

Making a Life: Urbanization and Poor Men and Women in Bangladesh¹

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The intent of this paper is to discuss the impact of urbanization in Bangladesh on social and political change for men and women. Bangladesh has experienced fast urban population growth of which two-thirds are poor people. This paper will focus mainly on the poor with regard to social and political change following their migration to urban areas. The first section deals with the development of urbanization and urban population in Bangladesh. The second section focuses on social, political and economic changes for poor men and women. It includes a discussion of kinship and social organization in the urban areas. It also discusses issues like poverty, economic and political organization and class relations. It focuses on the issue of feminization of labour in the urban sector following the penetration of the global market and the idea of growth through export oriented industrialization in particular the RMG sector. Further it includes a discussion on the indigenous migrant population in Bangladesh.

Methodology

This paper reviewed available literature on internal migration and urbanization in Bangladesh and used insights from secondary sources to explain the situation of urbanization. Further I used my experience as an anthropologist to understand the situation with regard to migration and urbanization in Bangladesh. This exercise is therefore a reflexive one. It is centred on my experience since my childhood. Needless to mention that human experience creates context to understand human behaviour and I was no exception for I grew up in a village and later lived in two cities of Bangladesh. This helped me understand deeply the process and meaning of migration from rural to urban areas and elsewhere. Moreover, these gave me opportunities on many occasions to experience

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happiness and woes of migrants. Against this backdrop I tried to understand and appreciate their lives.

The Development of Urbanization in Bangladesh

The fast growth of urban population in Bangladesh has been caused by Rapid migration of people from rural to urban areas in recent years. The region presently known as Bangladesh was the least urbanized area of South Asia but now has the fastest growth of urban population in South Asia although it is still less urbanized than neighbouring countries of the region (Alamgir 1993: Afsar, 2001). Between 1951 and 1961 urban population in Bangladesh increased by 45 percent. By far, the most rapid urbanization and migration took place during intercensal period, 1961 and 1974. The urban population increased by a phenomenal 137 percent. This was largely because of population displacement in the war of independence and by the economic crisis like famine in rural areas after independence (Alamgir 1993:32). The economic expansion gives a larger number of people the option of migration. Bryan Roberts' (1978) 'cities of peasants' pointed out that the peasants of Latin America migrated to urban areas in increased numbers for livelihoods following capitalist penetration. In Bangladesh increased capitalist penetration created a labour market for men and women (Jahangir 1976; Arefeen 1986) followed by large scale immigration to urban areas.

Bangladesh is experiencing very high rates of urbanization. Although over 20 percent of the population lives in urban areas the average annual growth of urban population 1980-89 was 6.6 percent in Asia and migration is the main contributor to this urban growth (Kemper 1989). Urbanization in Bangladesh accelerated at the time of the partition of India in 1947. Migration immediately before and after partition took place on a massive scale. By 1951 an estimated 700,000 migrants from India came to Bangladesh (Laskar 1983). The origin of this migration was based on religion. Hindus from Bangladesh (East Pakistan) migrated to India while Muslims migrated to the then Pakistan, now Bangladesh. Despite the outflow the time between 1931 and 1948 recorded a 43 percent increase in urban population in Bangladesh. Interestingly most of these Hindu migrants were from rural areas while many of the Muslim immigrants from India settled in urban areas. During the Pakistan period (1947-1970) Dhaka revived its status as the

Provincial capital and became the most important economic and political centre in the eastern region in the country. The small scale industrialization that happened during this time was limited to the cities and their vicinities. On the other hand poverty in rural areas expanded. The overall effects of urban prominence and rural decay created increased urbanization between 1951-1981; urban population in Bangladesh got accelerated by 45 percent. What follows from this is that urban growth in Bangladesh is mainly the result of a rural-urban migration which estimated to contribute between three-fifths to two-thirds of urban growth in Bangladesh (CUS 1990; Majumder et al 1989).

It is mostly the poor and the vulnerable ones who migrate as poverty pushes them out of rural areas. After migration many of them end up in slums and squatter settlements. A comprehensive study conducted by the Centre for Urban Studies on city slums (CUS 1995) discussed that among the population living in the 771 slums of the city 81 percent were migrants (CUS 1995). Another study estimated that nearly three quarters of the urban poor in Bangladesh were migrants (CUS 1995). Yet another very recent study corroborates the above (Barkat and Akhter 2001). For example Barkat and Akhter in the Harvard Asia Pacific Review hold that the large flow of people from rural areas occurs mainly due to the economic reasons.

Most of the migrants come from nearby areas. If the rural origin is far from the largest city, then hierarchical migration (from small eventually to large cities) probably takes urban population in South Asia although it is still less urbanized than neighbouring countries of the region (Alamgir 1993; Afsar, 2001). Between 1951 and 1961 urban population in Bangladesh increased by 45 percent. By far, the most rapid urbanization and migration took place during intercensal period, 1961 and 1974. The urban population increased by a phenomenal 137 percent. This was largely because of population displacement in the war of independence and by the economic crisis like famine in rural areas after independence (Alamgir 1993:32). The economic expansion gives a larger number of people the option of migration. Bryan Roberts' (1978) 'cities of peasants' pointed out that the peasants of Latin America migrated to urban areas in increased numbers for livelihoods following capitalist penetration. In Bangladesh increased capitalist

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Most of the migrants come from nearby areas. If the rural origin is far from the largest city, then hierarchical migration (from small eventually to large cities) probably takes place. Limited resources restrict the ability of the migrants to move directly to larger more distant city. In this connection a word should be said on the Bangladesh rural social structure where landlessness and pauperization has been increasing. Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics reported that about 70 percent of rural people are either completely landless or functionally landless. Despite this most of the migrants are circular ones. In Bangladesh because of strong agrarian household economy (Arefeen 1986) with extended character created a large number of circular or chain migrants who do not migrate to urban areas permanently and they keep in contact with their natal villages by keeping in mind their extended family in the village as a reference point. Migrants somehow kept alive the notions of their extended family of the village. Gail Minaults (1981) observed a similar strong ideal notion of the extended family in the minds of Indian urban migrants. Urban migrants in Bangladesh maintain a close link with their rural home. Since the household is the important social and economic unit urban immigrants keep various types of links with rural natal households (Rahman 1974; Jahangir 1979; Arefeen 1986). The household occupational structure has been diversified often households that migrate to cities keep one or two members in the rural area taking care of rural household and agriculture. As a result remittances from urban relatives form an important component of the household resource base while the rural household provides security and maintains diversity. There are pull back factors such as obligations to parents, family or kin and the needs to maintain property in the rural areas (Alamgir 1993). The majority of married male migrants leave their wives and children behind (Chowdhury n.d). All these factors force migrants to make frequent visits to their natal places. The circulatory nature of migration provides rural residents with contacts in the city and increases chain migration, where the migratory path of the pioneer migrant is replicated by subsequent migrants. Additionally kinsmen in the cities provide a hospitable environment and a social identity for the

new immigrants. Within Bangladeshi cities migrants from same areas tend to cluster in specific localities. Existence of strong contacts and networks with kinsmen and local people is a major determinant in the major decision-making for all forms of migration. Thus migrants bring in their kin and reproduce social networks (Alamgir 1993; Afsar 2000).

With the existing agrarian structure with strong polarization trend creates greater scope for non-farm activities *vis-à-vis* immigration to urban centres. The literature indicates that people associated with non-farm activities are mostly working in small urban centres to large urban centres. However, in spite of this the household remains a significant unit in the local economy, but the migration of family members and the fragmentation of economic enterprise undermines its basis as a unit of production (Roberts 1978). Such background in the agrarian structure in Bangladesh kept the rural urban distance at a minimum. Circular and chain migration characterize migration pattern in the city. In fact migrants can not sever kinship and local connections and settle down in urban centres permanently and they often fall back upon their rural kinsmen and local people when in crises. This creates a large number of circular migrants to urban centres but fails to create a permanent migrant population in the cities. A full-scale capitalism or industrialization would break the existing agrarian structure and thus can create a viable urban culture. Thus urban centres remain "cities of peasants" a term used by Bryan Roberts (1978). Poor migrants will continue to pour into our urban centres for livelihoods for some time to come because of strong rural urban links and at the same time the urban population will grow. Unlike Afsar (2000) And Barkat and Akhter (2001) I looked at the swelling number of urban population in Bangladesh positively since I consider that this development expands our economy and provides more people with livelihoods. Afsar (2000) already indicated that migrants from rural areas get employment readily upon coming to urban areas. Although it is a fact that the swelling number of migrants to urban areas will create slummization, (Barkat and Akhter 2001) stark inequality and deprivation among the poor. I am not insensitive to the stark inequality and poverty in urban areas but what I am hinting at is that the migrants are settling themselves down in urban areas on their own which will be

discussed in the section when we will discuss about their livelihood situation of the migrant poor people in the urban area.

Social, Political and Economic Change for Poor Men and Women in Urban Areas of Bangladesh

With the beginning of the century the growth of the rural population of Bangladesh continued to be high and increase the movement of poor people from rural to urban areas. This increases the rapid growth of urban population. In the following we will discuss changes in kinship and social organization following their migration to urban centres.

Kinship and Urban Social Organization

Studies on urban migration show that poverty, landlessness, river erosion, cyclones and other natural calamities have forced people to migrate to urban centres (Islam et al 1982, CUS 1990). Siddiqui et al (1990) pointed out that an important aspect of demographic composition of the inhabitants of Dhaka city is that they are predominantly young people. This demographic composition is probably also true for all the other urban centres of Bangladesh. These authors pointed out crucial aspects of migrants are that most of them are the first generation migrants to Dhaka city having a strong kin connection with the rural areas. This will be equally true for other urban centres. It should be mentioned here that most of the migrants to urban areas are from lineage based organization such as *bansa*, *gosthi*, and *bari* and extended family of the rural area. It has been mentioned already that migrants still idealized their extended family in the village although living in urban centres as has been researched in Indian societies (Minault 1981). As a result, many urban settlers retain close link with the natal villages. Settlers remit money home. Studies on urban kinship in a predominantly peasant society like Bangladesh show that kinship relationship have become loose and strong simultaneously in the urban centres. Migrants from rural areas are helped by their kinsmen who already arrived to settle down in cities or towns. New immigrants are helped by their kins to find accommodation and jobs (Islam et al 1982). In such situation kin networks play an important role (Majumder et al 1989; Afsar 2000). In fact kin networks to a great extent distribute resources, particularly in the form of jobs for the migrants in the urban areas. Kin networks also operate small business enterprises which are often controlled

overwhelmingly by the people coming from same rural locality of the rural areas of Bangladesh. Entrepreneurs exploit their fellow kinsmen who work for them for low wages. This has been observed in other Third World countries where entrepreneurs act as a patron to their kinsmen (Roberts 1982). The study of kin-based entrepreneurship is also important in understanding the formation of capital in urban areas. In fact, the capitalist vis-à-vis industrial classes are emerging from kin networks and entrepreneurship out of kin based resource accumulation. In certain areas of Dhaka city business enterprises of small workshops are owned by people coming from a particular region of Bangladesh. Capital is accumulated from kin resources, workshops are either run by kinsmen or local people. Most of the poor urban women are in a vulnerable situation. They mostly work as domestic help. Also it is wide spread that women are working in non-conventional field such as wage labourer in construction works. However, women in urban sectors are vulnerable. Incidence of female-headed households is on the rise (Qadir 1975, Begum et al 1989; Hossain and Humphrey 2002). Since poverty alleviation is highly unlikely vulnerable situation for poor people particularly for women will continue. Women will be in anonymous situation and thus their struggle for existence in urban situation will continue. Along with it stark differentiation, social deprivation will continue. However, in spite of these they will continue to build and run their lives through their own strategies.

Urbanization in Bangladesh is fragile one meaning that urban migrants have not been on a solid ground. Urban centres in Bangladesh are temporary ones for migrants who are peasants in cities (Roberts 1982). Along with the capitalist expansion in the country more and more people will immigrate to urban centres and will continue to be temporary immigrants maintaining strong link with rural areas in future. In this way urbanization is likely to expand in Bangladesh in the future.

Poverty, Urban Economic and Political Organization and Class Relations

We have already mentioned that poverty is inseparably connected with urban social and economic organizations (CUS 1990). We also found that the rural migrants to urban centres could not be absorbed properly in economic organization. They cling to

informal economy. This results in poverty and fast differentiation among the urban population of Bangladesh. Like other Third world cities we notice the existence of dual sectors in economic organization (Amin 1986; Islam and Zeitlyn 1987; Begum et al 1989). Siddiqui et al (1990) show the existence of a large informal sector. As such, most of the economic activities are run by family labour which includes child labour. Also, we notice peasant type activities to fulfill the consumption needs of the family. In urban Bangladesh, about 50 percent of the people live below the poverty level (CUS 1990) and we have seen that the overwhelming majority of the people cling to the informal sector. Kinship is an important force behind the informal sector where family labour is predominant. A good number of women petty vegetable traders carry out their activities successfully in urban centres. One of my former Master's students (Akhter; 2004) in her thesis on urban informal sector in a suburb of Dhaka city reports that the women small entrepreneurs work successfully in groups. The women buy their materials from whole-sellers in groups. They resist against and negotiate with man's world in groups. In this way women created space for themselves (Moore 1990). There is a widely held notion that informal sector is not a viable mode of economy but its absorptive capacity to employ a large number of people certainly proves its viability. Bryan Roberts' (1978) experiences in Latin American countries is that informal economy is viable and generated a lot of employments in urban sector.

Along with the viability of urban informal sector urbanization created space for women to participate in labour market as a force which is visible in the formal sector since the 1980s. For example, in the rural area there is a constraint against free flow of women's labour participation due to the strong patriarchal ideology, Islam and *pardah*. By contrast, in urban centres anonymity and poverty combine to create opportunity and space for large numbers of women to participate in labour activities in the informal sector. For example many urban women work in construction work as wage labourers. One of my former undergraduate students (Hassan; 2001) reported when he was working on his monograph that a large number of women wage labourers in a slum of Dhaka city work with men at night. Petra Dannecker (2002) reported that there has been enough space created for women garment workers in Dhaka city.

Islam and Zeitlyn (1986) Begum, Ahmed, Arefeen and Barman (1989) provided insightful observations on the political and social organizations, urban settlements and community in Bangladesh. They describe patterns of ownership and control of slum housing and how landlords and tenant often form a patron-client relationship. Ethnographic accounts describe how landlords often attend the life-cycle ceremonies of the tenant households and also arbitrate conflicts among tenants. The landlords of the slum are powerful. Most of the slums grew up on vacant government land, those who control the slum and collect rent from the tenants are mostly wealthy musclemen having active connection in local and national level politics. Thus slums are directly connected with the state. Recently, conflicts in slum communities have erupted into violent fights, involving guns and bombs, as rival factions associated with the two main political parties struggle for control. Regionally based kin networks weaken class based political mobilization and often kin and regionally based demands and mobilization predominate. Bryan Roberts (1978:82) points out that there is a certain ambiguity in the class locations in the third world cities. Kinship is strong in urban Bangladesh like any other third world city; and class differences are submerged by kinship solidarity and identity with a common rural location and community of origin. As a result, the overwhelming numbers of urban people are forced to fall back on kinship and mutual aid and on their common origin of locality. Kinship and mutual aid relations are reinforced and recreated by the large informal sector (White; 1994). This retards the development of class consciousness in urban Bangladesh. For example, the influence of voluntary associations such as district and upazila associations express rural kin-based social organizations and bridge the gap between urban life and kin-based society.

Feminization of Labour in Urban Centres in Bangladesh

A large number of poor women migrate from rural to urban areas and participate as wage labourers in the urban formal sector (Feldman 1998, Dannecker 2002). These women have emerged as a force for change in the urban scene. Petra Dannecker's work on women garment workers in Bangladesh helps us understand the changes in the urban sector and in the lives of women garment workers who make a key contribution to the economy. In the early

1980s a new form of employment emerged for women working in assembly lines in the ready-made garments (RMG) sector the export oriented RMG created a huge opportunity for women workers in Bangladesh and overnight created the first generation of a female industrial labour force (Kabeer 1988; 2000; Feldman 1998; Dannecker 2002). In fact a large female labour force were created in the major centres of Bangladesh. Petra Dannecker (2002) in her seminal work on garment factories in Dhaka city provides insights into the lives of these women who also emerged as a new political force in the urban scene of Bangladesh. In Bangladesh today RMG is the number one sector which earns the highest amount of foreign exchange for the country. According to Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association there are over three thousand garment factories and estimates that more than 1.4 million people are employed in this sector 84% of whom are women who have settled themselves in urban areas and have become a viable force to initiate social change. Petra Dannecker (2002) documented their lives with objectivity and empathy. Indeed, these women have created for themselves a viable force through a struggle which created capacities for autonomy not only as regards their working lives but also other realities. They have learned to resist and negotiate in a male world. Also, they have learned to increase their room for maneuvering and thus able to create their own spaces (Abu- Lughod 1990). Although they are subjected to various types of oppressions such as low wages and harassments at the work place at the same time they have learned to enjoy their lives and to take independent decisions. They enjoy spending their own earnings. But their contribution to labour force in the formal sector is no less than their exploitation in terms of low wages and harassments in the factory. Changing gender relations and increased autonomy of women is one manifestation of rapid social change and migration. There are other manifestations that threaten the well-being and security of the poor in Dhaka.

Urbanization and Indigenous Population

In this section an attempt will be made to highlight urbanization and indigenous population. There has been little systematic study done on the above issues. We have some specific data that indigenous populations are settling in urban areas and they

reportedly work in both formal and informal sectors. In fact, push and pull factors are causing their migration to urban centres. Since there is less rigid gender division of labour in these cultures, both men and women equally migrate to urban centres. Also, these people are pushed out of their natal places following the erosion in the local production system. Gradually, these people in large numbers will settle down in urban sector. It should be mentioned that the country has over 45 indigenous groups scattered in different parts of the country. We have little or no systematic studies on the migration of indigenous population to towns and cities. However, we get some information on the migration of indigenous population to towns and cities in two researches (Burling 1997; Roy² 2000). Burling (1997) worked on the matrilineal *Mandi* or *Garó* population. He mentioned that the *mandis* or *garos* started migrating to towns and cities in large number after the independence in 1971. Although a few migrated to Mymensingh town and Dhaka city before 1971 he pointed out that the *mandi* or *garo* women are working as nurses, garment workers, domestic servants in the homes of expatriates in Dhaka city. A large number of these women work in beauty parlours in Dhaka city (Gulrukh: 2004). A good number of *mandi* or *garo* men work as guards in the homes of expatriates. A considerable number of students also migrated to Mymensingh town or Dhaka city. Burling (1997) further indicated about the development of elite or middle class among the *mandis*. In addition, I came to know about a large number of *mandis* living in a particular area in Dhaka city. This gives a somewhat sufficient indication that *mandi* and other indigenous people have migrated to Dhaka city, leaving their traditional occupations. Although at the moment they are circular migrants hopefully a good number of indigenous people will be permanent ones to towns and cities. Thus they will be a part of urban culture.

Roy (2000) in an interesting paper 'occupation and economy in transition: a case study of the Chittagong Hill Tracts' provided some useful data regarding the migration of indigenous population of the Chittagong Hill Tracts to towns and cities. In fact, Roy (2000) indicated that many indigenous population of CHT presently live in Chittagong and Dhaka cities. He indicated that many indigenous populations changed their traditional occupation of Jhum cultivation and took up occupations that are available in

the towns and cities. Many work in decent and clerical jobs in towns and cities and mentioned that a good number of indigenous people are living in Chittagong city. With the spread of education many indigenous people work with the government and NGO sectors. Roy (2000) made a significant point by indicating that among the Chittagong Hill Tract's indigenous people there emerged a middle-class. In fact systemic studies should be undertaken on the middle class and urbanization issues among the indigenous population in Bangladesh. However, Roy³ in a recent meeting mentioned that a good number of indigenous people particularly from the Chittagong Hill Tracts live in important urban centres. For example, he said that about 20,000 indigenous people of the CHT are working as wage labourers in Chittagong city. Similarly, he pointed out that about 5,000 labourers from the CHT live and work in Savar of Dhaka metropolitan area.

Before wrapping up this section I would like to make an observation on the other indigenous population belonging to North, South, East and other regions of Bangladesh. In the north and south regions there are a large number of indigenous population such as Hajong, Santal, Oraon, Munda, etc whose members migrated to different towns and cities of Bangladesh (Bleie: 2005: 209-210). These indigenous populations work in different capacities in urban sectors. Although my observation here is impressionistic nevertheless it has some validity since I am associated with the *adivasi* movements regarding protecting their rights⁴. Many members of indigenous population told me that there live a large number of workers in different garments, knitting and similar other industries in Dhaka and its vicinities. Such migration indicates that these people are likely to live in urban centres rather than return to their respective regions. At least it is understandable that these people will promote diversity and multicultural values by participating in urban culture in Bangladesh. These will in turn strengthen cosmopolitan culture in urban milieu.

Conclusion

In the above discussion, we have tried to highlight the extent of urbanization in Bangladesh. Presently Bangladesh has the fastest urbanization with a high number of urban migrants of which two-thirds are poor. Also it was found that urbanization in Bangladesh grew out of agrarian background for which migrants to urban

centres retain a close link with rural areas and thus turning themselves non-permanent migrants to cities. They keep close link with their rural kin and identify themselves and belong to and are affiliated with their extended family in the rural areas. At the same time, they create for themselves a viable new life in the city despite stark poverty, deprivation, environmental hazards, political violence, insecurity etc. There has been a new force emerging in the form of feminization of labour with the development of RMG in the 1980s. Despite being subjected to various types of repression and exploitations garment workers have successfully created space and acquired capacity to resist and negotiate the patriarchal ideology of the factory system, thus becoming successful actors in the urban scene. There is an indication that poor indigenous people are migrating to urban centres and work in different capacities. Although their numbers are not large, it is likely that more and more such people will migrate to urban centres and will contribute towards urban life. Thus we see that the urban poor both men and women contribute significantly towards creating a viable urban life in Bangladesh.

Notes

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1. Paper presented at the International workshop migration development and pro-poor policy choices in Asia, DFID, held at Dhaka, June 22-24 2003.
2. Barrister Raja Devasish Roy is the traditional chief of the Chakma indigenous people.
3. Barrister Raja Devasish Roy's remark in a consultation meeting on Adivasi issues arranged by Research and Development Collective at hotel Sheraton, Dhaka March 3, 2008.
4. Author is presently the chairman of Bangladesh Adivasi Adhikar Andolan. (Movement for protecting the rights of indigenous population of Bangladesh).

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