

## Book Review

### ***Sociological Perspectives on Poverty***

**Edited by Nazrul Islam**

***Dhaka: Ankur Prakashani, 2010, pp. 380, BDT 400 and US\$ 10, ISBN 9844642787***

This interesting book looks at the relationships among poverty and diverse sociological perspectives in contrast to conventional wisdom of poverty that is primarily based on econometric arguments. This collection explores how the international financial institutions such as the World Bank (and other donors) have manipulated and exploited the concept of poverty. Historically what commentators mean by poverty depends to some extent on what they intend or expect to do about it. Thus academic and political debate about poverty is not merely descriptive; it is prescriptive too. The first thing is to bear in mind is that poverty is not a simple phenomenon which can be defined by adopting *the correct* approach. Poverty can be seen through a range of contested definitions which overlap and sometimes contradict each other. This book has successfully shed lights on sociological investigation of poverty by some leading scholars in Bangladesh. In addition, inclusion of African and Indian contexts has enriched the discussion and arguments made in this volume.

The first chapter (by S Aminul Islam) looks into traditional theories of poverty and exhibits the limitations. This work proposes the development of ground analysis of poverty with empirical evidences from two villages in Bangladesh. The same author assesses the poverty trends and poverty reduction programmes in Bangladesh in the concluding chapter. The author offers his invaluable personal experience on limitation of survey methods used in Bangladesh and proceeds to envisage the significance of space and human agency with the examples of four villages in Bangladesh. This work proposes that instead of elitist perception of poverty (based on crisis management and vested interest) thoughts on poverty reduction should be focused on sociological understandings – a signal for change in transforming values and attitudes conducive to increase human capability. The second chapter of this book (by Monirul Islam Khan) describes the problems of calorie intake and income based poverty. Instead this piece delineates the non-economic concepts of poverty. In order for doing so, it offers some matrix on measuring sociological profile of poverty taking resource poor and agency poor as examples. However, for some reader this may be a bit hypothetical. Some evidence (empirical or other) would have enhanced the claims made in this work.

The next chapter (by Shahadat Hossain) provides a critical assessment on social theories (for example, the theories of subsistence, 'relative deprivation', 'entitlement', 'marginality', 'culture of poverty' and 'political economy') on poverty and marginality in the urban contexts. After a critical review of these

theories this section suggests an integrated framework focusing on livelihood systems, poverty and asset vulnerability, network and social capital. This proposition is rather short and could have been elaborated. Hossain also has three other chapters in this book. The first one is on household strategies and coping with urban life in Dhaka city. This suggests a 'livelihood framework' – a strategy of survival for the poor during shocks and other stresses in addition to utilizing natural resource base. It is argued that urban poor use a combination of strategies for their economic activities, expenditure and purchasing pattern and using social services. Maintaining their rural ties, using various social networks and active participation in the community also consist their overall survival strategies. The second one looks into socio-spatial differentials of political behaviour of the urban poor in Bangladesh. He claims here that neighbourhood, age, gender, education, employment status, level of poverty and urban residence are the determinant factor for comprising the political behaviour of the urban poor in Bangladesh. They utilize their political attitudes in order to overcome their marginalized position in urban politics. The final chapter by Hossain deals with rapid urban growth and poverty in Dhaka city where he outlines that Dhaka has been the epicentre of Bangladesh's growth. In Dhaka the gap between rich and poor is increasing, also there is a significant increase in the population living in the slums and squatters. He also insists that urban poor use a number of social networks (both kin and non-kin based) that turns into social capital in the adaptation of urban life.

The fourth chapter (A I Mahub Uddin Ahmed) of the book investigates socio-demographic correlates of rural poverty in Bangladesh. This work presents strong evidence from two *upazillas* in Bangladesh and measures poverty by ten variables (such as food, income, assets, expenditure, health status, education, reproductive control by women, access to electricity, safe water and sanitary latrine). Eight independent variables are used as socio-demographic correlates of poverty in this study (such as location, gender, age, household size, marital status, occupation, ownerships of land and house). The author claims that findings of this study are reflective of Bangladesh's socio-economic context and insists that poverty analysis (primarily reliant on economic aspects) in Bangladesh needs a paradigmatic shift. – a shift in the definition of poverty from economic dimension to sociological dimension. Ahmed also has another chapter that sketches out the consensual poverty in Britain, Sweden and Bangladesh. This study also explores the dynamics of normative construction of deprivation and concludes that the wholesale importation of economic definition and measurement of poverty has made a disastrous impact on sociological research on poverty. He asserts that poverty studies should be society-subjective and preferably consensual type rather than universalistic one. Ahmed has also co-authored (with Lipon Kumar Mondal) another paper that offers a case study of Uttara (an urban location in Dhaka) in understanding normative deprivation in urban Bangladesh. This section is a follow-up of Ahmed's previous chapters and again claims for rigorous research on poverty from social scientific perspectives.

The eighth chapter of the book (by Nazrul Islam) unravels the discrepancies of World Bank data on poverty. Islam arrests the exaggerations of the World Bank in terms of their so called statistical claims in the numbers of poverty and success on poverty reduction. This fascinating piece alerts the reader that rhetorical claims of poverty reduction (specially in numbers, based on economic and statistical point of view) can be wrong and misleading. The ninth chapter (by David Everatt) questions the political intent of poverty reduction in South Africa. He depicts how poverty reduction has been used as a political tool and been replaced with the language of development. It is argued that along with the definitional problems, poverty reduction has been deterred in South Africa due to the politicization of poverty. This chapter suggests that South Africa should adopt a long term policy that will make poverty reduction redistributive and a national priority. The following chapter (by Mahububa Nasreen, Khondokar Mokaddem Hossain and Debashis Kumar Kunda) provides an overview on the inter-relationship between poverty and environment sustainability in Bangladesh. This work provides a background on environment sustainability, poverty and development. It goes onto envisage that Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP) claims to be participatory but it actually was made through the bureaucracy that has resulted in the exclusion of environmental issues of poverty reduction in Bangladesh. This paper invokes a participatory environmental plan connected to poverty reduction in Bangladesh in the context of alarming environmental changes. The next chapter (by D. Parimala) presents the challenges of poverty reduction programme in developing countries focusing on gender issues. This study scrutinizes traditional poverty reduction programmes in Indian context and demonstrates that often survey data may ignore the subtleties and nuances of female headed households and other gender related issues. This work underscores that important aspects such as 'female poverty' needs to be carefully looked at in poverty reduction programmes otherwise those may be inadequate.

It has to be said that the book has some stylistic and bibliographic limitations. Stylistically, the chapters are not written in coherent manner even when same author has written multiple chapters. Bibliographically, in most cases data and literature used in this book are little outdated (clearly there are couple of chapters those are quite updated). As the Editor informs us that majority of these chapters were published before in the *Bangladesh E-Journal of Sociology*, perhaps, the contributors could have taken the opportunity to incorporate latest data and information to crank up their works. This would have enabled them to examine whether there have been any change since they produced their papers. Furthermore, the notion of poverty (both economically and non-economically) is constantly changing. Updated literature and data would have helped the authors (and the readers) to perceive the changing trajectory of understanding poverty and the underlying reasons for those changes (mainstreamed and adopted by the academics, aid agencies, international financial institutes and developmentalists).

This book is however an interesting read for the graduate students and development practitioners alike. This collection has clearly evinced that poverty is not a mere economic issue. Having widely been

recognised that poverty is multifaceted and multidimensional there are not many useful texts that entirely come up with other social scientific perspectives of poverty than economic contexts only. This piece has demonstrated how poverty can be understood from a range of sociological milieu and hence widened the horizon of studying poverty. This is a well-structured book that makes a valuable contribution to the ongoing debate on poverty. It would have benefited from an advanced literature and date base. Perhaps future editions would take care of these minor problems.

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