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## *Rich Man Poor Man*

My obsession with poverty began in Holland. Apparently, it's not unusual for the return to one's own culture (Western, in my case) to be more dislocating than the initial exploration of new territories. The voyage back is always more tedious than the journey out. For whatever reason, my first few years in Asia included few shocks more traumatic than the first hour I spent in Europe. Of course my memory remains to this day littered with Asian paraphernalia collected throughout that initial period. My first glimpse of a water buffalo, for example, from a bus window near Ujang Pandang in Sulawesi (Indonesia). The first dead beggar (Dhaka, Bangladesh); the first monsoonal drenching (Annaradhapura, Sri Lanka). But these and other such memories jostle my thoughts gently, to surface periodically and then sink back peaceably. They neither haunt nor harangue me, having evidently been filed away in the documentary and not the horror/ shock section of my brain. Which is where my arrival at the Netherlands' Schipol airport has slotted itself tightly in.

In retrospect, it seems that my travelling days in Asia were filled with continuous, manageable changes. Being constant, these changes were semi-anticipated and therefore somewhat prepared for. Each change that Asia guided me through as I travelled over its mosaic of microcosms built me up for the next opportunity for change (and therefore growth) that I would encounter. Hence I shifted, one barely registered degree at a time, until my mental map was tilted way off kilter from its previous axis. The once-shocking marks of poverty (a narrowness of both diet and vision) amongst my neighbours quickly became normal, so I wasn't startled by their subsequent imperceptible emergence within my own life either. Throughout those years I learned to trust my neighbours' perception of reality at the cost of some of my own beliefs. I came to accept as normal that which they accepted as normal. Asia's invasion of my thinking may have been massive, but it was by infiltration and not by frontal assault. Its agents weren't precepts, but people.

People a jumbo jet from Bombay's Santa Cruz airport tore me away from in 1980, landing me abruptly back in the world that apparently hadn't shifted an atom from its previous axis. I mumbled and stumbled my way so ineptly through immigration that customs quietly took me aside and examined everything except my teeth. Disappointingly for them, I wasn't intoxicated or smuggling but merely trying to remember the rules of social interaction I'd once followed unthinkingly. The shock of re-entry both numbed and battered me. I was heading homeward, lost.

Thus came about Holland's pivotal position in my metamorphosis. Locked inside a bus's sleek speed from Schipol Airport to Amsterdam's tidy vices, past groomed and graded pastures, my disparate threads of thought gathered themselves into a single mantle of disquiet; 'Where are the poor? How can everything be so new and clean? And everybody be so rich? Where do they all get so much money from?'

Poverty, not wealth, had become my norm. A decade later, it remains my norm - which is probably not surprising considering that I've lived the bulk of that time in Bangladesh. Yet even as the sights and sounds of poverty (the near-feral children, or beggars' chants, for example) are

as everyday as my face in a mirror, the sense of dislocation that first seized me at Schipol Airport still retains its hold. How can there be isolated islands of wealth amid oceans of need? Can one world really encompass two such extremes? The pair seem as removed from each other as the West is from the East; how, then, can anyone be mindful of both? What causes wealth? What engenders poverty? “Make or Break: Bangladesh in The 1990’s” is my wrestling for answers to this admittedly complex topic. It is always a temptation when dealing with convoluted subjects to oversimplify the situation in order to produce neat, succinct solutions and investigations of poverty can easily fit this glib pattern. Even deciding what “poor” means isn’t entirely straightforward. Any source (foreign or local, expert or street-wise) will tell you that this country is poor, without defining the word at all. To the rickshaw-wallah pressing me for a tip, the sentence “I am poor” simply means “I have less money than you/can I hope for a favour?”. To the busy media-fed Westerner a per capita income figure standardised into US dollars has become the most trusted indicator of poverty. No account is given of how much of what can be bought for a dollar, nor of how relevant cash is to local trading systems anyway. In each case money is seen as the sole lacking element. The succinct solution to poverty, therefore, is seen as a simple handover of cash. In fact, money to poverty is as medicine to illness. To provide an effective cure, when and how much are as important as what, precisely, needs to be given.

Similarly, the difficult question of “Why is Bangladesh poor?” can get equally simplistic treatment. The country is poor, Bangladeshis frequently tell me, because of “floods”. Or “cyclones”. Or “overpopulation”, or “foreign interference, past and present”. All are lies of omission; all, in other words, are partially correct and together with perhaps a dozen other factors lead to Bangladesh’s destitution. Poverty has no single cause. It has several.

This inquiry, too, will be simplified since I will deliberately limit its scope. This isn’t because I believe Bangladesh is too chaotic to be analyzed in its totality but because I only feel qualified to carry out certain segments of that total study. And - more importantly - because those sections that I will examine are precisely those I’ve come to believe are central to the question of why my neighbours are trapped in their poverty. I have grown inexorably surer that the physical and historical quoted above are actually peripheral to why Bangladesh is sinking from low to lower (as testified by an actual decrease in average body height over the past few decades). The vital factors contributing to Bangladeshi poverty include (I believe) those intrinsic to Bangladeshi society and dictate how people view themselves and each other.

Such an assertion is debatable, of course. Less in doubt, however, is the fact that studies of poverty tend to ignore such societal factors entirely and concentrate instead on the more traditional scapegoats alluded to above. Westerners tend to have this bias because of a post-colonial sense of guilt, I suspect. What right can we have to even hint at criticising societies that our forbears once wrongly subjugated? The rights I, as a Westerner in Asia, give myself are the same as the rights any Asian living in the West deserves to be given. The right to be involved. The right, after a decade or so of living immersed in the host culture, to make comments. The right to think that an outsider on the inside can have a useful perspective. The right to make mistakes (if there is a readiness to learn from them). Armed with these I repeat my belief that some traits intrinsic to Bangladeshi society are paramount in holding back this country’s economic development; and moreover these factors are largely overlooked. The greenhouse effect is more studied than the house of mirrors wherein we look at ourselves and each other.

Even the most cursory review of those countries that have developed over the past few decades - and those that haven't - quickly shows how tenuous the link between growth and physical factors can be. What natural advantages does Singapore have? Where is Japan's oil? For how long did tin and palm oil fuel Malaysia's drive? Why are so many "lucky" (having minerals or fertile land) African regions destitute? It would rather seem that Singapore's growth (for example) was suggested by its harbour but guaranteed by its reliability as a port. Malaysia's boom, similarly, was only started by its primary products but sustained by its ability to do business. And could an Africa that was no longer addicted to tribalism fail to enrich itself?

Physical factors are peripheral to development. To return to the source of my obsession with poverty, a hypothetical assertion can illustrate the point. Were Bangladesh to be crowded with 110,000,000 Dutch, this fertile Gangetic delta would (I suggest) be developing instead of deteriorating. Or - its corollary - were 15,000,000 Bangladeshis to populate Holland while retaining their societal mores, their new mid-European home would slowly grow poorer. Probably the sudden increase in overall fortune would concentrate in the pockets of the uppermost 15-20 per cent, as has happened with the aid windfalls to Bangladesh over the past two decades, leaving the lower eighty percent daily less and less.

This "trickle-up" trend is so depressing to many of the consultants who work here that they suggest in exasperation the problems foreign aid has caused so outweigh the problems it has solved, that it is time to pull out. So little of the aid money has actually dribbled down that the poor would barely notice if it were cut off. Moreover, since most of the aid money (and therefore most of the GNP) has ended up as black money held in a few hands, life has in fact been made more arduous for the lower four-fifths as the top fifth's power to exploit has grown. Removing this foreign injection of power-equals-money, sceptics argue, would merely make survival easier for the many at the cost of the wealthy's luxuries. Thus the poor's slipping from subsistence to..... sub-subsistence? (what new euphemisms for death can be contrived?) would thereby be reversed. They say.

Who are the poor, anyway? While I've shown scant regard for others' definitions of the term I haven't yet dared to attempt one of my own. My crudest definition is just that - crude. Any town in Bangladesh has areas set aside where bowels and bladders are emptied. Near bus stations are ideal (follow your nose) since the travelling public represents a fair cross-section of society in its entirety. Once discovered, you have before your eyes (and, unless careful, under your feet) a representation of the state of health your fellow travellers endure. Stool samples - as laboratories would call these malodorous mounds - are very rarely solid. Many resemble what I've produced when too weak to walk. Exchange pleasantries with those swaying beside you during the tediously uncomfortably bus trip and wonder what is going on inside their frames. How is it that no-one seems too ill to share a joke or shout their opinion as to why "we are a poor country"?

What, then, of their often vociferous reasons? The most heard local thought is that overpopulation is the major cause of mass undernourishment. Surely the rate of population increase alone cancels out any chance of thriving here. Surely? Immediately we're out of areas like demography and agriculture and into societal factors. The official population growth rate over the past handful of years was 2.2%. Ex-President Ershad collected a UN citation on the strength of that figure. Local papers were dutifully enthusiastic at the time, devoting valued

column space to large-sized photos of him shaking ex-President Reagan's congratulatory hand. Then, following Ershad's slide from power, Acting President Justice Shahabuddin addressing the incoming parliament spoke of a 2.6% rate - no explanations, no wry smiles, just a 0.4 discrepancy. Were this gap passed off as just another example of the now discredited Ershad's ethics, we would have a too-simple answer giving a dishonest impression regarding a complex situation. Whatever the truth of the extinct 2.2 figure, there was never any official, media or casual challenge to it. If it was a lie, it was a lie many acquiesced to, albeit by silence. And the 2.6% figure; what of its chances? Some foreign consultants talk of 2.9, others mutter 'God knows.' The government's propaganda slogan, meanwhile, of "Two Children - a Happy Family" is heard far more often than it is seen. "Allah Janen" as they say. God knows.

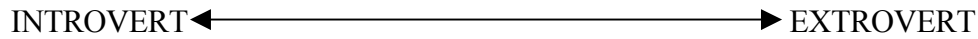
Figures detailing rice production, theoretically the other major determinant of future famine chances, are equally uncertain. Firm rumour (to invent a phrase) suggests that Bangladesh has produced a surplus of rice, its overwhelmingly staple diet, for three years now. While store houses are full (with pests as well as grain) an official story of on-going shortfalls is given out; all the better to impress the donors with. So the story goes.

Whether either story is factual or just bazaar rumour, they clearly show an aspect of life common in contemporary Bangladesh. All too often it can be extremely difficult to sift truth from gossip. The people you have learned to trust don't know what is going on, while those who do know aren't to be trusted. Of that truth I caught a glimpse soon after my arrival in the country. Heard, actually, and not a glimpse but a grunt, snuffling in the lane outside my door. It persisted, I investigated and saw a man stumbling away trailing blood in his wake. He had been stabbed, apparently; and nothing else was ever discovered, despite plenty of neighbourhood speculation such as "a thief who got caught", "a local mastan" (thug), "political". Any of which was feasible, none of which was evidenced. My "surely this is a police matter ... won't it be in the papers tomorrow" words were met with indulgent smiles and hurried "hasn't been here long" comments passed over my head. I persisted in my curiosity for a handful of days until I realized that actual explanations, even for something as blatant and discussed as street violence, may likely never emerge. The blood dried into blackness and the next rain obliterated it. Conversation moved on; there's always football and weddings.

When people really want to know they listen to the foreign news agencies. During the winter of 1987, for example, when the fall of Ershad seemed imminent, every evening saw groups huddled around radios capable of picking up the BBC Bengali programme. The irony of listening to a signal from London (centre of the erstwhile oppressor) to find out what happened shooting distance away never appeared to bother anyone. Local news was dictated by local leaders and therefore not to be trusted. (Bazaar gossip of purported "secret deals" between Sheik Hasina as leader of the Awami League and then President Ershad was rife, reflecting the suspicion both of those leaders inspired. Suspicion that arguable persisted long enough to cost Sheik Hasina the election when it finally did arrive in January 1991.)

A collapse of trust in leadership or a lack of commitment to uncover the truth of events near at hand (relying instead on others' ideas) can contribute to poverty just as much as a lack of food grains or an excess of insect pests. It is societal factors such as these two - and others - that will be explored in this writing.

The method of exploration that will be used is comparison - not, I hasten to explain, comparison of Bangladesh with other countries. Such a measurement is as emotive as it is meaningless. Rather, I'll follow the psychologist Eysenk's example, when he postulated his model of human thinking. He suggested that, following diagnostic testing, any individual could be placed along a hypothetical continuum that stretched from -:



He didn't therefore attempt a narrow comparison of one person against another. Rather he proposed that each individual should be measured against a non-existent personality imagined to have the full range of willingness to communicate with others. (In reality, these varying shades of introversion and extroversion mutually exclude each other and can't therefore all co-exist within a single consciousness.) By evaluating how a particular person compared to this wider hypothetical model Eysenk was able to give explanations of specific behaviour patterns and also make predictions of probable reactions in particular situations.

Of course, such a simple picture is inevitably flawed and modern personality tests do in fact take into account additional parameters. It is however notable how accurate even a simple model of human can be. ("Notable" should perhaps read "sobering". For such a complex being as humankind to be so easily explained is a reminder of our foundational simplicity).

My suggestion, then, is that individual societies (Bangladesh, in this case) can equally be "fingerprinted" by their position along a series of hypothetical continua, each of which describes a single thought pattern. The (introversion-extroversion) pattern that Eysenk chose is one that very strongly influences how we behave, how and when we interact with other people. Precisely because this tug between sociability and privacy is so powerful in governing human behaviour, he was able by a few dozen questions based on this single dynamic to produce his simple-but-strong behavioural model. Equally, those societal traits that will be shortly examined are precisely those I believe to be most influential in dictating how and why Bangladeshis act in their distinctively Bangladeshi manner.

Because this study concentrates on those societal traits I believe to be most harmful to Bangladesh's development efforts, my writing will inevitably be critical. In a society where critical analysis is all too easily equated with criticism, my thoughts may offend. "Ja Hook" as they say; "So be it." Oscar Wilde in answering an Eysenk-like "who do you choose to spent time with" enquiry replied that he cared less if someone was good or bad, more whether they were interesting or boring. Similarly, when looking at theories of why Bangladesh remains poor, "can I use it?" should be a more basic question than "do I like it?" Any belief that doesn't square with reality is a poor faith; conversely any idea, however unpalatable, that is useful should be used.

This study, then, will profile Bangladesh using a handful of continua. From its position along each of these, conclusions and predictions will be made in the same way that personality tests (that may launch or lose careers or marriages) classify individual behaviour in order to understand and modify it.

Initially, though, a clarification or two is needed. What is a society, and are we justified making generalisations about them?

“Society” is a term so central to this discussion that a precise meaning needs to be fixed. I will therefore use two related concepts to show exactly what I mean by it, before moving on to aspects of Bangladeshi society itself. The first is the idea of linguistic unity. It seems obvious that members of a single society should be able to communicate easily with each other. On reflection, though, this simple thought is shown to be merely simplistic. Are North and South Korea a single society? Do Bengalis living in India, England, and Bangladesh form one society, or three? Was a resident of Leipzig (in the Eastern part of Germany) part of the same society as a resident of Stuttgart (a Western-sector city) in 1982 when they were part of antagonistically different countries and therefore unable and unwilling to communicate? What about in 1992; does being able to sit at the same table and talk undo decades of differences and forge immediate unity? It seems that speaking the same language plays only a limited part in defining a society’s boundaries. Even geographic proximity can’t ensure that a region forms a unified society, as Serbia’s ethnic cleansing sordidly showed us.

Therefore a second concept, drawn from science, must be added to the linguistic idea of what constitutes a society. Science defines a species as “animals that normally are capable of mating with each other”. One evening in a Bangkok brothel is thus proof enough that although the human race consists of many societies we are all form a single species. (Purists may argue that not all couplings involved are normal but “ja hook”.) By extending the idea of “mating” beyond copulation to include a measure of long term commitment we can, however, get a useful definition of what constitutes a human society based on the concept of what a species is. People who form couples permanently enough to breed and care for their offspring can usually be said to come from the same society. Exceptions occur; Indians marry Europeans, Serbs marry (did marry? Will marry?) Croats. Maybe an Eskimo has married an Samoan, pitched her/his igloo in the tropics, and settled down to raise a hybrid family.

Usually though individuals marry within far narrower confines. Moreover, these confines may well not be only geographical. While the Eskimo/Samoan example seems unlikely because of distance, Serb/Croat intermarriage has already become rare enough to be newsworthy. In neighbouring India, inter-caste marriage between Brahmin/Harijan remains uncommon, despite Brahmins and Harijans living parallel lives and constantly communicating with each other. They even - to an outsider - look virtually identical, just as two species of wasp are indistinguishable to all but an entomologist (and probably a specialist in hymenoptera at that). “They all look the same” is a common enough comment passed any society novel to us.

Two Bangladeshi males, for example, often share many features. Black hair and eyes, brown skin, medium height, clad in a check-patterned lungi (the wrap around garment favoured by males here). Yet just as wasps seem able to satisfactorily locate and centre themselves in their own species, knowing by a surfeit of familiar clues which wasps are “us” and which are “them”, our two Bangladeshis would very quickly work out each other’s religion, status, possible occupation, probable income etc. All from clues an outsider wouldn’t have noticed, but indicative of divisions wide enough to create separated societies. Professionals don’t usually marry labourers; ditto for the rich and poor. Inter-faith marriages are very rare; hence by our

definition, this homogeneous looking Bangladeshi society is actually several societies. Bengali, as a language, recognises this since “somaj” (which a bi-lingual dictionary renders as “society”) is functionally often used in conversation to mean “religion”. Muslims rarely marry Hindus; the separate societies co-exist alongside each other

Thus we have a working definition of society. People who build for a future together form a single society. Several societies may therefore occupy the same geographic area.

The second question needing attention concerns how far any society, any grouping of people, can be generalised about. Both racism and sexism have discredited such all encompassing statements as whites/blacks/yellows/ greenies/men/women are lazy/fat/stupid/liars/smart. Rightly discredited too, as we nuzzle into the 21st century with our collected knowledge and universal education (for those birth-righted with such benefits). Yet generalisations, subject to whims of time and place, remain common. One of William Shakespeare’s several on-going contributions to English society is his unabashed display of once-current prejudices by which we can see clearly how far such biases have shifted. “The Merchant Of Venice” has enough anti-Semitism to satisfy a neo-Nazi; and Katharina’s declaration of dutiful womanhood that ends “The Taming Of The Shrew” would be shouted down in modern conversations.

But it isn’t only with time that prejudices change. At any given period different places have different biases of course. Thus Katharina’s submissiveness, so contentious to a European, would be seen as laudable by the majority of my neighbours (being male, I talk almost entirely to men, which may skew what I hear). Wearing a “Saddam, The Great Hero” T-shirt which would get you arrested in Kuwait and beaten in many other places earned me much praise, here in Dhaka. In 1990’s Bangladesh, Saddam is admired and women are belittled while in 1990’s Europe the opposite is true. By the year 2000 God knows who will be in and who will be out in each country. Though slow moving, public opinion is never static, as was shown here during 1992 when pro-Saddam feeling waxed and waned. It peaked just prior to the actual conflict, when “battle” and “victory” were read as synonymous. Support during the “Desert Storm” gradually muted. After its conclusion (or interruption?) silence reigned. There wasn’t even a loud sense of pique following the rout - such as (for example) Arab defeats by Israel have in the past provoked in some Muslim countries. Perhaps this was because the up-coming election suggested new champions to enthuse over. Either way, white skins soon came off the public hit-list and were replaced by those of differing political hues.

No-one is without their biases; no group of people is without their tendency to divide the world into “us” and “them” and subsequently generalize (positively or negatively) about “them”. “Habit is the flywheel of society” wrote William James, and this shared habit of typifying “them” persists because we all accept that habits are often useful. Who wants to re-learn knot tying every time a shoe lace comes undone? We believe ourselves to be right, often enough, in our generalizations of others to justify our use of such all-encompassing statements as “Bangladeshis are far more family orientated than Europeans.”

Which is, in fact, an often heard opinion; and one that my experience agrees with. Family ties do bind tightly. When chatting about my own country’s understanding of how deeply family responsibilities should be I once told some teashop companions “if I were to go to my own brother and ask for help, ask for money, maybe to get married, maybe to start a business, maybe

to get my child into a school, he wouldn't help. My own brother would refuse me. He'd say 'you've got two arms, two legs, by the grace of God, so get out and earn your own money.'

"Wha ... What; he'd say what?" Disoriented disbelief greeted my illustration of how individualism overrides family loyalties in the West. To a Bangladeshi, blood rules. The very language hints at family's centrality. "Uncle", "aunt", "grandfather", "grandmother" are terms too imprecise for relationships so vital. "Uncle" - on the paternal or maternal side? Is the father-or-mother's brother older or younger? Each distinction is seen as important enough to warrant a specific title. Or rather two titles. Since this "Bangladesh" isn't a single society one word is used by Muslims and one by the other religious groups for each precise family relationship that the English language tends to clump together.

We all generalize about societies. Such generalizations follow as fickle a fashion as apparel. "Industrialist", for example, would have been as complimentary in the 19th century as it is suspect in the twentieth. Our generalisations are a kind of mental shorthand and thus have their place in our "first draft" of taking note of our surroundings. So long as these generalization-based pre-judgements carry no more weight than rough sketches they remain useful. But to retain their usefulness two principles must be followed.

The first is that generalisations should be mutable, open to growth and evolution. To use a generalisation to exemplify generalisations, it seems that there are two categories of human beings. There are those curious enough to welcome the opportunity new knowledge brings to jolt their ideas one step closer to reality. And there are those to whom new knowledge threatens and who therefore carefully monitor all their perceptions to admit only information that confirms their existing world view. I write "it seems" because this generalisation by which several billion people are type-cast (the former group to learn; the latter, to stagnate) may well be too broad or inexact. I might be wrong.

I am certainly not exactly right. Generalisations - aphorisms, apt often enough to be useful - are inevitably astray too often to be regarded as utterly reliable. Bangladeshis are indeed family oriented. But as my experience of Bangladesh widens and deepens many "buts" emerge. As in "but it depends how you define family, nuclear or extended." "But it depends on what stresses the family is under." "But it varies from urban to rural." To be valid generalisations must be pliable. Experience should extend their meaning while compressing their form, experience as gathered first hand or gleaned from a trusted source. (It is indicative of the distance between Eastern and Western societies that the West sides with the media, and Asia with street talk, in deciding what a "trusted source" is.)

Other than their fragile transitory nature, generalisations have a second sharp limitation. They can't be extrapolated into the particular. For example, while most Bangladeshis (90% was a common guesstimate, which may well have been conservative) supported Saddam Hossein in the Gulf stand-off, to therefore seize on any particular Bangladeshi and treat them as an adherent of the Iraqi cause (or the Iraqi leader's cause to be more precise) could be dangerously inaccurate. White South Africans adrift from their homeland in past decades often suffered badly from an inappropriate application of the generalisation that "South Africans are racist". It was often disenchantment at their government's racist policies that prompted these individual South Africans to travel, often into uncertainty, sometimes into exile, in the first place.

Sadly, Israelis now share the same fate. Those willing to risk visiting Islamic Asia in the hope of learning should be seen in Bangladesh; both Jew and Muslim would gain. But granting Israelis access here will happen when Bangladeshi political parties work peacefully together and roadway man-hole covers aren't regularly stolen for their scrap metal value (in apocalyptic terms it is called "when the lion lies down with the lamb"). None of my neighbours has ever knowingly met a Jew yet their hatred of the race is as fierce and straightforward as Shakespeare depicted it in "The Merchant of Venice". A play studied, incidentally, at Dhaka University - and, yes, any suggestion that Shylock may have been provoked into aggression rather than be utterly evil is sternly scorned. Jews Are Evil. Exams are passed (and opportunities lost) by such blunt, shared prejudices.

Why all this preamble about generalisations? Because it is on generalisations of Bangladeshi society that the following discussion will be founded. What type of generalisations? Those that will place Bangladesh along a series of hypothetical continua, between two poles representing extremes examples of human behavioural types. 110,000,000 people (but who's counting) will be represented as a few crosses along five lines. Hence the importance of establishing the relevance and limitations of using generalisations.