

This is the introduction from *Make Or Break: Bangladesh In The 1990's*

Introduction	2
Rich Man Poor Man	3
Not Why Bangladesh Is Poor.....	12
Pericles Or Hamlet?	19
Lack Of Dignity.....	21
Exclusivity	37
Abstractions	53
Compartmentalisation	62
The Style Of Leadership	75
Conclusion	81

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Introduction

This is a study about Bangladeshi poverty. Or rather, it is a study that questions why Bangladesh isn't affluent despite huge natural advantages and two decades of massive foreign aid. Its terms of reference are only partially other countries, more principally an imagined set of five yard-stick like measurements by which I evaluate Bangladeshis' cognition of reality. How they view the world, in other words. The effect of their world view on the development process is then discussed.

I can't claim that the contentions made throughout these pages are either "statistically valid" or based on any particular model of aid or economics. Rather they have grown from what I have seen and heard. Being a Westerner, my perceptions can never be identical to those Bangladeshis I write of - despite years of effort to narrow the difference between myself and them. Because I am free to leave I must always remain a visitor to their state of poverty. The extent of that difference I once saw, not at a glance, but by a catatonic stare. It came from an amateur gambler. He, bored by a ferry crossing, had fallen for the "how can you lose?" patter of a trickster. A simple sleight of hand, "which cup is the stone under?" - and the man put down his money, smiled and pointed. Wrongly, of course. His face, for as long after as I could bear to watch, was appalling. A mask of horror and incredulity frozen outward. The loss of one hundred taka, three American dollars, was clearly larger than anything I could comprehend. Money, not only vanished, but irreplaceably so.

To write about Bangladesh I first observed my neighbours' actions and then tried to formulate ideas to explain them. In particular I was interested how a homogeneous society could set up what is, in effect, an apartheid system whereby eighty or eighty five per cent are given minority shareholder status. This group is getting poorer and in time must be decimated unless change comes. The fifteen-or-twenty per cent who own most of the country's assets are increasingly alienated from their rural compatriots as they look westward for direction and stimulation. Their frustration is expanding as their slowly rising standards of living can't keep pace with their quickly burgeoning aspirations. "There's good and bad in every country; we are, after all, a single race created by God and descended from Adam" my friends here tell me often. Yet from this underlying unity Bangladeshi society has evolved some unusual behaviours. An extreme level of corruption, for example; or a disorienting ambivalence to non-Bangladeshi cultures; or a willingness to overtly support mistrusted leaders. These, and other, societal traits will be explored in this book.

Explored and, hopefully, made explicable. If reasonable people (as I know the majority of Bangladeshis to be) can treat their own country so wastefully (as it seems Bangladeshis are acting) what is their reasoning? By observing the actions of people I believe to be rational and deducing their motivation, I arrive, throughout these pages, at my conclusions of why Bangladesh isn't rich.