

This is a single chapter from *Make Or Break: Bangladesh In The 1990's*

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Lack Of Dignity

Definition, as we've established, precedes analysis - which is why this piece of writing has thus far done little except define terms central to our topic. In the same way we need a clear understanding of dignity before we can begin any examination of how its lack affects the development process. Unlike previous terms we've looked at, however, dignity doesn't suffer from any "the-closer-you-look-the-more-it-blurs" Heisenburg-like problems. Instead confusion arises because it is often used as an exact synonym of "pride". The two words serve as interchangeable terms of self approval, which is unfortunate since potentially useful shades of meaning are thereby lost in the generalised nomenclature.

Language, in other words, acts at times more like a liquid than a solid, with meanings tending to flow away from rigid definitions. This also happens (to give another example) with the simple word "work" which physicists read as "force times distance" while commuters packed on a suburban train are more likely to feel anger, boredom, or greed when encountering the word. Hence we need to firmly fix the meaning of both "pride" and "dignity" before we explore what lacking the latter involves.

Both pride and dignity imply a general sense of self approval. Unfortunately neither of them distinguish between such important variations as "where does this sense of approval come? Is it a self assessment or does it originate from others? If the latter, are they close to me or strangers? What about God? Do I take His opinion as final? Is any sense of approval I feel a positive or negative force? Does it build both me and my neighbours into something better? Or is it a competitive force, avaricious and destructive?" Evidently there are two sources for valuing oneself, one within, the other without; and these are not only different but in some senses opposite. Hence it seems opportune to use the two words "pride" and "dignity" to demarcate between these two.

Pride can be defined as that sense of worth which is primarily produced by a person's own self opinion. Others' - even close others - views carry little weight. Drug addicts, the educated beggars of Western cities, are commonly cut down by strict public disapproval yet they often also personify this fierce, stubborn, self-centred pride. Their devotion seems like a silent cry of "... if you who are ignorant of the uniqueness of my suffering knew of the wisdom and insights it gives me, you'd honour, not despise me ...". Pride flares in the darkened soul's fight for survival with nothing to burn but its own fantasies.

Dignity, conversely, I see as having an opposite source to pride. The dignified person carries a sense of worth primarily because others have convinced them that such an opinion is justified. "Others" equating to those close enough to know, but remote and reliable enough to confer both impartiality and validity to their evaluations. Hence the strength of the religious. Convinced of God's high opinion, they are all but impervious to human judgements. They can bathe lepers or bomb children (depending on their conception of God) with impunity. Dignity, then, is granted; pride we usurp. Others give us dignity; pride we steal.

Tyrants, unsatisfied by their pride alone, often try to buy dignity. They'll commonly surround themselves with hired sycophants and hope that this paid-for approval will supply some legitimacy to their rule. The media is bent into compliance. During the Ershad regime, for example, every nightly television news and daily paper set aside a prime slot for Ershad's aggrandisement. The dictator's hope is that a bulk of pride-swelling propaganda can substitute for the loss of dignity that buying favour costs. In poor-little-rich-boy fashion they inevitably fail, floored by a Catch-22 type of oversight. Only those whom we ourselves respect can, by their freely given approval, feed our own self respect. Forcing others to approve of us is like raping for love. Most tyrants only need to review the compromises involved in their own climb to power to doubt the integrity of those around them. Those to whom approval is conditional on material gain don't make reliable allies. All that can be bought slowly sours in the dictator's shopping around for sweet flattery. But this tendency of absolute rulers to remain unsatisfied by their pride alone despite the ample power they have to feed their egos does hint at the fact that we can not be emotionally sustained by our own, perhaps bloated, opinion alone any more than we can elevate ourselves by our own sandal straps. Others' opinions are more fundamental than our own in maintaining our emotional health; the more we want to feel beyond reproach the more we rely on others' approval. (Darwin, by the way, was caught by a puzzle similar to this. Late in his life he questioned the credibility of any theory, however ingenious, conceived by a monkey's off-shoot. Could he, as a scientist believe what he, as a hairless ape, had dreamt up?)

The earth being our home, our feet remain grounded even as our aspirations challenge heaven. Being social beasts, however, our thoughts usually avoid both extremes and settle on the latest gossip. We are fascinated by our kind. Our emotions are fed by others' emotions, our actions are forged according to their expectations. "You think therefore I am" could pass as our call sign, our linkage across the void between us all. Indeed, when our calls into this void prompt no recognisable answer, the mind implodes into its own bleak hole of alienation and becomes trapped by our inner space's gravity. Emotionally emaciated, gregariously inclined; healthy bodies housing wizened minds. Such is the form poverty has taken in wealthy regions, oceans away from my neighbourhood.

Such a poverty is not merely foreign but astronomically baffling to my Bangladeshi friends. Since its source is alienation, and since alienation is as foreign here as wide open spaces (double Britain's population in half Britain's size) my teashop hints of wealth not automatically supplying bliss side-swipe comprehension and bounce emptily into space. Just as pride and dignity get wrongly equated, wealth and happiness are seen by my neighbours as near-identical twins.

Yet in its striving to rush from the material poverty prevailing here, Bangladesh may encounter this very alienation Western materialism seems infected by. A quirky, illustrative storm-in-a-teashop-cup (chipped, stained with tannin) blew through the local newspapers not so long ago. The Ambassador to the United Nations had the temerity to present his credentials while clad in a lungi. His recall is discussed; demanded even. Letters, editorials and articles have questioned his wits. The lungi is unquestionably ideally suited to clothe any reasonably shaped male body in the country. It is light, locally produced, modest and comfortable; the chosen garment of perhaps 85% of this nation's men. Yet for it to represent Bangladesh at executive level outrages, particularly the 15-20% middle-and-upper classes who increasingly see themselves in foreign terms and clothe their aspirations in Western garb. They are casting their net far off-shore in the

hope of capturing some convincing feast of dignity; a hope repeatedly thwarted. Even as the 15-20% float free they inevitably downgrade the importance of the 80% to influence them deeply. Alienation from the very fabric that clothes Bangladeshis hints at alienation from the country itself. It is intriguing how wealth can (among other options) give the potential to swap one form of poverty for another. From emaciation to alienation; a progression of sorts.

The 20%, then, is splitting from the 80%. (Unless the figures really are 15 and 85, which they may well be. Reliable statistics are as rare as exact weights and measures in the market place.) The urban is pulling away from the rural. It's an odd, but not unique, situation. Sharad Joshi, after holding various high public offices in neighbouring India, declared that "India wasn't one country but two. The first, called India, is sited in the cities of Delhi, Bombay, Madras, etc. The second, called Bharat, is sited in the villages." Bangladesh shows the same pattern. In the trek from rural conservatism (and its stifling framework of supporting relationships) to urban modernity (and its pastiche of professional and local friendships) there seems to be a period of disconnection from wider attachments. I guess fighters caught in no-man's-land often listen to ghosts.

None show this disconnection clearer than the young male offspring of Dhaka's newly rich middle class. For them, the "village" is a powerful and unifying myth. Replete with images of blood-red sunsets, laden boats gliding down lake-wide rivers and cliché-green rice fields, the village mythology has been with them for as long as they can remember. And it remains a myth; removed, remote, an unreal and unrealisable ideal. A picture on a million city apartments' walls, spread across this city that has itself been called the world's largest village. Justifiably, perhaps, when the fragility of locally forged friendships is shown with every religious festival. At these times citizens frenzy themselves into transports of crowded escape, all leaving on the penultimate day to briefly visit the village they're neither a part of, nor apart from.

If dignity is gleaned from those known and respected by us, who can these stranded straddlers of societies look to for their guidance? The village is unbelievably distant, peaceful to the point of being soporific. The city beckons, but ambiguously. Family ties still seal Dhaka's six million citizens into innumerable cells. Moreover, the capital's attractiveness is tempered by its blatantly repulsive aspects, such a mixture being common to all addictions. Violence and tumult, bribery and lies, greed in various guises, all these leave the lost generation's search for direction unsatisfied. With no acceptable leaders or inspiring guides it has become necessary for these young urbanised males to invent their own heroes. American (and to a lesser extent European) TV and pop stars have therefore grown to exalted status in this conservative, Islamic, Asian nation. Dreamed for approval from never-to-be-met actors in outdated TV programmes (and their pop star counterparts) serve this strange sub-group, from whom future leaders will arise, as role models. For now, dressed in tight fitting Western garments, they practice their swaggered mannerisms studied from the media. Phrases caught in passing; those bidding for more status play their English. Swearing is trumps. It may well be not only Dhaka, but the entire globe, that has this segment modelling itself on the entertaining fringes of a country they'll never see. Nonetheless it is a quirky, even absurd, manifestation; while any attempt to mine dignity from such visions and dreams may prove very disorientating. Like the original lost generation who foundered in Britain's post-World War One's ghostly peace, too ephemeral to coax them into faith, middle class Bangladeshi youth are stranded. Idealism has propelled them into situations

that realism has shown to be hopeless. Cynicism, despair, and selfishness await their opportunities to cue those who will spearhead this country into the next century.

Thus we have dignity. What it is and isn't, where it comes from, how much we need it, and what we do in its absence. The central question of whether there is any correlation between dignity and development remains. Are societies that enjoy global esteem, that are approved of by those they themselves approve, more likely to develop? Will they become rich? Are countries such as Bangladesh that are a by-word for poverty destined by their reputation to unending problems? Are they caught by an Experimenter Effect's self-fulfilling prophecy?

As an aside, it would be interesting to research the other end of the spectrum as exemplified by countries like Britain or Saudi Arabia. The UK basks in generally high international esteem. Perhaps because it played Greece to America's Rome while the USA was gathering its power, Washington continues to give a larger-than-expected measure of deference to London. Even its former colonies tend to give their measure of respect to the now dethroned power. This could well be due to the distancing of bitter Raj memories as new enemies emerged, enemies who are all-too-often home grown dictatorships showing even less care for any outside the ruling clique than the British used to. Bengalis, now divided over two of the countries of the subcontinent once unified by the pax Britannica, are still tugged by the chances of past centuries enough to retain some respect for their past masters. English is not only the second language, it is also as strongly the language of status as French was in nineteenth century Russia. Colonial administrative structures quietly decay since they are too alien to be easily revitalised, but history's irrevocable echoes still sound across Bangladesh, distanced but distinct as the click of the cricket bat. The colonial past resembles a displaced wraith clad in legal robes; a remote and elusive influence, slightly sinister and vaguely ludicrous. Seen from afar yet, even today, still slightly looked up to. And, predictably, noted with an attendant measure of ambivalence (double-mindedness, to repeat myself, is as certain as floods here and tides elsewhere). The arrogance that undergirded the British Raj has left its legacy of resentment even as the honesty and reliability of the evaporated rule is ruefully acknowledged.

Saudi Arabia, too, is largely respected, but that is only to be expected. With Mecca and Medina (the two cities uppermost in Islam) within its territory, its homeland-of-the-heart credentials ensure prestige amongst all Islamic nations. Although this, too, may pass. The Kingdom's current power may be tomorrow's history, another unexpected result from the Gulf War. Rumours about secret debauchery have been aimed at Saudi Arabia for decades. What arose for the first time during the Iraq/Not Iraq conflict was open criticism by Bangladeshi Muslims of Saudi Muslims. The latter's reliance on America jarred so strongly with local support of Saddam that the usually adopted assumption that both sides in an intra-Islamic conflict are right was momentarily put aside.

“ not even proper Muslims, only Wahabis, that's what they all are, over there”. One tea-shop enthusiast who regaled the crowded shack was disarmingly devoid of theological or historical validity, but this didn't stop the audience from grunting and nodding their encouragement. “And that means they're not even proper Muslims like us . Every Ramadan - a friend of mine who worked there told me - every Ramadan they all go to Egypt and ...”. The stories are old, but whereas such a commentary before the war would have invited a beating, this mid-conflict angry cry had strong support and only some muted disapproval. Men reflexly

muttering about not being too sure and turning inward to their tea-cups. Favouritism is fickle when our grope for heroes is grounded mostly in hope.

The UK and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, then, are candidates for an investigation into whether a high level of others' respect correlates with a high material standard of living. An inquiry, unfortunately, totally irrelevant to our current topic. In keeping with its topography (most of its 55,000 square miles - plus a flexible few as tides and floods vie - lie within ten metres of sea level), Bangladesh is a country few look up to. Our focus, therefore, closes on whether and in what manner global disapprobation is one of the causes of Bangladeshi poverty.

An obvious question arises here. Does "few look up to" in any way describe how Bangladeshis believe that the rest of the world perceive them, irrespective of the world's real opinion? Do they really think the world out - somewhere undefined - there sees them as despised and rejected? As, to drag out yet again Kissinger's haunting epithet, a "basket case" among nations?

At first eaves-dropping, no. While problems in contemporary life are admitted, they are seen as both transient and principally due to other countries' policies. "... We were rich then the British stole everything - including our knowledge." "... the Indians helped us in 1971, but when they left they took everything." "... foreign aid is just a trick to make us part of the West's plans." When asked what they believe other nationalities' impression of Bangladesh is, people invariably answer positively. "They think we are heroic because of our liberation war courageous because of our development struggle poor but magnificent." Bangladeshis' talk of Bangladesh often rebounds with such superlatives. Martyrs and beauty and heroes and history and poets and mental sharpness - the stories all swell and burst with importance. Yet, like many overshadowed areas (and India's history, culture, current population, economic grunt and Third World leadership combine to throw out a large penumbra), Bangladeshi claims often have a tiny stridency, an echoing defensiveness. Perhaps local reports of Sheik Mujibur Rahman show this as clearly as anything.

Sheik Mujib led the country through its 1971 independence and subsequent tumult, a feat that earned him the title "Father of the Nation". Of course, this respect is not devoid of its attendant measure of ambivalence. As an historical figure, conveniently remote, he is revered. As a symbol of the Awami League that he once presided over, and which continues as one of the two major parties, his public fortunes rise and fall with the Awami League's popularity. Not that the man himself is presumably overly concerned since he was assassinated fifteen-plus years ago. He is remembered and mentioned, at times. Heard, more often; famous speeches are played as favourites and boom from party head-quarters to wash over Dhanmondi Lake and mingle with Mirpur Road's grinding traffic noise. Being part of the country's historically-based collection of legends his status therefore tends to be elevated to mythical proportions, allowing comparisons with such monoliths of the twentieth century as Mao Tse Tung, or Lenin. I never mention that outside the region few have heard of Sheik Mujib; I don't have the fanatic's love of lost causes. Of course, most - all? - nations share this tendency to magnify their country's newsworthiness. Bangladeshis' participation in this global trait would seem to argue against their feeling inferior to other countries. "Our heroes, at least, are as big as your heroes" seems to be the tacit claim. "The whole world agrees."

Yet time exposes a deep sense of shame underlying their surface pride. The fact that Kissinger's throw-away phrase recurs here, like journalistic flotsam, and continues after a decade-and-a-half to anger people gives one hint of hidden currents. Even articles ostensibly chronicling "our impressive recent performances in developing the struggling masses" tend to glance over their shoulder and trot out Kissinger's tired quote, forgotten elsewhere, as if trying to prove the point in a lapsed argument. There is an incongruity, like the nouveau riche trying to buy culture, that belies the stridency and undercuts logic. "In defence of our national honour it is allowable to lie a little" seems to be an unwritten code, considering how often people are driven to extravagant statements of faith beyond sustainability. "Bangladesh is the most civilised country in the world" I've been told - by people desperate to escape from it. "The world admires us because of our liberation struggle" - from people informed enough to know the 1971 war is long buried in the world's collective, consented unconscious of ancient pains. Despite all the evidence, self congratulatory sentences are pronounced; and then, on the first quibble of dissention, transmuted into savage denunciations of all aspects of the nation. There is no middle ground.

The already-mentioned frantic search for heroes is another glimpse of hidden dissatisfaction; non-Bangladeshi heroes, of course. The oddness of this when Westerners playing at rebellion are elevated to stardom can be disconcerting. I've often been startled when walking into a standard middle class Bangladeshi front room (where visitors are received) and seeing the standard middle class furnishings (low table, arm chairs, "showcase" with its locked-up toys treasuring memories of now grown children's departed years of playfulness) all overseen by Caucasian faces, framed on a poster and dressed in mid-80's sexual ambivalence. It has a what-are-you-doing-here sense of unreality. Often the rock group or singer thus pictured is unknown to me and I am quickly updated on their excellence. No doubt, a decade or so ago millions of Westerners sacrificed billions of brain cells to such idols, but those people have passed away and besides it was in another country.

Beyond the oddness, however, when the heroes who are selected come from other poor countries a sad poignancy is added. "These are people from backgrounds as disadvantaged as ours but the whole world, wealthy and powerful included, admires them" ("why not us?" remaining an unvoiced echo). The Cameroons football team could almost have started their own political party around the time of the 1990 football World Cup, and been confident of some electoral success. The symbolism of a poor, developing nation making it in the rich nations' glamour event was irresistible here. Their every goal, coming over live in the middle of the night onto middle class households' TV sets, caused streets to erupt with nocturnal celebrations. Firecrackers the loudness of bombs punctuated the yahoo'd joy each African victory prompted. The crowning irony being that Africans are "too black" to be normally accepted in this savagely colour-conscious society. Even in the villages every win loss and draw was noted and discussed. And above all, this hitherto never-heard-of African nation carried Bangladeshi hopes. Here's one from us, the poor; to you, the rich.

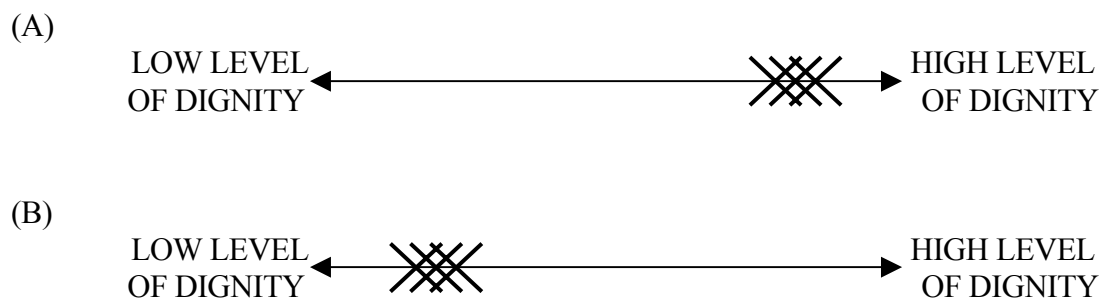
Never was this more bizarre than during the cricket World Cup, 1992. Pakistan was the tantalising hope. As if following a movie script, they started so badly that their pre-competition brashness seemed foolish. Then they only just scraped into the second round, beating the in-form unlikely contenders to the throne. Over the weeks the tournament took to get to this intermediate stage, support swelled and hopes burgeoned. By the finals a "could-this-happen-

anywhere-but-here” mind-bind had evolved. For at the same time that pro-Pakistani cricket sentiment had amassed to near hysteria, another social hurricane was peaking (for one of its several, as yet unfinished) crises.

Golam Azam was the leader of the religious fundamentalist group, the Jamaat-I-Islami during the 1971 war period and led their support of the Pakistani regime’s military oppression. With the defeat of Pakistan (largely because of Indian intervention though Bangladeshis seldom care to remember this now) after nine months of Pakistani genocide, Golam Azam was discredited, dumped, and deemed not a Bangladeshi citizen. By 1992, the Jamaat felt confident enough to re-elevate him to the top ranks of leadership (thus showing how to never lose an opportunity to lose an opportunity). For the huge majority of Bangladeshis, the promotion of one so associated with the atrocities of 1971 was beyond acceptance. Despite being Muslim, despite being biased toward any group as committed to their faith as the Jamaat-I-Islami, most people rebelled at the thought of Golam Azam’s rehabilitation. Demonstrations and violence spilled onto the streets. At the same time, therefore, we had massive pro-Pakistani sentiment generated by sport plus massive anti-Pakistan (since they were central to the tyranny of 1971) sentiment jostling together. A combination held together by emotion, not logic.

Does a love of sport account for the noisy support the Camerouns and Pakistan have unknowingly received? Only in part. More importantly it was the vicarious siding with the underdog, a once removed sharing in their victory. The sadness being that this nation of 110,000,000 talking together in the eighth most spoken language on earth has to rely on smaller countries of slighter cultures to glean such satisfactions from. Surviving, emotionally, on the crumbs of the feast.

These two examples aren’t isolated or contrived. Rather, they represent a flood-sized sense of eroded worth that covers Bangladesh, causing its citizens to look outward for excellences to identify with. To return to the diagrammatic method of defining the terms of this discussion laid down in our introduction, we can postulate two types of society -:



and say that diagram (B) describes the spread of attitudes prevalent in Bangladesh.

It can, I think, be assumed that it is fundamentally human to crave significance, to need others’ affirmation (exactly how fundamental was the question that the psychologist Maslow grappled with; exactly what mechanisms are used to gain such significance was investigated decades ago by the Sharifs). If none we admire respect us we are forced to search in alternative areas. We

may imagine approval from distant role models who can't threaten us with rejection - which (as I've mentioned above) is the primary coping mechanism here. A second method of garnering self respect involves a narrowing of the field to friends and peers. This, at least, isn't illusory; but its satisfaction is limited. With technology turning the world into a global village, the terms of reference by which we villagers measure ourselves has broadened enormously.

Things were different in the fifteenth century. Feudal society was, perhaps, too ignorant of its ignorance to feel any lack; certainly their writers don't show any wistfulness at their isolation. Right up until the Renaissance English writers rarely incorporated continental views in their writing even though their forms and themes at often originated in mainland Europe. The marvellously titled 'Breton Lay', for example, framed the ideas of chivalry that dominated centuries of English literature through authors such as Mallory. Yet neither he, nor other Middle English writers (Chaucer being predominant) presented their readers with foreign world views. England was, for them, the world.

Not that they lacked imagination. Far from it; their fantasies can dazzle, even at a distance of five hundred plus years. "Gawain and the Green Knight" for example, the fourteenth century version of "Superman" manages to bustle with action while being both bizarre and inspiring. But until the Renaissance, stories chronicled read like bright village gossip. Not until after that time did writers change their focus from what people did to why they did it. Concurrently, there was a widening interest in other cultures. Shakespeare places his characters from Egypt to Denmark. Admittedly he created a non-Arab Cleopatra and non-Scandinavian Hamlet, but the beginning was made. Insular English society was irrevocably led to grapple with alien cultures.

Bangladesh is at a similar crossroads. In some ways the country seems feudal (health services are a horrifyingly obvious example). More prosaically, there are half a million villages across this delta that measure days and weeks by the sun and the moon, and years by harvests. Yet even in the quietest corners, modern technology has inserted the twentieth century. Teashop chatter probably concerns local news but a football match or decisive battle that happened thousands of kilometres away may also be discussed. Traditional art forms - poems, stories, songs - are crammed with enough clever foxes, talking cockerels and other yokel folklore to be reminiscent of medieval England. But, then again, a picture of Michael Jackson may be staring from a newspaper lining our teashop's flimsy walls.

Modern communication systems have punctured the country's isolation, stretching the gap between traditions and aspirations impossibly wide. Whereas people once needed no more than their immediate neighbours to maintain their sense of worth, we of the twentieth century demand more. Acclamation around the village well no longer satisfies us. Which is where my neighbours' problem lies. Even as their attention is coaxed outward, their awareness of Bangladesh's comparative disabilities grows. Knowledge hasn't yet brought them power or peace, just frustration. Much that they learn undermines their sense of cultural esteem. This is in spite of an effective censorship system that cuts off unfavourable news, albeit a little late at times. A foreign TV report on the Hindus' attack on the Babri Mosque inadvertently gave a glimpse of a wider reality when it also showed Muslims burning churches. Someone was a little slow on the panic button, but the belated blackout did come and normal transmission returned only when more acceptable images of Hindu outrages began beaming our way. Perhaps such lapses explain why the BBC's television broadcasting may be stopped. The suppression of news

about military massacres of tribals in the Chittagong Hills has been far more successful. Few have even heard of last year's killing of 1200 in a single operation.

Yet there is a vague, growing sense that Bangladesh has a low international reputation. Foreign news brings disconcerting views. Foreign visas become increasingly rare as embassies finally realize how massively they have been lied to. Foreign sports teams don't bother to visit here and when Bangladeshi players travel abroad they are casually pushed out of competition. It is one of the quirks of our times, and one that next century's anthropologists may remark on, that sport has become a global yardstick of status in the 1990's. Because eleven New Zealanders could skilfully move a small red ball round a large green oval during a 1991 cricket tournament, an underpopulated remote couple of islands became briefly famous throughout the Indian subcontinent. Reality again being odder than fiction.

Bangladesh, with a population thirty-plus times greater than faraway New Zealand has won next to nothing. Football is the most popular international sport, yet the best teams here owe their success to non-Bangladeshi players. The premier league is thus dominated by the only two teams able to afford such professionals; while rumours whirr that games are played out to a prearranged plan anyway. At street level this failure to excel at a global level reinforces peer importance and the young (men, in particular, status being so important to them) rebound into the strictest pressures of peer approval since their obsession with the West makes Western rejection the more bitter. A recent phenomena of Dhaka city is the "Boys' Clubs" emerging in every suburb. One, I noticed, captured the corporate mood with its roughly painted slogan "We want to be alone and we want to be together". Semi-tribal and faintly intimidating, it will be interesting to see if these gangs successfully gather power and, if so, what they then do with it.

For now, they clearly demonstrate the "if the outside world won't grant us our dignity we'll defend ourselves by building up each other in pride" coping mechanism. Necessities, by definition, will be sought in secondary sites if where we look first proves barren. The bitter twist of Bangladeshis looking to each other even as the country craves outside agreement that "we are not a basketcase" comes as all are too familiar with the break downs in their own society to place much credence on their neighbours' approval. It is reminiscent of Darwin's death bed dilemma.

Lack of dignity thus translates in part into the fragmentation of a large population. Dhaka city's millions are traumatised into support-group sized cells (family or peer) which in turn hinders growth by enormously complicating any development plans.

Perhaps the seminal studies of peer pressure's power was made by Spiro Melford (in his 1958 book "Children of the Kibbutz") and Bruno Bettelheim (in "Children of the Dream, Communal Child Rearing"). My Muslim friends could well find these studies instructive, though it may be mutinous of me to make such a suggestion. The Jewish children studied in the two books grew into clannish adults, indifferent to outsiders' opinions. Their kibbutz-raised peers formed an inner circle of confidants, whereas those who hadn't shared in this unchosen initiation were ignorable, regardless of race or creed. Arab, American, or non-kibbutz Israeli alike were all disdained; decisions were made solely according to how the peer group of other kibbitzum would be affected.

While this may help explain Israeli political obstinacy there are many differences between the socialistic fervour of 1950's Israel and 1990's Bangladesh. Family ties, for example, that were narrowed and remoulded in the kibbutz remain wide and strong here. Yet there are similarities. Fragmentation, as illustrated by the number of Israeli political parties, is also a Bangladeshi problem, and for some of the same reasons. The young middle class males - the heirs apparent, in other words - follow no laws but their own. Their parents can no longer rein them in. When employed as private militia by political groups (as the student wings of BNP or Awami League in effect are) their enthusiasms seem to go beyond their taskmasters' brief.

As it is for this small and privileged group, so it is for the country at large. Clan sized groups, forged from family or (less commonly) work, operate together while concurrently viewing outsiders suspiciously. "We can't trust each other" is a too-often heard assessment; although such pessimism seemed nonsensical to me on one occasion, as I watched small boats being loaded with rice in Chandpur.

Huge sacks of grain were hoisted onto shoulders and ant-like carried across a flimsy gang-plank. With a shrug each sack in turn was freed and fell with a dull thud to add to the stack of cargo. "Where's it going?" I asked a bystander. "Dhaka?" came the reply in a not-my-business tone. More surprising, though, was the lack of any paperwork at the conclusion of loading. An unknown farmer carrying what seemed like his whole harvest to an unknown market and nothing but a handshake to seal the bargain. That, I decided, is trust.

Not quite. The sacks were counted, the boatman was local. Or, I was later told, even if the boatman wasn't local, some of his family would have been. He could indeed have stolen the rice; but his brother's house would have been known and could easily have been torched at midnight. There is therefore a system of accountability, rough though it is both in establishment and the justice that any cheating would prompt. A system that is linked together by interpersonal relationships, people knowing each other or at least having mutual acquaintances. The working assumption is that anyone outside this network can't be trusted; partly because "they" are believed intrinsically untrustworthy and partly because "they" (in the absence of a viable policing or legal system) couldn't be punished if some trickery was involved.

So it is that having low expectations helps limit economic growth. Believing the worst of each other limits the size of units people are able to organise themselves into, thus fragmenting society into small cells. Cohesion at a macro level inevitably decreases. Any scheme or plan such as building a road or an embankment that involves more than "me and my friends" numbers will almost certainly encounter what Bangladeshis call "political" problems. This doesn't involve who was voted for in the 1990 elections so much as intra-organisational power fights with workers struggling to reduce a larger-than-comfortable environment into extended-family-sized chunks. Inefficiencies follow, both in the conflicts (strikes, violence etc) downscaling imposes, and in the reduction of central leadership's directive role.

In the absence of outside help, any system will tend to collapse, will veer from the complex to the simple. Such is the first law of thermodynamics, the so-called law of entropy. Such, too, is the tendency here in Bangladeshi society. A large and complex country is, in the absence of restraining factors, shattering into small units.

Fragmentation isn't the only problem fed by a low sense of dignity however. More importantly, accepting that "we are a bad race" makes exploitation that much easier. Those who accept others' low opinion of them as justified become eminently exploitable. If I think of myself as worthless, how can I quibble if others agree and treat me accordingly? Bangladeshi society, as we've seen, isn't a homogenous mass but a competing conglomeration of inward-looking cells. When one, more powerful, cell moves against a weaker neighbour its expansion is aided by the weaker members' sense of being unworthy of better treatment.

This doesn't mean landless labourers, for example, gently agree to the effective slavery imposed on them. But their sense of unworthiness does undercut their commitment in fighting against the injustice. Another of the oddities Bangladesh presents is that the enormous courage people display in rebuilding after (yet another) disaster has never yet been translated into a steadfast refusal to be exploited. Such a refusal demands martyrs, as any history of European or American trade unionism details. And such martyrdom Bangladeshis aren't yet capable of.

This claim seems absurd. Bangladesh is, after all, the country of martyrs. Festivals celebrate them while the 1971 martyrs' monument serves as a national symbol, favourite rickshaw painting, common calendar backdrop and television sight-bite. Yet many of the 3,000,000 killed by the Pakistanis during their 1971 campaign were simply wiped out of existence because of unfortunate placement and timing. There wasn't often a choice for freedom or death. Bangladeshis tend to make such hazardous choices only when emotionally heated. "Abeg beshi" is their self-analysis; "we act from a surfeit of sentiment." So it is that a powerful speaker will deliver a call to arms from a podium. An audience will be stirred. A march will swirl out, charged with enthusiasm. Sticks will be broken over heads; bodies carried to the morgue. Everyone else will go home, eat their rice, and cool their blood. Nothing has changed. The dispassionate decisiveness that can make a Hitler or a terrorist, a Martin Luther King, or a Nelson Mandela (depending on how it is directed) doesn't flourish here. The outrage exists, but the sense of injustice wavers. After all, mistreatment isn't really unsuitable if life really doesn't have much value.

The poor's acceptance, as if a birthright, of wrongs is one of poverty's saddest savageries. The servant-girls weep after their rapings and carry on with the menial housework. The street vendors smile at the police as the latter go on their regular round of uniformed extortion (the daily rate for pavement vendors is two or three takas per person). Of course those with less power always have to pay something to those with more to protect even the little they have - taxation is such a formalised agreement Westerners have evolved - but do poor Bangladeshis have to do it so eagerly? As if convinced of its correctness?

Women are particularly vulnerable (and not just in Bangladesh, some may argue). Although it must be admitted that hearing their voices raised in vociferous argument (a regular broadcast in closely-packed neighbourhoods) their frailty may be doubted. Nonetheless, women are at the bottom of the power pyramid with the full weight of others' power pushing them down. Hence even blatant cheating against them continues unabated. The recently risen garments industry has mostly women machinists, which helps the owners' scam of withholding wages. It's a simple trick. Each worker is paid the legal minimum monthly wage, something under a thousand taka. The sting comes at collection time when the labourer is told that only three or four hundred can be "unfortunately" paid at the moment. The rest will follow "next week". After some months of

this, the employer has accrued a handy sum insuring him against the defection of trained staff. To leave means to forgo the - by then, hundreds of taka - back wages due. It's a clever variation of the bonded labour trap; doubtless someone is very proud of its invention.

“For evil to prevail” goes the old saying “it isn't necessary for bad people to act but for good people not to act.” There always will be those bending their intelligence toward maltreatment of others. Should the sufferers agree to their suffering? When there is no alternative, perhaps the answer is “yes”; and some would say that, with new workers at the door ready to replace any who quit, there really is no alternative. In fact, women working in the garments factories have begun agitation - and suffered the consequences. But, again, they (more than anyone) are undercut by a sense of worthlessness. Even in their own eyes, women are not men's equals.

Sex seems to be at the centre of it all. Women have bought the package that for men sexual desire is a weakness whereas for women it's a sin. Fornication, that most destructive lapse, therefore has different implications for men and women. For him, poor fallible being, it's an unfortunate weakness. For her, slippery seductress, it is no less than a revealing of her true contamination by evil. Once again the sly trick of loading most of the burden of guilt onto the disadvantaged party regardless of their share of blame is perpetrated. The raped maidservant is discredited for causing her noble employer's frenzy. No wonder, then, that she doesn't want to publicise the event, particularly to the police who would see her fault as worthy of correction by several repeat performances in the cells (nothing like a spot of beating up prisoners to work up an appetite of sorts). The poor's worst error is thinking themselves deserving of torture; the wealthy's cleverest trick involves shifting the blame of injustice onto the poor themselves.

Not that the poor as a group are somehow superior either. The quaint idea that a class struggle exists in which power need only to slide into the hands of the deprived for wrongs to be righted can't survive a collision with reality, here. The oppression of the poor by each tier of the slightly less poor overlying them suggests it; the oppression by the poor of the truly powerless confirms it. Of course the poor have more basic excuses for their behaviour. Their needs aren't metaphysical or abstract, they'd just like a better-than-even chance that their children would get past their first birthday. But the poor's treatment of each other, as well as their more understandable cheating-for-pittances of the wealthy, auger badly for any time when they, unrepentant, hold power.

(A theological aside, one (this time) that is speculative enough for Muslims and Christians both to agree or disagree with irrespective of their party's lines. It may be that God allows the existence of poverty because it is in our treatment of our powerless neighbours that we show the true state of our heart. While most people are wise/clever/hypocritical enough to maintain civility when being rebuked by their boss, they have the freedom to abuse their rickshaw driver ruthlessly for having the temerity to demand two taka beyond the standard fare. Such a lowered class of people in this - dare one say it? - caste-bound, Islamic society invites mistreatment so strongly that some can't resist.) Not, to repeat myself, that rickshaw-wallahs always model angelic behaviour. A particularly sharp memory intrudes of a woman waiting in Green Road. Another of these names alluding to a never-to-recur past, Green Road was (until 1961) called Coolie Road, but then the rich residents decided the term degraded them. The area (centred by Kathal Bagan which the older people can still remember as actually being the jackfruit grove implied in the name) is now a tarmacked strip under a grey polluted sky along which the smaller

vehicles (baby-taxis, tempos, motorbikes and rickshaws) tend to cut between Farmgate (a farm, decades ago) and Newmarket (no longer new).

Green Road in the rain. A woman bargaining her rickshaw fare. The woman on crutches, the rickshaw driver lounging on his seat. Because of her disability she was barely able in the finest of weathers to negotiate the uneven, irregular, crowded pavement; in the wet she was effectively, and obviously, immobilised. His enjoyment was palpable and he shared it with his companions as they all stared and jeered. Someone at their mercy (or its lack) for a change. The price which usually is negotiated downwards from maybe 150% started - and stayed - at 400%. A woman and a cripple; who could hope for better? Enforced poverty rarely ennoble.

Or another memory that haunts me, this time not of rickshaw pedallers but of sundry street people, some quite well dressed, surrounding a lunatic for a bit of boisterous fun. Perhaps he prompted their cruelty, maybe he passed an insult I didn't catch. Diminished responsibility would have freed him in any fair judgement, but this group's excitement wasn't so coolly deterred. After a bit of playful slapping around they - I suppose I knew such things were physiologically possible - began tearing his hair out. In clumps; it was scattered and left for the wind to play with. He left, scalp bleeding and silenced by the howls of laughter.

Bangladeshis treat Bangladeshis roughly. If any generalizations have validity, and keeping in mind previous provisos about the place of such generalizations, Bangladeshi manners range outward from harsh. The place of the weak in provoking us into showing our heart's true state only very rarely prompts the degree of gentleness that gives us glimpses of hope. All too commonly the large number of needy combined with the lack of effective legal and social prohibitions against oppression present too tempting a chance for inhuman behaviour. Every act of compassion is outnumbered hugely by casual cruelty.

Even everyday interactions are characteristically abrupt. Shopping is done with shouts and discussions sound like disagreements. Which may imply nothing about the underlying mentality, or (in accordance with the idea that the obvious guides us to the true) everything. In this case I'm sure the lack of civility is indicative, because under pressure the behaviour patterns squeezed out into the open are more, not less, aggressive.

The continuance of such harshness in society is partially, then, because the underclass bearing the bulk of its burden tacitly agree that they aren't worth better treatment. They allow themselves to be exploited. Any fight back they wage is sudden and fierce, fuelled by "abeg beshi" - a sudden rush of unsustainable emotion. Somehow the crucial ingredient that would crystallise such outbursts into a hard unbreakable resolve of "so far and no further; we're not going to take it any more" is lacking. After the rhetoric, slogans, and blood letting, the abused continue to bow down to their abusers.

This climate of low dignity compounds the problem further. It not only tells the poor that they deserve no better, it also allows those with power to treat them with routine harshness. Were slave owners kind when listening to the lie that those they bought were soul-less sub-humans? At a guess, occasionally yes; as occasionally, yes, there are acts of kindness in our street. But any view of life that sees others as of little value must inevitably add to the hardness of their treatment. That "hardness" can only increase as a person's status diminishes. In Bangladesh,

mob frenzy (a compounded form of “abeg beshi” reacting as explosively as nuclear fission) is the only counter to the ruling minority’s absolute monarchy. While still unpredictable, certain things are almost guaranteed to provoke a riot against the rich.

Running down a child usually does it. Blame is rarely properly apportioned since the driver is hardly ever caught (and thereby lynched). But the bus is, in itself, a two-fold symbol of the rich. Those travelling in the faster, more accident prone mini-buses are probably middle class. Not, therefore, of the 80% living day-to-day or week-to-week who travel in the slower “country buses”. Also the buses are usually owned by the wealthy; sometimes by the extremely wealthy. During the mid-1992 bus owners’ agitation for higher fares it emerged that some “maliks” (as the bus owners are called) owned as many as 3,000 buses. The poor here are very poor. The rich defy comprehension or, for that matter, apprehension.

Therefore following an accident, particularly of a child, (especially a precious son) the road is blocked and the next few buses after the now fled culprit are stopped and burned. People are allowed to get out first, although some manner of violence usually features and some lives are commonly lost. Mob frenzy continues for a few days then normalcy resumes - until the next accumulation of frustrations finds a trigger to be released. This savagery is one way impoverished males act out their frustration. In a systolic/diastolic manner, pressure (due to mistreatment) rises and is then explosively released (protected by the safety of numbers). Village women (arguably the most oppressed group) have a far more poetic way of coping. It is called “saper batas”. The breath of snakes.

The idea is simple. If a woman crosses the path of a snake’s exhaled breath, she collapses. The only way for her to return to her senses - perhaps even to consciousness, depending on how severe an attack it was - is by the administrations of a skilled practitioner. A man (of course) of piety and reputation, he will chant magical words drawn from an alarming range of religions. The woman regains herself with a “what happened?” sequence, and life continues. While Western medicine would talk of hysterical symptoms, no-one in village Bangladesh questions the reality of snake breath episodes (although, interestingly, in some parts of the country it is seen as a physical problem and in others a spiritual one). And only the most cynical could suggest that the package fails to give poor uneducated women a chance to release their tensions, albeit temporarily. If it works, use it. At village level, a wasted afternoon costs little. At national level, burning buses (arguably) saves the day - although it may cost a week in lost opportunities.

It’s a desperate strategy. Unjust treatment builds to explosive point; the outburst then gives temporary benefit and long term detriment. A coping mechanism forged, in part, by the low global opinion of the country which only notices Bangladesh in simplistic headline terms such as “disaster” or “flood”; “famine” or “corruption”. “Basketcase” in a word. Of such ingredients cynicism and despair thrive. On such a diet people can’t develop.

Perhaps nothing points to this low expectation of each other than the stories that pass as boasts. After all, we can reach no higher than our aspirations and what we hope for is reflected by what we are proud of. “Chalak” is one of the pivotal words in Bengali. It translates inaccurately to “clever” but actually the word carries a more ambiguous meaning and can imply slyness and cunning as well. It may be heard as an epithet following a long teashop story about transactions

in which the speaker (to everyone's amusement) managed to profit handsomely. And, by inference, the other party lost, smarted, but was too outflanked to counter attack. "Chalak" thus is a complement. It is a good thing to outsmart those you do business with.

We have already established that no race is genetically better or worse than any other race. Such a theory, we saw, is both unprovable and destructive. Yet different societal groupings do show differing habitual actions. Hardly anyone of any age here, for example, bites their nails. There maybe an element of natural selection involved. (Knowing the left hand's use, dysentery is a near certainty to any who nibble those fingers.) Children learn from those around them the habits (of thinking as well as action) that their adult life will be marked by. Among Bangladesh's distinctives the routine brutality and callousness are all too noticeable. Gouging out of eyes and cutting of tendons aren't how all countries' students' conduct their politics. "All races have the same value" is true; "all races act similarly" isn't. If racial variations can't be attributed to genetics they must be due to our varied upbringings.

Bangladeshis habitually think ill of themselves, partially because others they admire (albeit grudgingly) think ill of them. They therefore grow to expect low levels of behaviour around them. Excellence or compassion, are startling and therefore best avoided. Just as success breeds success, having second rate expectations become self fulfilling prophecies. This is because people generally forge friendships with those they feel comfortable with; those they understand. If debasement is expected it is only around debased people that they will feel relaxed. Degenerated actions are admittedly bad but they are at least expected. Dealing with a compassionate or honest person would be extremely baffling, hence such people tend to be ignored or marginalised in Bangladeshi society. Admired, maybe; but who would want to marry into such a bizarre family?

Moral laxity is expected, reassuring and ineffectually complained about. At a micro level, millions of individual decisions enshrine dishonesty, untrustworthiness, slyness and betrayal as successful behavioural adaptations. At the macro level, a complete breakdown of trust has become endemic throughout Bangladesh. Monetary theft is a constant in almost all business or development projects. The judicial system is open to the highest bidder, which means that no arbitration exists to rectify any "chalak" dealings that slide to the law's far side. And with each episode, turned quickly into teashop rumour, rebuilding trust becomes harder since trust can only be learned by being trusted. By self-definition, Bangladeshis are those who can't be trusted; how then to begin?

Simplistically, it could be suggested that all Bangladesh needs is a good zap of self confidence. But unfortunately more than mere positive thinking is needed to reverse the country's slide. Bangladeshis have reasons enough to feel despondent although they aren't eager to be reminded of their country's problems (particularly by an outsider). A sense of self worth needs solid achievements to rest on, while Bangladesh has only myths and dreams. Inevitably, few are deeply content by the state they're in. For those with aspirations the uppermost question is by what scam can they escape the country. Very few, twenty years after independence, see staying and helping their nation as an option. Freedom's dream has twisted to mean "free to flee the country". Get out and help the family by whatever means possible has become the highest goal.

It's a sad footnote to four or five thousand years of development - the Bengal delta has such ancient roots. And dignity is a long way off the agenda for most people. So history slides on while Bangladesh looks to the world that ignores it and tries to juggle its feudal systems into the twenty-first century. The irony is that, just as advances in communications link the country tighter to the outside world and thereby reinforce a sense of inferiority Bangladesh actually is beginning to regenerate a history to be proud of. Rice production is not only sufficient for the country's 110,000,000 citizens, its price has also actually fallen. Advances in irrigation mean that, for some parts of the country, the principle rice crop is now the "Boro" harvest, which relies on deep-tube well water and is therefore independent of immediate weather variations. Rice is central to the country's stability, to the extent that some attribute Sheik Mujib's downfall in the mid 1970's to his inability to control rice prices.

Moreover, the last change of government saw a dictator merely dethroned and not murdered. Ex-ruler Ershad has been collecting sentences in jail ever since, prompting complaints by his remaining supporters concerning the legality and hardship of his incarceration, but even ten years ago the coup would almost certainly have resulted in Ershad's quick execution. The army stayed in the barracks while the mob's frenzied retribution was over in one night and cost only tens of lives. A fair election followed despite the huge emotional turmoil that the Gulf War, then running, imposed on every Muslim country. Two years later, the democratically elected government remains. It is confident enough to invite half a dozen heads of state to an international conference (SAARC) despite outstanding issues such as water sharing (dis)agreements and the Babri Mosque/Ahoydhya Temple that could tempt an assassin's aim.

Democracy isn't yet a habit, stability hasn't yet sunk foundations, determination doesn't yet outweigh opportunism. But a start has been made that could dare people to hope. Countering this optimism we have the despair bought about (in part) by a deep lack of esteem. Unfortunately, this lack of dignity isn't the only societal habit that works against development, as we will see. In fact some of its effects dovetail closely with other societal traits' manifestations. For example, the willingness to mistreat each other is reinforced by a sense of exclusivity - and this is the focus of our next chapter.