The Official Definitions of the Household

The definition of the household by the Bangladesh Census is a group of people who eat food prepared from the same cooking pot and live together. According to the Bangladesh Survey 1975-76, the household was defined as

> A group of persons usually living together in a structure of dwelling. A household may also be found within a shop, office, and mosque or on a boat, in a tent as long as its members sleep and eat there regularly.

This definition implies that the household is a residential unit and provides food for all members. People who live in the same house but have separate cooking arrangements constitute separate households, so that sharing the same pot is used to demarcate one household from another. In the definition preferred by Bangladesh Household Expenditure Survey (BHES),

> A household may be defined as a dwelling unit where a single person lives alone or a group of persons normally live and eat together from the common cooking

> arrangements. Persons living in the same dwelling unit but having meals from separate cooking arrangements will constitute separate households. (BHES 1975-76:5)
>
> According to the survey writers, household members are usually family members as well as boarders and lodgers, servants and other employees. They specify two criteria for identifying a household member, namely 'living' and 'eating' together with common cooking arrangements (ibid:5). In this definition 'chula' (common hearth) or 'deg' (cooking pot) is the cooking unit and people who eat from it are considered to be members of the same household. Conversely, where people live in the same dwelling unit but are not part of the same eating arrangement, they belong to separate households.

There are serious defects in this conceptualisation of the household. In the first place, co-residentiality alone is inadequate to understand the complex arrangements in rural Bangladesh. In the forthcoming section we will see how and why people in the study areas do not necessarily live under a common roof but may be considered as household members. In contrast to these definitions, anthropological and feminist literature of the last two decades shows a great cross cultural diversity of household composition and social relations (Harris 1984; Whitehead 1984a). It is evident that households are often shifting, flexible structures in which boundaries are difficult to discern. Feminists also show that the bounded nature of the household obscures intra and inter household exchanges which can be essential factors of production and consumption of goods (Rapp 1982; Whitehead 1984b, Guyer 1987). Critically too, as Whitehead (1984a) argues, the household is not necessarily a 'collective of mutually reciprocal interest'. Consequently, as she argues, men's and women's access to resources and labour income are determined by their relative position within the household, kinship group and the wider social and political environment.[iii] As Guyer and Peters (1987:208) has rightly pointed out "One needs to ask not where is the household'? But 'what are the significant units of production, consumption and investment in this region/group/people'?; and

'what are the major flows and transfers of resources between individuals and units'?" (emphasis mine).

Village studies and household conceptualisation

Like conventional sociological definitions, some village studies in Bangladesh have conceptualised households in terms of sleeping and eating units. There is no space to explore all of these studies, but it is helpful to have a look at some leading studies which represent the rest. I take two examples to understand how household conceptualisation has been problematised.

In his study, "Rural Bangladesh: Competition for Scarce Resources" (1987), Jansen has identified chula as the household unit where food is prepared. The people who belong to the same chula constitute a unit of economic interests (ibid: 322). Jansen also states that households are kinship based, consisting of several elementary families . According to Jansen,

> The household may consist of incomplete families, an elementary family living with other family members, or several elementary families living together in a household (emphasis mine, ibid: 57).

Van Schendel's study "Peasant Mobility: the odds of life in rural Bangladesh" defines 'households by the act of cooking; a residential unit for which food is habitually prepared in one batch may be called a household' (1981:22). Van Schendel's definition implies co-residence, excluding an agricultural labourer from his wife's household because he lives and eats in his landlord's household. It is assumed that to become a 'fully fledged' member, one must eat and live together with household members (ibid: 21). Regarding splitting of the household, Van Schendel's study shows that it is associated with both downward and upward mobility, contributing to polarisation' (op. cit., p-263-271). One of the causes of splitting is 'uneconomic fragments' shedding 'strong nuclear units'.[iv] The backgrounds, as Van Schendel argues, are intergenerational power conflicts between a father and his sons or between a woman and her son-in-law. Consequently, the joint household inevitably splits. As Van Schendel writes:

> Harrison's idea of a household splitting as a process in which economically strong nuclear units within an extended *family household rid themselves of uneconomic and backward fragments* is more in line with our findings than Shanin's notion of equal division..... (emphasis mine, op. cit., p-264).

In analysing the 'peasant household' in Russian peasantry, Shanin has shown that early splitting is a strategy amongst the richest households. To apply this model in Bangladesh, Van Schendel has suggested that splitting is associated with poverty and downward mobility in rural Bangladeshi households. This means that household splitting is merely conceptualised on the basis of physical separation resulting from economic differentials.

In both of these village studies, the conceptualisation of the household is akin to the official definition in which households are seen as a bounded unit. Without showing how property is managed, held, or distributed, the household is merely conceptualised on the basis of physical division. In both studies, the 'nuclear' family is assumed to be more common than the 'rare' and 'temporary' joint family (Jansen 1987: 57, 62-64; Van Schendel 1981: 263-273).

In what follows I will show that sleeping and eating arrangements are an inadequate definition and that the boundaries of the household are difficult to establish. It is important to know how local people themselves explain the household. Once we check their views against what some of the major village studies of household have had to say, then the 'co-residential ' and 'bounded' nature of the household begins to look less useful as a starting point. This is particularly the case when we want to disentangle and disinter co-residential arrangements . This will be discussed in the following section by looking at how households are linked to wider contexts.

Swadingram experience

Swadhingram is a *char* village, situated in Southern part of Noakhali district. Based on fieldwork, I have taken the form of anthropological enquiery. The distinctive feature of the village is its risk coastal character which brings a hig level of insecurity of inhabitants. Agricultural risk is a common phenomenon which is

simultaneously physical (e.g. from salinity) and socio-poloitical (e.g. from land extortion and vulnerability to the play of power relations). It is in this context that negotiations and renegotiations of households' arrangements are seen as part of the ways villagers deal with the livelihood uncertainties in relation to a range of overlapping social institutions including households. Let us discuss the nature of household first.

The Ghor (the household)

As in most Bangladeshi villages, the basic elements of kinship organisation in Swadhingram are: the ghor (household), the *bari* (homestead), the *gusthi* (lineage), and the *shomaj* (society). *Ghors* are linked to a series of relationships operating within those groupings. In her work in Talukpur in Bangladesh, Gardner has argued that

'describing the household as isolated entities undoubtedly risks marginalising these wider links and subsuming everything into the unit which writer finds most convenient' (1995: 100). In the same way, in Swadhingram, most ghors are related to wider links and include networks of social relations such as kin, friends, malik, jotdar/patron and so on.

In Swadhingram, the ghor is synonymous with the English word household. People's explanations of ghor are based around sleeping and eating arrangements. *Girosthi* (householder), a derivative from *griho/ghor*, implies a house but can also mean farmer, which is obviously related to landholding and work. Members of a ghor are often but not always family members in Swadhingram. Some ghors consist of families- spousal, parent-child and sibling bonds. But some ghors also contain relations beyond primary kin as well as non-kin such as ailla (year round labourers).

Swadhingram people divide households into two main categories namely *ekatra* (joint/extended) and *juda* (separate). Ideally, *ekatra* household are those where two married couples are living and related through the male line either laterally or lineally. On the other hand, juda households consists basically of a married couple with

some extra members-typically the relatives of the husband. It must be pointed out that *juda* is not synonymous with the English 'nuclear' household. *Juda* does not necessarily mean that property is divided as well. Firstly; several non lineal kin such as kamla (servant) and maternal kin may be members of a juda household. Secondly; although *ghors* are physically separated, economic co-operation and property holding may be considered as common resources. One respondent believes that ' we live in separate ghor, but eat from the same pot'.

The real living and eating arrangements can be understood if we look at the composition of households. The Swahingram data shows that the majority of the households are single units consisting of their dependent children. Of 26 households, almost half were already single before migrating to Swadhingram and the rest have been split after spending a considerable time with their parents. Most rich household members have non-kin (especially *kamla*) who live and eat with them. Amongst the poor households, the composition does vary considerably when relatives come to assist during peak season.

In three households, members do not live under a common roof but eat from the same deg. One household consists of single parents, and a divorced daughter with her two children considered as ekatra. Against the cultural norm, the married daughter returned after her marriage to her natal home. This suggests the real arrangements of the households are much more open to negotiation than the cultural norms imply. Joint households are those where two or more married couples live with their siblings. About eight of the households live with their married adult sons and may be termed 'rotational joint' households. These household members do not light chula together and their daughters-in-law prepare food in separate deg. This can be arranged by the sons mutually. Land may be held by a father but farming is done by sons. Meanwhile, the rewards of productivity are seen as joint. In the next section I discuss how local people work within the household organisation.

Understanding—and misunderstanding—household:

During my stay in the field, I saw how household composition changed over time. It changes especially where migration is involved. In Swadhingram, the fluidity of households is associated with the movement of individuals to their original place, Ramgoti, from which they have migrated. About twenty households are involved in this process, in which household members help each other throughout the agricultural cycle.

Interestingly, the majority of the villagers believe that their *deshkul* (home) is still in Ramgoti, where their close kin and property belong. Conversely, members at that end believe that they have right to Swadhingram property as it belongs to their father's household. In this sense, transfer of resources, labour allocation and exchanges are so common that it is difficult to draw household boundaries. Mr X , for example, came to Swadhingram ten years ago. He built a house on his father's land. His household consists of his dependants and his mother, whilst his father and other two brothers live in Ramgoti. Throughout the year, Mr. X visits Ramgoti to help his father's household and the same thing happens when he becomes busy with sowing, harvesting and other agricultural operations in Swadhingram.

The ins and outs of migration have a profound impact on households and affect the size and composition of the units. In Swadhingram, the majority of farmers migrate after *amon* harvest in order to find work in adjacent districts. This means migrant households need to shelter dependants, who usually come from Ramgoti to help in agricultural activities. In a similar vein, during sowing *amon* paddy when labour is scarce, a large number of in-migrants come into Biswanath from Greater Sylhet as well as from poorer regions of the country. Most of them come only seasonally, working in a group. These labourers basically work for the wealthier households and live either in their *kachari* (lodging house) or in colonies (*bustees*). In such cases, the new members live separately but eat form the same *deg*. Others live under an annual agreement with Londoni households, which provide lodging and a certain amount of money.

The above data indicate that living and eating arrangements are fluid in two sttings. This fluidity is associated with migration both in and out, which in turn affects the size and composition of households. This fluctuating nature of household composition is related to present livelihoods of the in-migrants. The co-operation and movement of individuals between physical households is definitely a strategy used to manage the destitution to people (see Ahmed, forthcoming). This will be clearer if we look at how households are organised.

Authority and Power within the Ghor

Within the household, different members play different roles in maintaining household activities according to their age, sex and kinship.[v] The pervasive cultural ideology is that the household *karta* (head) is always male and has considerable skills and knowledge in all affairs. As we shall see however, females are also sometimes household heads (Lewis 1993). The ideology helps to maintain a hierarchy where husbands / fathers are given enormous authority. The norms of filial piety and obedience are generally accepted towards karta.

Whilst a father is alive, household management and other agricultural decisions are normally taken by him. But this does not mean that fathers have absolute authority over all household affairs. The sharecropping contracts and labour management are often managed by married adult sons who are assumed to be more dynamic and stronger than the fathers. The authority of the households is even more blurred when almost all-agricultural decisions ranging from operation of land to managing credit are taken by sons. But it must be pointed out that any decision taken by sons is usually placed before murubbi for his official approval.

Hierarchy is also maintained by gender within the household, where males officially have more authority than females. This is related to the patriarchal ideology, in which men tend to control most of the household material resources including the labour of the female and *nabalog* (junior) members (See Kabeer 1994; White 1992). Men's

labour or earnings are given special emphasis in comparison to their women folk. A metaphor, for example, *purush mathar gham paye peley porisrom korey or rokto pani korey porisrom korey* (Men work so hard; they sweat from head to foot, turning blood into water) But this should not give the impression that women have no role in agricultural activities. Apart from domestic tasks, various agricultural decisions are actively taken by women. I observed that many agricultural activities officially practised in the field by male farmers, are actually performed by female farmers (see Ahmed 1999).

In the absence of their Londoni husbands, women play an active role in household decision making. But this does not mean that they are officially household heads. In one instance, where the husband lives in London but maintain regular contact over cell phone, the headship is rather ambiguous. The wife thinks her husband is karta who remits money but the husband thinks it is the wife who takes all household decisions. In this case, the wife takes decisions in consultation with her teenage son, who manages household including agricultural decision making; but crucial decisions may be the arena of the mother. Officially the man is the household head, but in practice it is the wife. As Gardner has rightly pointed out 'Rather than authority being absolute, and vested in any one individual, in most cases it is more diffuse' (1995:103).

Household Fission/Fusion

In Swadhingram, family household composition is continually changing over time. Some commentators assume that household fission-fusion is determined by the household 'development cycle' in which 'nuclear' households expand, extend and then again split more into 'nuclear' units after the death of household heads i.e.- the process is linked cyclically to the progression of time. When examined more closely, this assumption becomes increasingly problematic, because household splits are related to a number of socio-economic reasons and not necessarily their 'natural' cycle.

Households may split due to the number of the family members, lack of space in ghors, tensions between the members and so on.

In Swadhingram most households are divided, even when the fathers are alive. To avoid family disputes, fathers may think it is wise to build separate ghors for married sons but farming may take place jointly. Another reason may contribute to splitting households. The majority of fathers think that it is important to make sons more independent (*Nijer payey darano: stands on own feet*) by making them Juda. As I have already mentioned, separate ghor creation or even split kitchens does not necessarily indicate that there is no co-operation between two ghors. In such cases father and mother may have physically separate ghor but eat with their sons. Land is officially held by the father, but farmed by sons together, other forms of capital (plough and other agricultural inputs) are shared, and the rewards of productivity are usually seen as joint resources.

When a father dies, a widowed mother may live with the original household and become the head, but if other family members are there, the household may separate. Mothers may live and eat rotationally in a year according to the well being of sons. The property is not necessarily divided. Since his father's death, for example, Ayub Ali's widowed mother lives in a separate ghor with her youngest married son. Ayub lives with his two wives who have separate ghors. These three ghors are in the same *bari* and have separate cooking arrangements. But the two brothers farm their land together and the crops go to common granary from which consumption is met according to need.

This example gives some indication of the range of co-operation where extended households are drawn together economically. After the father died, the two brothers did not divide their property, instead they farmed together. In addition, the rewards of productivity (cash or crop) are usually managed through a *joutha bhandar* (common fund) which is embedded in what Standing terms 'redistributive ideology' (Standing 1991:94).

What happens to the poorest households? Does extreme poverty force landless households to partition out nuclear households from joint ones? Most village studies show that amongst landless households, breakdown occurs quickly (Bertocci 1970; Adnan 1979; Arthur and Mcnicol 1978; Van Schendel 1981; Jansen 1987). As these researchers argue, household incomes cannot sustain any more members, resulting in a separate household. According to Jansen, for example, because of poverty elderly parents would be separated from an adult son and his wife, compelling the father to beg and starve (see Jansen 1987: 64-65, 207-208). For Van Schendel, 'why, for instance, should an able-bodied teenage son stay in such a household if he resents his father's authority and is earning his own keep as an agricultural labourer? The son's income is now used to help support non-earning members of the paternal household' (Van Schendel 1989:265).

The tendency to assume that household forms are directly related to economic position is too simplistic.[vi] What is missed out from such an interpretation is an important aspect of cultural ideology in Bangladesh: every person expects to serve their household members, especially their parents. Being Muslim, the majority of the farmers in Swadhingram believe that *Ma-Babakey korley Allahr kachey paoa jabey* (Looking after parents is synonymous with prayer which in turn satisfies God). Despite deteriorating economic conditions, poor farmers manage to help their parents by sharing among the brothers on a rotational basis according to their ability. This is not to say that parents are not sometimes forced out from the original household due to poverty. It does seem that parental authority may be reduced if there is no property. In such situations ideology and material necessity may mismatch. But, we have to be wary of making generalisations which are based on mere economic reasons, largely because the understandings of co-operation are social in origin, not a natural and inevitable process.[vii]

A number of cases illustrate that belonging together and sharing land management are embedded in cultural ideology as well as material factors (Ahmed 1999). In one case it is possible to see that although

two households are physically separated, the land's management is usually placed together whether a household contributes much or not. Another case also illustrates how responsibilities within/between households appears to be a historically specific mode of managing households and resource allocation in which the distinctions between 'earners' and 'dependants' or between 'productive' and 'non-productive' members are increasingly blurred. Similar findings have been brought out by Standing among the Bengali urban community in Calcutta. Standing forcibly argues that : "There is no 'natural' reason' why a man should feel less responsible for his deceased brother's widow than his own wife, nor why a woman should consider her sister-in-law's children less deserving than her own" (1991:92). This implies that the ethnocentric assumption among researchers that the nuclear form is more 'natural' or easy to maintain is problematic. Having discussed the Swadhingram data, let us move onto Biswanath to see how migration plays a pivotal role in understanding the fluidity of household.

The Biswanath experience

This village is located in Biswanath upazila, a booming Londoni area only twenty minutes by bus from Sylhet Town. The main aim of our research was to understand the intersecting dynamics of internal and overseas migration in the village. We have found that many in-migrants (both male and female) from different parts of the country come into the Londoni villages in order to find work. These in-migrants include: permanent and seasonal labourers and colony dwellers. Permanent and seasonal labourers mainly they reside in their employers households/houses-although not all do; some reside in the colonies (bustee).

The Biswanath study shows that local people themselves call Londoni households whose members live in London but maintain relationships with home households. Put simply, the Londoni household are those who have members currently in Britain who may be regularly remitting money (usually male), and those who were once in the same household as Londonis (for example several brothers, one of whom stayed in Bangladesh). The data also shows that over our year's fieldwork, colony households compositions have

frequently been changed. Just as some people arrived, others would leave, either visiting their home villages for a crtain period, or moving to another colony. It would be misleading to assume these in-migrants reside 'permanently' in Jalalgao. Rather, colony households are in constant flux, with members moving in and out of the village according to necessity. Unlike the stable inhabitants in villages in Bangladesh, people are highly mobile. Few live only in one location, and the vast majority depend, in one way or another, upon a place other than their 'home' for their livelihood.

This complexity indicates the ambiguity of household that often prevent from defining it in a more precise way (Gardner and Ahmed 2007) [viii]Let me say a few words about this ambiguity when I submitted migration research draft report to one of my teachers, who acted as a research coordinator of Sussex migration research centre. She read the report and backs the comments for clarity.

I want to quote her now:

> Your data is complicated because it includes information about households and as far as we can gather about immigrants as individuals. But it remains very ambiguous as to how many of these immigrant individuals are living in their employer's households and how many are somehow in their own households. You need to be clear about this yourself in your initial definitions about who is in different kinds of households. How have you dealt with the non kin members of insider households who live where they are working?

I struggled to find out the answers. I revisited the households in order to check what my teacher wanted to know. She not only was a teacher I respect but she has gained such a reputation in unpacking the black box of households both conceptually and empirically (Whitehead 1984a; 1984b). My clarification concerns who is a resident of this village and who is not. I have treated immigrants labour in the same way that local residents of Jalalgaon do-as essentially members of the village, not visitors. The survey data shows that they are often away from home and it may reasonably to think of many of them as having two 'homes'-a home village and then a home at their place for labour migration. From an analyst's perspective then the temporary immigrants should be treated as village residents. It then become a question of how I decided to classify them according to whether they have their own households or belongs to the households of employers.[ix]

As I have mentioned that in-migrants' households change frequently, moving either to colonies or to home villages. The crucial point was to explain exactly how one is treating the temporary and permanent farm workers in relation to their household membership. I should make it clear that most of the workers live and eat in employers houses and thus become the members of the households of their employers. It was really difficult to count how many workers came during the conduction of fieldwork but roughly estimated that around 100 workers came. This means making a decision about whether people working for others and living in their *bari* are members of employers households. On the other hand those who live in colony along with their dependants constitute separate households but work for the village residents. Few in-migrants leave their families somewherelse constitutes own households.

Towards a conclusion

I have argued that household arrangements are inadequately conceptualised in some of the literature, which does not give enough attention to the complexity and variability of household arrangements. Swadhingram data shows that the social identities of farmers as multiple and fluid negotiated at both intra and inter household levels. The household is 'unpacked' not along lines of gender but also of age, generation, land holding statuse etc. while the fluid character of household is shown. On the other hand, Jalalgao data shows that household is neither bounded nor coresidential. The Londoni migrants in Jalalgao is physically absent but structurally present as household members/'head' and main source of subsisence. Moreover, the in-migrants' households are dynamic and changing, and therefore difficult to define precisely.

The understanding of the household in two different social settings raises important issues concerning the unit of analysis. Focusing narrowly on coresidential unit is clearly inadequate, as this obscures the wider relations. The evidences I have presented prove that household is a problematic concept to rural areas in Bangladesh, where people frequently move in and out. This understanding has been empirically discussed in the above. Here it is only necessary to

review very briefly main points against some of the assumptions made in existing literature (Ahmed 1994).

Firstly; assumption that households are organised around a household head.[x] It is often assumed as male headed and thus somehow natural, with little consideration of precisely what this approach means in terms of nature of authority, and relationship to allocation of resources. Without seeing more exactly what different individuals do and the interrelationships between different aspects such as consumption, distribution or decision making process, it is simplistic to follow household head approach. Significant influences on differentiated individual's interest cut across age and sex may be obscured if we fail to recognise, for instance, the unequal access to resources created by specific cultural ideology. While an adequate detail look at individuals' role and interest is necessary, it must not be too narrowly conceived.[xi] It is also assumed that authority of household head is natural. Thus a *murubbi*, senior male, uses his authority and power in each decision making process within the household. Women are portrayed as 'food provider' for sustenance for the members through productive and reproductive activities often thought of as part of a 'domestic sphere'. Little attention is paid to make link to wider political economies and culture.

Secondly; assumption that household as a co-residential arrangement (sleeping and eating arrangement) obscures the flexibility. Often, members who do not live or eat together are not considered as members. Furthermore, focusing exclusively on visible members' obscures their relations with 'outside' members, ignoring the nature of income pooling that often constitutes due to migration. This means that household is constant flux and changes regularly. The focus on coresidential unit can also imply, misleadingly, that household is unchanging when other than kin members are excluded.

Finally; the tendency to equate women uncritically with domestic work is unhelpful, largely because it fails to recognise the changing nature of division of labour both at intra and inter households levels. However, the way people in Swadhingram manipulate, subvert and

negotiate around ideologies concerning gender-appropriate activities became evident in the discussion of decision making processes. Sometimes women are portrayed as 'women headed household', ignoring critical differences related to age, kinship and socio-economic position.

Notes

i. See Ahmed 1994. This paper has been prepared for my MA course in social anthropology in University of Sussex. I am grateful to my teacher Ann Whitehead for her valuable comments during the preparation of the term paper. For a similar discussion, also see Guyer and Peters 1987; Kabeer 1991; Harris 1984; Whitehead 1984a, Whitehead 1984b.

ii. In her article 'Households as natural units', Olivia Harris (1981) points out that in much Western thought, households assumed to be the same as families.

iii. Common definition of household is 'shared hearth'. Early feminist anthropology has deconstructed the notion of household, paying special attention to the relations within household. Before then, households were assumed to be units of joint economic interest, then the interests of the different members of the household were the same? Other feminist advocates has shown this to be very far from the case (Whitehead 1981, Standing 1991; Guyer 1986, 1987).

iv. Though Van Schendel is aware of the need for keeping family and household distinct, he has conflated both concepts and used them interchangeably (see the discussion on household mobility in the concluding chapter, van Schendel (1981: 263-273).

v. The unequal relationships are usually vested in kinship terminologies which are based on bifurcation [*boro bhai* (elder brother, *mejo bhai* (middle brother), *choto bhai* (younger brother), *boro apa* (elder sister), *mejo apa* (middle sister), *choto apa* (younger sister)]. These terms denote roles, obligation and status where relations of hierarchy exist. Whilst the terms are bifurcated, they are also lumped together on the basis of age, where elderly fathers or brothers are considered as *murubbi* (honourable) in comparison to their junior members.

vi. Taking examples from Sub-Saharan Africa, Whitehead and Lockwood (1998) argue that because of various complexities such as the variety of household forms, intra-household relations, gender division of labour, complexity of membership of different social organisations, it is difficult to define the household. Along with these complexities, they further argue, the contingent nature of livelihood poses a serious problem for the economic modelling of the household. As they explain, "Livelihood strategies are intricate, flexible, adaptive and responsive. There have to be many different avenues of choice and decision making. Long, rather than short-term considerations may

dominate some aspects of household behaviour. Survival strategies to deal with the various forms of risk depend on having complex alternatives" (1998:10-11).

vii. See also Whitehead 1984b; Folbre 1986; Evans 1989; Kabeer 1991.

viii. Compared to Gardner's 1995 book titled 'Global Migrants, Local Lives', her recent writings on 'transnational household' analysis takes off, from the universalist position. She argues that connections between local and global, and Sylhet and Londoni households are inextricably linked to each other. Gardner's household conceptualisation in relation to transnational migration has devoted to take a flexible approach, looking beyond individual or household responses to wider social and economic contexts. The nature of these households is cosmopolitan what Gardner terms 'Transnational Households', encompass wider relationships between neighbours and relatives which include both patrilineal and matrilineal kin, as well as in-laws. As Gardner argues, I am not defining households as being rooted in a set physical location or a single hearth, but more loosely, as a group of people tied together by common productive and reproductive interests (Gardner and Grillo 2002).

ix. Katy Gardner shows that Bengali families are increasingly broken up due to the fact that the shortage of council housing for large extended families in Tower Hamlets and local council policy prevents extended families from being rehoused together. As she further shows that when children get married, the shortage of space in council flats becomes particularly pressing (personal communication).

x. Taking evidence from the Kusai of Ghana, Whitehead (1981) shows that in order to understand the difference between men and women we need to deconstruct both the division of labour and the household. For the Kusai, there are two different types of land, private and household, and men and women have different access to resources such as labour. Productivity therefore relies to large extent on degree to which labour can be utilised. As men enjoy much power compared to women, - they can utilise women labour by calling on the work of their wives, and also on community work, whereas women have to pay for work with beer. Thus, it is necessary to understand men and women's differing access to resources and how they are negotiated within complicated cultural amd political contexts.

xi. Ann Whitehead's concept of 'conjugal contract' is useful here. She describes varied ways in which husbands and wives exchange goods, labour and different forms of power in different settings. Her work in both Ghana and UK, pointed out the key importance of breaking down household relationships; of analysing the division of labour both inside and outside households; and of examining women and men's differing access to resources. Marriage and kinship often emerged as important political and economic institutions (see Of Marriage and The Market, Young *et al.*, 1981)

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আখতার,রা ২০০৬ পুষ্টিজ্ঞান অধ্যয়নে গৃহস্থালী ধারনায়ন, নৃবিজ্ঞান পত্রিকা, সংখ্যা ১১. নৃবিজ্ঞান বিভাগ, জাহাঙ্গীর নগরবিশ্ববিদ্যালয়।

ইসলাম,ফা ২০০৫ নগর দারিদ্রের প্রেক্ষাপটে গৃহস্থালী প্রত্যয়: লিঙ্গীয় দৃষ্টিভঙ্গি নজরুল ইসলাম সম্পাদিত ভূগোল ও পরিবেশ জার্ণাল ৫(বিশেষ সংখ্যা) ঢাকা: সেন্টার ফর আরবান স্টাডিজ।

সুমন,মা ২০০৩ গৃহস্থালির প্রচলিত প্রত্যয়ন: নারীর অধ:স্তনতা অনুধাবন কল্পে প্রত্যয়গত সীমাবদ্ধতা এস,এম,অলিম সম্পাদিত *সমাজ,শরীর ও পরিবেশ: নৃবিজ্ঞানের প্রবন্ধাবলী*, নৃবিজ্ঞান বিভাগ, জাহাঙ্গীর নগরবিশ্ববিদ্যালয়, পৃ: ৬০-৭৯.