

## **Insights from people's self-initiatives in Bangladesh and the poverty and development discourse**

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*“Outwardly the species is thrown naked, armourless and weak in all respects while its soul is freed to fly. Elated by the joy of this freedom it cries out: ‘I shall do the impossible!’ - meaning I shall not accept that what has been happening all the time will continue to happen – what does not happen will also happen”. (Tagore 1921. “The Call of Truth”. p 321)*

### **1. Introduction**

This paper presents a gist of grass-roots experiences in Bangladesh of creative self-reliant initiatives of disadvantaged people to promote their lives independent of government and NGO programmes, and of some Participatory Action Research (PAR) initiatives in the country, and reflects therefrom upon the concept of poverty, the problematic of overcoming poverty,<sup>1</sup> and the philosophy of development.

### **2. Glimpses of people’s self-initiatives**

324 self-initiatives of disadvantaged people all over the country have been reported by a team of 70 journalists working over the last three years for Research Initiatives, Bangladesh (RIB) (Mukta *et al* 2005; Morol 2005; Tahmina *et al* 2005).<sup>2</sup> The special qualities that have been looked for in searching for such initiatives are: creative initiatives to promote people’s self-objectives with positive outcomes, the initiatives not dependent on outside material assistance but not ruling out bank loans, motivational support, technical inputs and advice from outside. To present just a sample:

#### Agrarian revolution through land redistribution

A social leader of village *Maheswarchanda* east of Kaliganj thana, Jhinaidaha district, mobilized farmers of his village to deliberate for days and days on how to improve their economic and social life (Morol 2005 Part 1.pp 1-4). This resulted in voluntary land redistribution in 1996, with land leveling and removal of boundaries for collective farming. Agricultural extension officers joined them to advise on modern farming technology. Dramatic rise in production and earnings resulted. All round collective development initiatives in economic and social sectors followed, and villagers including the youth meet regularly to deliberate upon and review activities and progress

– an example of spontaneous “participatory action research” or “people’s praxis”(Rahman, Md. Anisur 1985).

### Union of science and farmers revolutionise agricultural production

Farmers of Bandobilla area of Bagharpara upazilla, Jessore district, formed “agricultural clubs” where Agricultural officers were invited to come and advice on a regular basis (Morol Part 1 2005 pp 4-7). The officers responded, came regularly to the clubs, tested soils and advised on optimum cultivation practices on different kinds of soil. The result was revolutionary jump of production per acre - from less than 20 maunds per acre in 1998 to about 100 maunds by 2002. The example started spreading, and similar clubs started being formed in neighbouring areas. By now the upazilla has 22 such clubs, contributing to phenomenal rise in land productivity there.

### Fish Revolution in Iliotganj

An agricultural and fish farmer mobilized 52 farmers in dhanuakhola village in Iliotganj union, Comilla district, in 1988 to undertake collective fishing on agricultural land that gets waterlogged in the flood season precluding agricultural farming (Morol 2005 Part 1. pp 118-159). His slogan was “*save yourself, save others*”. The initiative paid off and spread. Today there are about 50 very profitable collective fish projects in three upazillas of Comilla , some of them quite gigantic, one involving 350 farmers of seven villages pooling their land.

### Innovative duck nurseries:

Once a poor egg seller has built in an wetland area by the “growth connecting road” in Nasirnagar Upazilla, Brahmanbaria district a large nursery of about 1200 ducks, where farmers of downstream areas lease in ducks from duck farmers of upstream areas when water level in upstream areas is low, rear the ducks and sell the ducks and eggs, and when water returns to the upstream areas the ducks are sold back to their original owners – a kind of innovative 'sharecrop-farming' with ducks benefiting both sides (Morol 2005 Part 1. pp 214-216).

### Group fish farming by the "hard core poor"

Another enterprising group in gurguri village in Kundupukur union, Nilfamari sadar upazilla, of two unemployed young boys and six women of very low income families (one widow, one wife of a landless labourer with uncertain income, and the husbands of others not earning enough for family needs) started moving out of acute poverty without any support from outside to start with (Morol 2005 Part 2. pp 310-313). These six persons formed a samity and managed to take lease of two-and-a half acre low-lying land at a

nominal rent for fish cultivation. With good return from fish they were able to buy eight cows and their income rose above a lac taka within a year-and-a-half. Thereafter came help by way of credit for them to move further forward. Seeing the impressive entrepreneurship of this group the upazilla fisheries office came forward in 2002 to give them a loan of 32 thousand taka free of interest repayable in five years. With this loan the samity rented and engaged labour to prepare a whole marsh for fish cultivation, bought a net and heaps of fishlings and feed for them, lime, fertilizers, etc. for large scale fish cultivation. The fortunes of the samiti members, self-managing the samity with hard work and strict discipline, have changed dramatically, and within three years the samity has also been able to repay half of the loan – an exemplary example indeed of appropriate credit to the very disadvantaged to liberate their latent group entrepreneurial talents in large scale production to contribute not only to augmenting their own income but also to economic growth of their village.

#### Productive enterprises by low-income farmers

A poor farmer Omar Ali of Cherenga village of Jaldhaka upazilla, Nilfamari district, got a loan of 3000 taka from the Krishi Bank which he put into egg plant and fish farming that dramatically changed his fortune (Morol 2005 Part 1. pp 110-112). In three months he had a profit of fifteen thousand taka from eggplant alone after festive distribution of the product to his neighbours. With the profit he invested further in milch cow and goats. In one year his earning was more than 80 thousand taka. The Krishi Bank of Jaldhaka also initiated the formation of nine groups of low income farmers and gave them a total loan of 216000 taka and helped them with technical know on vegetable farming, poultry and fishery. Fortunes of these farmers have started changing dramatically (Morol 2005 Part 1. *loc. cit*). The benefit has spread to other poverty groups in the village by way of greater employment and wage of day labourers, rise of fishing-net business, and stimulation to unemployed youth to get engaged in creative ventures like poultry and biogas production with cow-dung after taking training from relevant government offices. And some farmers have started storing the products themselves and sell them outside by-passing the middlemen, coining a new term for this activity - "rakhi business" ("keep it ourselves business").

#### Nursery enterprises by a "hard core poor"

Masud Rana of Sripur village in Sundarganj upazilla, Rangpur district, had only 70 Taka in his pocket with which he bought guava seeds and started guava cultivation in his homestead. His father gave him 1300 Taka to buy a bicycle to help him with a transport, but he invested this money to extend his nursery. His income started rising and he subsequently bought six bighas of land to extend his nursery. A decade later today he is owner of two large nurseries earning 9-10 thousand taka a month and has six farm hands plus a

number of day labourers (kamlas) who have found employment in his nurseries. (Morol 2005 Part 1. pp 180-183).

### Group saving-and-loan initiatives of low-income people

And there are impressive accounts of poverty groups coming out of poverty through group saving-and-loan initiatives of their own, and even without loan but with technical input from outside abound in the country. There are numerous self-initiated saving and loan societies of low-income groups in the country's villages whom either micro-credit from external sources has not reached or who themselves have not gone for such credit being unsure that they can handle it. There are, for example, "mushtichal" (fistful of rice) samitis of women of extremely low-income households whom micro-credit from external agencies do not reach - e.g. "mushtichal mohila samity" of dalanbari village, Begumganj upazilla, Noakhali district, self-managing saving investment and loan operations (Morol 2005 Part 2. pp 305-307); and similar samiti of wives of rickshawallahs, van drivers and low-income farmers in *pirgachha* village, shapara union, Gaibandha district whose members set aside two fistful of rice and one taka saving daily from which loans are given to samiti members for various small scale economic initiatives (Tahmina, Raj, Morol *et al* & others 2005. pp 103-4). The fultala bazaar small businessmen's savings and loan scheme in Khulna started in 1981 with 296 members which gives productive, business as well as distress loans to its members, including rice and khoil loan *without interest* when rice price goes up, and has also a pension scheme and an educational support programme to meritorious and needy children of the members, is another particularly exemplary case (Mukta *et al.* 2005 Part 1. pp 61-76). The great merit of such saving and loan samities is that they are not subject to dictates of outside loan agencies as to the terms of repayment, size of group formation, etc. and move forward with their own rules of saving and loan and other procedures. Among other advantages, this is also immensely more cost-effective not requiring any outside personnel to supervise their operations.

Accounts of numerous other instances are known or coming to light, of some initial capital of more than "micro" proportion, obtained from a bank or from friends or neighbours or relatives without a "micro-credit" type rigid repayment schedule, or some capital somehow saved by oneself, having dramatically changed the fortune of poverty-stricken persons in addition to contributing to economic growth and promotion of employment in villages.

### Productive use of every inch of land

And there are also outstanding examples of initiatives without credit of acutely poverty stricken people to move forward with outside technical assistance only. One is the case of a government Agricultural Block Supervisor Md. Hamidur Rahman posted at Chuhor block in Pairabandh

Union, Mithapukur Upazilla, Rangpur district, who saw the landless labourers there taking rice only with chilly at the end of days of hard labour. He wondered how he could help them live better. He went from door to door to motivate and teach them productive use of every inch of land they had in and around their households, by way of integrated vegetable, poultry and fish farming, and production for sale of organic compost fertilizers with homestead, water and farm wastes combined scientifically with chemicals. The initiative started in 1995 with 55 men and women, whose economic status grew rapidly. Today 1200 families are intensely involved in this 'self-reliant revolution' under direct supervision of Mr. Hamidur Rahman. Many other landless in all the villages under Chuhor farming block have followed suit, whom Mr. Rahman visits to advice. (Mukta *et al* 2005. pp 100-117)<sup>3</sup>.

#### "Hard core poor" women move forward with improved ovens

Another example of science for poverty alleviation through productive initiatives without any credit is the application of the technology of improved ovens in six villages in Beltia Block on the outskirts of Jamalpur city. Block Supervisor Badal Chandra Das from the Agricultural Extension office of Jamalpur learnt this technology from the Science Laboratory at Dhaka and in 1999 motivated and trained a number of women of "hard core poor" families in these villages to make improved ovens. Today there are 70 women's and 20 men's samities with a total membership of 1350 making this oven by visits to villagers' homes charging 100 taka only net of material cost for making each oven. The total saving accumulated in these samities taken together today is nearly 250000 taka. Members of the samities are also making further earnings by vegetable farming in their homesteads and in environment preserving work with tree planting<sup>4</sup>. (Morol 2005 Part 2. pp 308-309)

#### "Rakhi business" of chilly farmers

Mention may also be made of chilly farmers of khalishapani of Nilfamari who have organized a hat (village market) in the village and are managing the hat through an elected hat committee, to bypass the farias (trading middlemen), another example of "rakhi business" to retain the surplus from sale of their products themselves.<sup>5</sup>

#### Villagers build public library

Dihi union public library, started in 1977 by the local youth in sharsha Upazilla, Jessore district is a library with a difference (Mukta *et al* 2005 pp 8-33). In addition to providing books for reading the library also provides training to farmers in modern farming, poultry, forestation, health and family planning, the history of the country etc., and organizes eye care camps almost every year. It also manages a nursery. The library gives stipends to meritorious students of low-income families. Land for the library was

contributed by an illiterate villager. It is run with contributions from villagers including low-income people who contribute 4-anna, 8 anna - whatever they can. Some grants from the government and NGOs were taken, but offers of the rich (smugglers) were refused. Now the venture is fully self-reliant. The library is run by voluntary labour of local teachers and others. Today every school of the union has a branch of this library under the supervision of its teachers, and the library workers are involved in developing the education programmes of the schools.

#### Public library created and run by yoghurt seller

A young man in remote Battala village in Chapainawabganj district, who could not pursue studies as his father could not provide money to buy him books, started building a public library in his village in 1969 with earnings from selling yogurt. Today he is lending books to 100-150 poor students every year through whom he is fulfilling his own unfulfilled dream of schooling. Student loanees of books themselves donate to the library books they buy after reading them (Morol 2005 Part 1. pp 41-44).

Many other initiatives have been reported, such as

- instances of heroic struggles of women abandoned by husbands or husbands unable to provide them, to stand up with dignity by hard work. Mothers with children who have lost husbands or have been abandoned by them have not married again in order to save their children from uncertainty or ill treatment in new family, and have gone through the challenge of life to bring up their children with single-minded dedication sacrificing their own “basic needs;
- voluntary initiatives by low-income groups to set up and run schools for their children;
- numerous instances of persons from very low-income groups preferring fulfillment of artistic/innovative urges – singing, painting, sculpture, block design, artwork with bamboo or clay, textile designing, innovation of agricultural implements – to higher incomes doing other kind of jobs; some such artists even training free-of-charge other low-income youth with similar urges, living very modest lives themselves and aspiring to give exhibitions in Dhaka rather than earn high income;
- instance of one blind person earning whatever he gets by singing to families, often starving all day with his family, because he thereby can *sit on a chair in listeners’ houses*, a privilege that both he and his wife prefers to higher income he could get by begging;

- the poignant case of a rickshawpuller-cum-clay model designer making exquisite models of dwelling mansions and selling them, with the distant dream that some day the proceeds of these sales will entitle him to live in a mansion like those;
- inspiring accounts of indomitable courage and determination of so-called “disabled” persons (an unfortunate coining by others for those some of whom prefer to be called not “disabled” but “specially challenged”) to face physical handicaps with honour and dignity – e.g. writing with legs or elbows and going to school and seek highest degrees, including accounts of such heroism inspiring even normal children of low-income groups to go to school;
- and many other initiatives of varying such natures.

#### The “kajoli model” pre-schools for children of the “hard-core poor”

To this set of creative initiatives should be added the “kajoli model” pre schools for children (Ahsan & Imran 2005) of those who are referred to as the “hard-core poor”. A well-to-do friend of the disadvantaged coming from *kajoli* village, Sripur Upazilla in Magura district who does not believe in helping people with money gave a room in his premises in the village to start in January 2003 a pre-school for children of “hard-core poor” families who had never thought of sending their children to school. Twenty six such families were invited to send a child from each family to the school, with the condition that each day the parents of one family would feed all the students in the school. The first reaction of the parents was: “how can we feed so many children? we are so poor!” When the simple arithmetic was explained to them that it was to be 26 children for one day only, and they certainly fed their own children for 30 days of the month (four days being week-end days), they agreed readily. The joy of the child whose mother comes and cooks and feeds all the children in the school on one specified day knows no bounds – who says they are “poor”? S/he is the class captain for that day, serves all her/his pals, and leads the physical training of the class on the green outside for that day. The school is managed by an association of the parents. News of the school has spread far and wide in the country, and well-placed villagers sympathetic to the disadvantaged are coming from distant places to see and learn in order to initiate such school in their villages. By now nearly 125 such schools are running in different parts of the country, with local people contributing rooms or land voluntarily for the project and local persons coming forward to supervise the schools free of charge. In some of these schools the parents even pay 10 taka each toward the teacher’s salary (in other schools this is financed by contributions from the local well-to do) even though some parents themselves starve some days of the year. (Maqsud 2006: p 4).

## Participatory Action Research

In another series of RIB-supported initiatives disadvantaged people are getting together for participatory action research (PAR) – being called *gonogabeshona* (“people’s research”) in Bangladesh - discussing their problems together and taking initiatives to promote their economic and social conditions with mutual cooperation. With RIB’s collaboration another agency, the Hunger Project, has also initiated PAR in seven unions of the country (Mahmood 2005: 2006). Positive gains in varying degrees are resulting - e.g. security and income-raising collective saving-lending schemes and collective economic projects; reduction of wastage of income through gambling; mutual solidarity and mental support in their distressed situations. PAR is also generating pressure-group activities by people’s groups with success in some places, e.g. collective bargaining by women farm labour for equal wages vis-à-vis male labour, gaining access to public services previously denied to them because of their low social status. Women engaged in *gonogabeshona* are coming out of their traditional inhibition to speak out in public and to do what previously was viewed as “men’s” work. Their status in the family is rising as they are contributing more to family income, and are also being able to opine and argue on family issues with better articulation and reasoning than before (Rahman, Md. Matiur, 2006: 31-33).

Over and above this kind of gains, a rather new awareness among the disadvantaged is emerging from some of these *gonogabeshona* initiatives, on the primacy of access to *means of thinking together* as a poverty-alleviating resource. A number of *gonogabeshona* groups have analyzed and concluded on the importance of thus thinking together, which is opening up avenues for overcoming their poverty that they had not thought of previously; and also that they had often frittered away resources by not thinking carefully about their use and could do so again, unless their thinking capacity is enhanced by *gonogabeshona*. (Rahman, Md. Matiur *op cit*: 27-29; Ali 2006: 15-16).

### Three steps in “poverty alleviation” of the “untouchables”

A search for the so-called “missing poor” by RIB in its *gonogabeshona* initiatives has revealed deeply poignant existence of numerous “untouchable” classes in Bangladesh<sup>6</sup>. These communities in general live in dire material poverty. In addition, being “untouchables” they do not have access to hotels and tea-stalls for a cup of tea or a plate of meal, and their children avoid going to schools not only for pecuniary reason but also as other children bodily shrink away from them.

Life of a number of untouchable classes have brightened up through PAR as by systematically getting together and deliberating collectively they are realizing that untouchability is not “divinely” ordained but a human-made taboo that can be challenged by their collective strength. They have started

getting mobilized and are challenging. The following account of progress on this front is worth narrating many times over:

The untouchable *rishi* community in Satkhira mobilized themselves through *gonogabeshona*, and among other activities demanded that the local hotels serve them. The hotels yielded to their collective pressure, but marked their utensils separately to assure other customers that they would not be served in utensils used by the untouchables. Still this was some progress – “poverty alleviation” step one. The *rishi* community then sought to set up a pre-school on the “kajoli” model described above. Thirteen families were found with children of pre-school age. Coming to know of the vacant thirteen seats very low-income Muslim families approached them to send their children to this school, but wanted that their children eat separate food sent from their families and not food cooked by the *rishi* families. The school started in February 2006 with this arrangement, nevertheless a big step forward toward integration - “poverty alleviation” step two.

*In a few months the final barrier dissolved* - all the children in the pre-school are now sharing the same meals. Who can stop the non-'class-conscious' child of any family to drink from the same glass with her 'untouchable' class-mate or to want to taste what is in 'that plate'? - “poverty alleviation” step three.

Such empirical evidences of people’s efforts to promote their lives invite a re-examination of the notion of poverty and the challenge of poverty alleviation. To this we now turn.

### 3. The poverty and “poverty-alleviation” discourse

#### **The concept of poverty<sup>7</sup>**

“*All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights*” – Universal declaration of Human rights, Article 1.

Meanwhile, much of the current poverty discourse has continued to follow what I have termed the “livestock” approach to poverty count (Rahman, Md. Anisur 2004, p 11). It is the so-called “cost of basic needs approach” (World Bank 2006: p 6; Mahmood 2006: p 25), which reckons the “basic needs” chiefly as so many calories, with an arbitrary allowance for education and health.<sup>8</sup> For international comparisons of progress in “poverty alleviation” it has become customary to follow the “dollar-a-day” approach first initiated by the World Bank (World Bank 1996); Islam 2006: p 57 Table 3.1).

Many omissions in such a “basic needs basket” can be pointed out (Rahman, Md. Anisur 1997b). Some of the more serious omissions are education and health expenses taken seriously; cost of school transport of girls to avoid

being assaulted on the way; guest hospitality; marriage expenses, religious festivals and expenses for funeral rites; old-age care. Omission of the last one, in particular, confirms the “livestock view” of the “poor” insofar as old, ‘unproductive’ livestock need not be ‘maintained’. What is obvious is also that one cannot naturally stay “contended” with such a “basic needs basket”, and must move up from here, by fair means or foul, or sacrifice calories to meet some of the other essential expenses or, for women unable to defend themselves with this kind of resources, submit to physical violation. And why shouldn’t one aspire badly to have a personal watch in today’s world, and also consider oneself “poor” if one is not entitled to a telephone set (if not a mobile one with civilization a further step ahead) or electricity in the house minimally necessary for modern living?

And, indeed, the country is getting some credit that poverty-count thus reckoned is getting reduced by some percentage points every year (Mahmud 2006: p 25-26). What is being ignored, in addition to the absurdity of the “basic needs basket” being earmarked for “the poor”, is what this offers to those who at any time remain below the “line”, besides a statistical probability for each of them to be admitted in the “stable” in the coming year. Such statistical probability, one suggests, can hardly be sufficient to dissuade the more impatient of them to refrain from drawing their daggers to a passer-by or committing other anti-social/immoral conducts in a bid to jump their turn. And they are, in fact, not refraining from so doing, seeing as they are the rise of *kotipatis* (multi-millionaires) in the country and their ostentatious life styles. There is, therefore, a question of dealing with this likely turbulence of the ‘other half of the glass’ while waiting for turns to cross the “poverty line” or, speaking more positively, to keep this “other half” constructively rather than destructively engaged in the pursuit of life through their continued poverty<sup>9</sup>. This is also a humane question by itself, if so many people have to live in poverty for years to come and perhaps die without seeing the end of the tunnel. And the size of this “other half” is much bigger than the “livestock count” gives us, if we allow the people to have a sense of right to a decent living in the light of average lifestyle of society.

And, finally, it is not clear what exactly would be achieved if all people below the “poverty line” today waited patiently and were, someday in the distant future by which time living standards of the privileged will have advanced further, able to enter the “stable”.

So much for the absurdity/inhumaneness of the current poverty count discourse in its own terms, what with counting those that are crossing, and those that remain outside, the ‘line’. But there is much more to consider in a human approach to this question. `

## Pressing non-economic needs

There are many pressing non-economic needs of disadvantaged people. The search for creative self-initiatives draws attention to a few of them: security of disadvantaged powerless women in an ‘uncivilized’ male-dominated culture to which any poverty discourse must give very high priority; widowed or abandoned women’s first-order concern for welfare of their children for which they sacrifice their own “basic needs”; artistic and inventive urges for whose fulfillment even persons of very small means are seen to give priority over higher income at the margin of choice. And, of course, elimination of the “untouchable” stigma from all categories of the human species as a fundamental human consideration.

The writer has been personally asked the question: “Don’t these people, economically very poor with whatever other urgent needs and urges they have, nevertheless, need food first?” Quite a puzzle, indeed, to decide which need comes first if needs must be ranked hierarchically. *And this is where the failure to understand the nature of very basic human needs has occurred. As analyzed by a team of Latin American development thinkers a decade-and-a-half back:*

“Fundamental human needs must be understood as a system, the dynamics of which does not obey hierarchical linearities. This means that, on the one hand, no need is, *per se*, more important than any other; and, on the other hand, that there is no fixed order of precedence in the actualization of needs....Simultaneities, complementarities and trade-offs are characteristic of the system’s behaviour. There are, however, limits to this generalization. A pre-systemic threshold must be recognized, below which the feeling of a certain deprivation may be so severe, that the urge to satisfy the given need *may paralyze* and overshadow any other impulse or alternative.”

The case of starvation may serve to illustrate this clearly. When the possibilities of satisfying this need are severely impaired, all other needs remain blocked and a single and intense drive prevails. But such a situation does not hold true only in the case of subsistence. It is equally relevant in the case of other needs. Suffice it to say that total lack of affection, or the loss of identity, may lead to extreme self-destruction”. (Max Neef *et al* 1989: p 44; *italics added*).

Indeed, the evidences provided by the creative initiatives of the underprivileged as well as by the PAR work with the “untouchables” lend support not to the linear but to the systemic view of poverty. Ask if the threshold for a starving woman offered a bowl of rice – for herself and/or for her starving infant - in exchange for her *honour*, is the rice bowl or her honour. Can it be different for different women, and even for the same

woman at different times facing such intensely, very painfully, competitive choices, depending on where the ‘paralysis’ strikes her at the particular moment of choice? Similarly for the starving untouchable offered food thrown on the street to share with a dog – can we predict the nature of his paralysis at that particular moment? Or, to relax with a ‘fever’ rather than paralysis, what will be the choice of a possessed painter, between a better-paid job that will give her little time for painting, versus a lower-paid job that will give her hope she may give an exhibition at Dhaka some day? And doesn’t the riverine and rain-soaked Bangladesh produce natural poets and singers who would not give up composing and singing ferrying boats in the countryside notwithstanding the low earnings from such occupation? A mother would and does, sacrifice calories for herself to finance her son’s education, so that even if she were given sufficient income to buy the “basic needs kit” there may be constant leakages from her kit. And some mothers of the “kajoli model” pre-schools are saying that one of their motivation to send their kids to school is that this raises the status of their families, poor and slighted as they are in the community (Maqsood 2006: p 3). The choice of the blind singer and his wife between social respect accepting periodic starvation, and non-starvation income by way of begging, also deserves some contemplation. The behaviour of the rickshawpuller-artist who is saving the proceeds from his clay-mansions in preference to meeting some or other “basic need” of himself or his family for a distant, perhaps never-to-be fulfilled, dream of living in a mansion himself, is explainable only by the systemic and not the linear view of poverty. And, to give a macro example of historical moment, the independence struggle of Bangladesh as of other nations has shown people forgetting their material poverty to fight and die for national self-determination as that is where the ‘paralysis’ has struck at the final moment of reckoning.

It is rather odd that modern poverty discourse has attempted to impose an extraneous linear preference pattern - e.g. so much calories first – on low-income people which these people themselves do not show that they follow. Actually, the notion of human needs as a system applies not only to “fundamental” human needs but also to needs at higher levels of income. The choice between spending one’s high but still limited income on a more luxurious housing and on a more luxurious car is not determined by a linear preference pattern but by the dynamics of personal/family psychology and deliberations and social environment.

Given the systemic nature of human needs, basic or non-basic, we all do nevertheless aspire at the end of the day to have access to resources in aggregate monetary terms from which we wish to keep the freedom to spend as we like according to, not hierarchically ordered preferences, but decisions “of the moment”. A case for drawing a monetary “poverty line” as a pragmatic guiding measure, therefore, remains. But this should preferably

have some normative as well as empirical basis rather than resting on external thinking on “basic human needs” that are not operative in reality.

In fact, the original formulation of the “basic needs” concept by the ILO had indeed a more humane notion of basic needs of all. This conception of “basic needs” included two elements:

“Firstly, they include certain minimum requirements of a family for private consumption: adequate food, shelter and clothing, as well as certain house-hold furniture and equipments. Second, they include essential services provided by and for the community at large, such as safe drinking water, sanitation, public transport and health, education and cultural facilities... The concept of basic needs should be placed within a context of a nation’s overall economic and social development. In no circumstances should it be taken to mean merely the minimum necessary for subsistence...” (ILO 1976: p 243; *italics added*).

One suggests that this must also be in line with the perception of basic needs of the deprived, and wonders how and in whose hands this humane notion of basic needs got replaced by the “livestock” notion<sup>10</sup>. This “livestock” notion, as I have discussed elsewhere (Rahman, Md. Anisur 2004), corresponds to a “cheap labour” ideology for market exploitation of labour rather than a “humanist” ideology. All humans have a right to be a part of modern civilization. And it should not be necessary to argue that the notion of poverty in the human mind is a relative and not an absolute concept. As a relative concept, following the natural “demonstration effect of advanced consumption standards”<sup>11</sup>, the “poverty line” must then also rise with rise in the consumption standard of upper layers of society. Who can deny that the sense of “poverty” of a slum dweller in the city of Dhaka has aggravated when the “dish antenna” came in the building next to the slum? And that every car driver aspires to buy an Eid saree for her wife worth worth at least Taka 1000? And it is this actual sense of poverty of humans that causes them affliction that needs to be addressed as a human question, apart from this being also a social question of equity and social stability.

A “basic needs line” in line with the ILO’s conception, in fact, exists in all societies governed by a modern fiscal system. It is the income tax exemption limit, assessed implicitly as a level of income below which comfortable living is not possible with modern standards. This is a measure given by ‘democratic’ systems, with formal or informal negotiations between leaders of a society and the government and hence with socio-empirical validity. Unfortunately, however, this is regarded to be an allowance only for the well-to-do in society. Why should this level of income not be reckoned as a desirable minimum income for all in the same society, in order to grant to all

right to a share in modern civilization, rather than having two standards of “basic needs” for two different strata of people in the same society?<sup>12</sup>

However, for all in the society to reach such a level is far out into the future if this were feasible at all, as we shall discuss later. More importantly for the immediate present, unless some of the non-economic dimensions of poverty are tackled in the first instance, many specific social categories (e.g. the “untouchables”; destitute women risking physical assault) may never even be able to move toward such a level of income. Hence, at least for the present, for addressing poverty as a human as opposed to a ‘livestock’ concept, the non-economic dimensions of poverty need immediately to be reckoned as a first-order question in its own right. In other words, for addressing human conditions of real economic-cum-social distress we have to address poverty as a systemic notion that it really is and not as an income-line notion.

### **Overcoming poverty**

With such systemic notion of poverty, overcoming poverty is not just a matter of raising people’s incomes/entitlements to goods and services. The amelioration of many kinds of deprivation and social environments of human indignity and insecurity obviously requires strategies of a sociological nature, aimed at improving social awareness and a sense and culture of respecting human dignity and equality irrespective of the nature of one’s social or occupational status.

A key strategy for overcoming poverty that disadvantaged people are themselves showing in many places is joining hands for collective economic and social co-operation in a variety of ways, placed as they are in situations where they can do much less as individuals to raise their economic and social status whereas real possibility of moving forward by mutual co-operation exists.

People’s collective thinking stands out in the search for people’s initiatives as a powerful motor in generating creative ideas and motivation for taking initiatives to move forward, both individually and collectively. Collective thinking forums also provide much needed mental support to poverty-stricken people in their many-dimensional distresses which by itself can be poverty-alleviating in the systemic sense<sup>13</sup>. Hence the facilitation of PAR and people’s workshops and such other popular self-deliberation forums deserve to be reckoned as an important strategy for addressing poverty. Allocation of resources for such purposes should, therefore, be important, just as intellectuals, industrial and business managers, etc. have access to resources to organize their own forums for collective deliberations and collective action. For disadvantaged people beyond school-going age, access to means of thinking through processes like PAR is in any case more immediately relevant to promote their self-engagements in life for overcoming their poverty, than access to formal education and thereby ‘entitlements’ to jobs.

An obvious strategy for addressing poverty is also to spread the demonstration of successful efforts of the poverty classes themselves by way of people-to-people study tours, and enhancing mutual cooperation among them - i.e. “technical co-operation among the people themselves”<sup>14</sup>. There is enough evidence of such demonstration already sparking off similar initiatives among newer groups in neighbouring areas. There is no better way to convince people understandably hesitant to plunge into new ventures because of little or no risk-bearing ability, than demonstration of actual success of such ventures.

And a lot of voluntary action by better placed people including youth is called for to speed up the process of advancement - by way of working with poverty groups to give them motivation and bring to them relevant technical knowledge, connections, social support, leadership if necessary and, above all, comradeship to hold their hands in distress which means such a lot to them, of the types witnessed in Bangladesh (and must be in many other countries). The very positive role of some agricultural officers and teachers in the country to give unpaid “overtime” service with outstanding social dedication for economic educational and cultural progress of disadvantaged people goes against the grain of the international labour standard of 40 hours a week of service. The interest of villagers of some education and status to supervise the “kajoli model” schools without financial compensation is another such example of altruism. The same holds for voluntary social service action by the youth in so many places. Such altruism that is being shown spontaneously is a resource for overcoming poverty whose augmentation by imaginative strategies should be desirable.<sup>15</sup>

While efforts to address poverty in the above sense continues, the problem of the “other half of the glass” raised above – i.e. problem of those whose poverty cannot be redressed soon enough to give them a stake in the social order - that is overlooked in the current incremental approach to "poverty alleviation" counts must also be addressed. The tendency for substantial elements of this quarter of the country's people toward rejecting the system, and to be attracted by anti-social activities or religious fundamentalism referred to above, is very real and may be understood as a response to a sense of continued social deprivation without hope of improvement early enough.

### **Creation of poverty and need for structural change**

What is also very important to note is that this "other half of the glass" itself is not a static quantity that could be progressively reduced by incremental action and eventually eliminated given sufficient time if its turbulence could somehow be kept under check. Poverty is a dynamic process in which it gets created and recreated all the time by an oppressive and manipulative social structure. It is well known that powerful quarters are dispossessing weaker

quarters of their assets – e.g. land, housing and financial assets – by various unscrupulous, often violent, means throwing them into poverty if previously they were not there or had come out of it. Sudden large expenses can also throw people without adequate reserves into deep poverty. As long as such processes of creation and re-creation of poverty continues, the attempt to reduce poverty by incrementally raising incomes of poverty groups by amounts, in fact, to *walking up a downward falling escalator*. Such effort may never eliminate poverty from the system unless the downward glide of the escalator can be “switched off”. This switching off is a question of structural change toward redistribution of economic assets and social power in the society.

Such structural change is needed not only to alter the political power balance in the society that is responsible for continued oppression and exploitation of the disadvantaged: after all that can be done within the existing structure by way of alleviating poverty, the fundamental fact remains that Bangladesh is yet to register its take-off into economic growth that could lift this country out of mass poverty as a macro problem. Its current claimed growth rate in the neighbourhood of 5 per cent per annum is too little to do this. I have argued elsewhere (Rahman, Md. Anisur 2006a) that even this claim is on the high side in view of a large array of negative growth factors operating in the economy not reckoned in growth accounting – e.g. drastic decline in the quality of public services, rise of insecurity and compensatory activities to protect security which are not net value-added items but are counted as such, massive environmental destruction, etc. But in any case a country cannot ever solve its mass poverty problem with growth in the order of 5 percent per annum. The fundamental question before us for alleviation of mass poverty is, therefore, how to dramatically raise the aggregate growth rate of the country to the order of 8 per cent or more from wherever it is now, and at the same time insure that a substantial part of the benefit of such growth accrue to the low-income strata of the society. In this context it is very important to identify who can be the agents of such growth in our society.

It is common knowledge that at present the country’s affluent classes led by its godfathers are the principal recipients of ‘macro-credit’ from the financial system of the country, as well as the principal beneficiaries of foreign resources flowing into the country, and that the principal result of this is not investment of resources that are being usurped by them in productive investment but (a) the accumulation of personal property and liquid cash, a large part of which is transferred out of the country, and (b) rise in ostentatious consumption. Apart from channeling off the nation’s saving for non-investment purposes this is also distorting the consumption-aspiration pattern of society as a whole<sup>16</sup> and thereby putting a downward pressure on its aggregate saving propensity. And the political strength such access to economic resources is giving to the rich is enabling them also to keep the "escalator" falling downward to go on creating and recreating poverty. On the

other hand the low-income classes are showing their eagerness to save even their meagre incomes and are also showing their entrepreneurial skills what with quick-yielding business with micro-credit or in collective productive enterprises with larger credit. This should leave no doubt that there is, in effect, no essential conflict between the growth and poverty reduction objectives of this country, and that the way to higher growth is in fact channeling the needed resources along with necessary technical assistance to the low-income groups of the country. For this we should not think only in terms of micro-financing for the "poor" who deserve larger financing with technical support if they need it. As supported by evidence presented in this paper, with larger amounts of credit and more open repayment schedules members of the poverty groups may embark upon productive initiatives which will not only lift them out of poverty faster and more securely, but will also generate employment opportunities for other members of the poverty classes thereby helping them as well out of poverty, and with all this contribute to overall growth of the economy. And, of course, as the examples the landless labourers of Chuhor and the women in Beltia show, significant advancements are possible in specific circumstances with scientific and technological inputs even without any credit.

Such a strategy of re-directing investible resources to low-income classes in the society also presupposes the kind of structural change discussed above. This political question, however, has no immediate answer given the formidable economic and structural power of the vested interests backed also by very powerful international forces with a contrary ideology. An opportunity had come to the nation to redistribute economic power when it was newly born and did not have much by way of an affluent class, not to speak of millionaires. But the Great Leader failed to rise to the occasion, and put the nation's gear decisively toward augmenting concentration of power and privileges, exploitation and inequality (Rahman 2005). Today there is none to lead the nation to such height which its poverty-stricken people are always prepared to scale if the call was given.<sup>17</sup>

#### **4. Self-realization**

Short of an answer to this question poverty as a macro phenomenon in the country is going to continue. Hence a great bulk of its poverty-stricken people will continue to face the question of fulfilling themselves in life as they are situated, in altogether different terms. Using an Aristotelian term<sup>18</sup> I shall call such fulfillment "self-realization" in whatever situation one is placed in life.

A unique example of such self-realization is the case of *rishis* of Satkhira as members of the "other half of the glass". Stimulated first through PAR and then through the kajoli model, they got engaged, emerging out of their abject despondency finding a meaning in their life in creating greater dignity for

themselves and promoting dignified education for their children. This provides deep insights on what poverty alleviation may mean in a particular social condition by way of promoting the social standing of “untouchable classes” as well as contributing to the enlightenment of the mainstream society on the meaning of civilized humanity. The material poverty of the *rishis* may continue one does not know for how long. But they have nevertheless gotten engaged in positive self-realization by creative means that could not have been pre-planned by any “poverty-alleviating” effort from outside. This, perhaps one of the most novel processes of a deprived community moving forward in their lives, recorded in the poverty and development discourse, challenges conventional thinking on the meaning as well as method of development itself. This shows also that while novelty or creativity cannot be planned, it can be stimulated by friendly inputs from outside (in this case by PAR and the kajoli model). And through such creative self-engagement people discover their paths for self-realization, to hand over the forward journey to their descendents with conceivably no regret for their own lives spent in fulfilling self-engagement notwithstanding their continued material poverty.

The examples of creative self-initiatives of the people provide other revealing examples of varying responses to the experience and challenge of life through which not only poverty groups but also others in society working with them, are realizing themselves or are seeking to do so, on which some quotes directly from them are given below:

- “So far 62 boys who have studied with books from my library are in the job world. When I see them I get great peace of mind...I recall those days when I also could have been like them if my father could buy me books.” –The yoghurt seller of *chapainababganj* who built a library for poor village youth. (Tahmina *et al* 2005a. p 35)
- “My life will be fulfilled - I shall remain immortal even by dying. My history will live. For this I shall be rewarded by God.”. –60 year old illiterate barber in *tarapur* village shibganj thana in chapainababganj district, living in a hut, has made ten kilometres of road green by planting trees all alone. (Tahmina *et al* 2005a. p 42)
- “Working as a Block Supervisor here the thought came to me that since these poor people have no opportunity to get help from outside I could try help them stand on their own strength.” – Agricultural Extension Officer of *chuhor*, Rangpur. (Tahmina *et al* 2005a. p 61).
- “I used to think of giving education to my son, to help him grow big. I did not even marry (again) thinking that he might be neglected.” – Tahera Begum whose husband went to Saudi Arab and she never saw him again, working as a peon earning very little. Her eldest out of

three sons has passed M.A. from Dhaka University in the first division and is now a magistrate. (Tahmina *et al* 2005a. p 96)

- “I do not consider myself disabled. I want to move up very high studying. I want to stand on my own feet.” – A boy going to college by wheel chair traveling 14 kilometres every day. (Tahmina *et al* 2005a. p 99).
- “When I was a student of class eight I saw day-labourers in my hamlet Dharma Narayan, Mohini roy and Bishshwar Roy dying without treatment....I decided to become a doctor and treat poor people.” – Ratan Kumar Roy, son of a very poor day labourer in Boikuntho village chirir Bandar Upazilla of Dinajpur. (Tahmina *et al* 2005b. p 37).
- “A textile mill has asked me to take charge of their mill...but no matter how much allowances and benefits they give me in the mill I shall remain a labour there.” – Once a canteen boy in Dhaka Public Library, Zakir of Chandpur district who used to dream from his childhood of working independently is now a designer of clothings preferring free lance designing work to higher income managerial work in a factory. (Tahmina *et al* 2005 b. p 90)
- “Unable to bear my husband’s torture I have taken refuge in my father’s house...Thought of committing suicide, but daughter Mithila came to the world giving me dream of struggling anew to live..” – A mother working in a women’s handicrafts business in Lalmonirhat district town.(Tahmina *et al* 2005 b. p 93)
- “I am a woman. I stood on my own feet and showed the way to self-reliance to twenty other women. What else can offer such fulfillment?” – Sheema Shome Sarkar, owner-initiator of a tailor shop in the city of Mymensingh. (Tahmina *et al* 2005b. p 113).
- “Once [a kind gentleman] came to Patuakhali and wanted to help me personally. I did not accept. I said that I would accept something only if it benefits everyone. I do my official job and spend the rest of my time here...the ‘disabled’ cannot do anything – this is the challenge I have taken. I want to prove this notion false.” –Muhammad Saheb Ali of Patuakhali losing both his eyes from typhoid studied by the Brail method and passed up to B.A. Honours, now a government employee and General Secretary of the National Blind Welfare Association. (Tahmina *et al* 2006 b. p 131)
- “What I cannot do never gave me any regret. I always used to get pleasure from what I could do...I cannot walk, cannot stand – this

does not matter. this does not mean I would fold my hands and sit idle. These thoughts were with me from my very childhood. This gave me self-confidence as well.” Abul Hasnat Abdullah of North Badda village, Noakhali, went regularly to school crawling with books tied on his back, passed middle school and higher middle school and is now student of honours in Sociology in Noakhali University College. Managing his own livelihood as a private tutor. Aspires to take Bengal Civil Service Examination and get into government service. (Tahmina *et al* 2005b. p 134-5).

- “My legs are impaired, but my mind is not...courage is my asset.” – Ariful Islam, chhatiali village, Pabna (Tahmina *et al* 2005b. p 135).

Such self-realization has been achieved by people through sacrifices participating in national liberation struggles including the independence struggle of Bangladesh, and in social revolutions, all being efforts to change reality. The poverty-stricken people of Bangladesh in parts of the country had also sought self-realization in mobilizing whatever they had for nation-building after independence without waiting for outside credit, micro or macro. An outstanding example of this was the well-known Rangpur self-reliance movement of villagers to march forward rejecting all outside assistance (Rahman, Md. Anisur 1997a. pp 107-140), which was unfortunately cut short by the coming of military rule in 1975. For the longer run one may speculate, even with the failure of experiments in the last century, with the idea of a social revolution that would transfer social power to the working class as was conceived by Marx. As discussed elsewhere (Rahman, Md. Anisur 1985; 2006d), to truly do so rather than to give power to “revolutionary intellectuals” and technocracy in the name of the working class, such revolution will need to transfer power to the working class over both means of material production and “means of mental production”, a question that ‘participatory action research’ is at present addressing for poverty groups on a rather insignificant scale in the country. However, even such ‘dual-transformative’ revolution may not necessarily solve the macro problem of poverty as conceived in modern poverty discourse, at least for a long time to come, in view of the sheer magnitude of the problem<sup>19</sup>. But Marx never talked of the “poverty problem” to be solved and talked instead of “the working class creating its own history”, giving a creativist view of human accomplishment in which labour, the essence of the Human, fulfills itself. And Tagore said explicitly:

*“the poverty problem is not so important. It is the problem of unhappiness [misery] that is the great problem. Happiness may not compete with wealth in its list of needed materials, but it is creative, therefore it has its own share of riches within itself.”* (Bandopadhyay 1989)<sup>20</sup>

And all great philosophers have also emphasized the sense of oneness between humans that is manifest in the actions of so many of the disadvantaged and also of the advantaged in Bangladesh and anywhere, including the very concern we professionals are showing for the afflictions of the disadvantaged.

With such a view the problem of “poverty” gets *dissolved* when humans can exercise their power of creativity in a framework of fellow feeling for other humans, to show what they can accomplish in whatever situations they are placed, and can thereby realize themselves.

We may, therefore, wish to stop regarding the disadvantaged (or "specially challenged" in whatever sense) people of our country as mere objects of statistical poverty counts, and go in particular to members of the "other half of the glass" with humility, sitting down to share a cup of tea with them whether they are "touchable" or "untouchable", telling them that we have no answer to their "poverty" problem, and that we have come to learn from them how humans in their situation realize themselves in this world in whatever situation they are placed in life.

## **5. Development philosophy**

*"Everyone has duties to the community in which alone the free and full development of his personality is possible" -*

Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 29 (1).

*"Ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country." –* John F. Kennedy

Finally, a word about ‘development philosophy’ which overlaps with the way one looks at human poverty.

Amartya Sen (1999: p 5) has espoused “individual freedom” as the foundational view in development. A careful review of this philosophy seems necessary in order to put this kind of thinking in a more realistic and humane perspective.

In reality an individual is brought up to imbibe a mix of both "individualist" as well as "collectivist" urges. The latter is derived from identities with collectives like immediate family, kins, community, society, nation, the human race as a whole and even the whole ecology (identity with nature). Different persons imbibe these several identities in different mixes, and this is also determined/influenced by one's experience of association with such various collectives. For the great bulk of the human population such associations with some or other set of collectives are quite strong. Such association may start with voluntary extra-family care of children in many

societies – the care of the extended family and neighbours in the initial nurturing of a child. Growing up in such environment and experiencing sustained living in close interaction with a wider community one naturally develops senses of identities with such wider “families”. Furthermore, as we have seen above, the disadvantaged people in the course of their very effort to promote their struggling lives have often joined hands as a path to development, and this also may strengthen their collective identities. And we know of primitive societies (“primitive communism”) and also of indigenous societies of today where the notion of “individual” has hardly developed. To the extent that such sense of organic collective identities (“higher selves” – see quote from Wadsworth below) in individuals exist or develop and/or is strengthened by the experience of life, the notion of “individual freedom” loses its force as a distinctive concept. What is more, an invocation to release individual freedom may even serve to promote or broaden a split in one’s identity away from unity with some or other collective entity (e.g. family; community) that may or may not be considered desirable.

Of greater need is to clarify the normative content of a philosophy of expanding individual freedom as the foundation of development. As Backstrand and Ingelstam (2006: p 117) observe in a recent discourse: *“Individual freedom is meaningless and dangerous when not rooted in an ethic and enlightened by social and spiritual<sup>21</sup> considerations.”* This should not need arguing in view of exhibitions of indeed dangerous individualist and sectarian conduct throughout human history by persons enjoying high degrees of individual freedom by virtue of money and social power, with perhaps a first order crisis for humanity rooted in such conduct that we are witnessing today. Thus the suggestion of individual freedom as the foundational view in development needs to be tempered with real caution, and initiatives to morally enlighten individual action as well as to provide for safeguards against abuse of individual freedom need to be actively pursued. The desired ethical conduct of individuals may not be ensured merely by “public discussions and social interactions, which are themselves influenced by participatory freedoms” as Sen seems to suggest (Sen *op cit.* p 9). Participatory freedom may be insufficient to ensure social justice, particularly in conditions like unequal distribution of economic power, asymmetrical economic inter-dependence and patron-client type economic relations. Furthermore, some ethical views representing the most enlightened thinking of civilization, e.g. the ethics of Human Rights, may stand above any society-determined values, expressing concerns of all humanity which has a stake in how any society conducts itself. Thus all enlightened social thinking encourages service to the community especially to the needy, and such work, when out of the ordinary, is acknowledged and often rewarded (e.g., by community or nation and by Nobel Peace Prizes and "Alternative Nobel" Awards). And John F. Kennedy inspired millions in his country, supposed to be the citadel of the “individualist” ideology, invoking such a principle in his famous quote given above. Hence initiatives to ethically enlighten individual

action need to be actively pursued irrespective of social consensus in any given country as a contribution to the spiritual discourse of humans.

In the context of the current crisis of humanity, the spectre of human suffering of disadvantaged groups all over the world calls for action not merely at state levels but also at the level of communities and individuals to sacrifice for and stand by such people. It also seems necessary to curb individual chases of over-luxurious lives leaving behind if not exploiting and ravaging the disadvantaged classes that also distorts value-patterns of others toward corruption and criminal actions in a bid to catch up with such life styles. The stories collected by Bangladesh journalists reveal that individuals from among the elite class are indeed expressing such solidarity with the disadvantaged. But much more of such acts of solidarity and curbing one's own "individualist" urges is needed. And one may suggest that the obvious crisis of modern civilization threatening its degeneration and possible breakdown by the take-over of barbaric human tendencies in so many parts of the world including Bangladesh calls for serious effort at community, social and international levels to curb the lust of individual greed without a commitment to society, humanity and the ecology. Tagore has given the same call for promoting unity between humans and service to society and to humanity (Rahman 2006a), whose relevance for the very survival of humanity through "the creation of fully engaged-with-all-others' *higher or possible selves*" has been acknowledged in recent western literature (Wadsworth 2006: p 228, italics added<sup>22</sup>).

This brings us, as a final point, to one index that has gained popularity in recent development discourses - the Human Development Index (HDI) of the UNDP. This index is conspicuous by its omission of social values altogether, and as a result might give absurd frontline "human development" rankings even to genocide-committing nations<sup>23</sup>. Obviously, something vital is missing in this index designed to rank countries according to the quality of their human contents. One suggests that the missing factor is precisely the human value of care and concern for others that civilized humans are expected to exhibit, and that has also been asserted in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (article 20(1) quoted above).<sup>24</sup>

## 6. Summing up

To sum up the salient points in this paper, we have looked at illustrations of disadvantaged people's own initiatives to improve their lives with or without outside resources and technical inputs, some shining with economic success, some illustrious in personal struggles against hard odds with courage and human values, and also a number of touching examples of people from other quarters engaged in service to people in need. Conceptually, the illustrations show that the customary "poverty line", besides being demeaning for human beings, has no empirical validity, inconsistent as it is with actual behaviour of

disadvantaged people in facing their poverty that follows systemic rather than linear logic, and exhibit agonizing alternative choices at the margin with meagre resources and social power. People of upper income brackets also have a systemic preference pattern; only the alternative choices are more intensely competitive for lower income than for upper income people. The answer to this intensity of competition between alternative choices for disadvantaged people is not to prescribe unrealistic and inapplicable choice patterns from outside, but to address the pressing economic and non-economic needs together as a holistic phenomenon.

Nor does the customary “poverty line” have any normative validity, and effort should be directed at raising incomes of the disadvantaged much higher in order to give to all a fair share of modern civilization.

In terms of poverty reduction strategy, collective economic co-operation among the disadvantaged emerges as a promising direction, and the importance of access of such people to means of collective thinking is emerging as a new insight. Promotion of technical co-operation among the disadvantaged people themselves is especially suggested.

With all such efforts poverty alleviation as a macro problem remains intractable in view of processes of structural creation and re-creation of poverty, and also needing a much higher economic growth rate than what the country is currently experiencing. The theoretical answer to this question in terms of bringing the poverty groups to share the driver's seat of the economy begs its political feasibility. And with incremental improvements in the poverty statistics the question of constructive engagement in life of the “other half of the glass”, i.e., of those who in the meanwhile would stay deprived and disadvantaged, remains. The end of the “poverty” tunnel is not quite visible. But the challenge of life may not be seen as to solve one’s poverty problem as is being talked of, but to give the best account of oneself as a creative being, in a framework of fellow-feeling for other members of the human race, in the reality in which one is situated in life including also effort to change this reality - a fulfillment that we have called "self-realization".

The paper ends suggesting a review of Sen’s philosophy of promoting “individual freedom” as the foundational view of development, from the point of view of organic identities of individuals with various levels of “collectives”, and also of the need for individual freedom to be subject to ethical considerations. Revision of the UNDP’s Human Development Index is also suggested to include a component representing human care for each other.

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<sup>1</sup> The commonly used term "poor" is avoided in this paper as it is considered paternalistic, and derogatory to refer to people with fine human qualities.

<sup>2</sup> A number of these – close to a hundred and a quarter – have already been reported in the media – major newspapers, TV and BBC broadcasts.

<sup>3</sup> Two of the landless participants in this initiative have claimed the President's gold medal and one the bronze medal for production of organic compost and vegetables, in addition to Mr. Rahman himself getting the gold medal for motivating the landless in such initiative.

<sup>4</sup> Badal Chandra Das got the "Bangobondhu Award" in 1997 for his work in agricultural and technical extension.

<sup>5</sup> Care-Bangladesh, an NGO, is providing advisory service to them in this respect.

<sup>6</sup> so-called 'harijans', 'adibasis', 'das', 'muchhi', 'rishi', 'dalit', 'buno' and other such social categories spread all over the country. The author in a personal interaction with a community of "harizans" was told how a bright boy among them managed to pass the bachelor degree of

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law and got a job with an NGO, only to be sacked after three months when the NGO learnt that he came from the harizon class.

<sup>7</sup>The critique of ‘mainstream’ poverty measurements presented in this paper refers mainly to poverty measurements of the World Bank culture which has dominated poverty measurements and analysis for southern countries including Bangladesh, perhaps because of the overwhelming power of the Bank money. Numerous other poverty conceptions and poverty measures exist (Gordon and Spicker 1999) which, however, have not been so popular in actual national and cross-country poverty arithmetic.

<sup>8</sup> 30 per cent of total (Rahman, Hossain Zillur 1996).

<sup>9</sup> This question was first raised by the author in a note submitted to Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, Prime Minister of Bangladesh, in 1972, in which a policy of national austerity had been proposed (Rahman, Md. Anisur 1972).

<sup>10</sup> The World Bank?

<sup>11</sup> As the well-known concept was propounded by James Duesenbury as early as in the middle of the last century (Duesenbury 1952).

<sup>12</sup> Such a “basic needs line” or, if one likes, “poverty line”, applied to all in the society would also lend itself readily to international comparison, not as an absolute level like the absurd “dollar-a-day” for all countries, but in terms of percentage of people below a line determined by state-society discourse in each respective country. Such a measure of poverty may also move up through state-society discourse with rising average living standard of a society. A single quantitative measure of poverty like the income tax exemption limit might also answer the questions of security, untouchability etc. raised above, to the extent that an individual may have reasonable means with such a level of income and the associated social status to deal with such questions.

<sup>13</sup> Apu’s mother in “Aparajito”, the second of the *Pather Panchali Trilogy*, wanted to stop her son going to Kolkata for College Education and asked him to stay in the village with her working as a low-paid village priest, although her own “basic needs” were well looked after in her work as housemaid with a caring family. Such insights on the “systemic” nature of human needs abound in the writings of story tellers who have been able to penetrate deeper than economists into the minds of the poverty groups.

<sup>14</sup> RIB organized an” initiative festival” in April 2005 in Char Khoribari, a remote very depressed area in Dimla thana in north Bangladesh, to bring people involved in a number of positive initiatives in other areas for stimulation and education of people of Char Khoribari (Anonymous 2005)., and has also supported a number of people-to-people study tours between such initiatives.

<sup>15</sup> Recall the” Kerala Science for Social Revolution Movement” (Kerala Sastra Sahitya Parishad 1984) whose contribution to the advancement of mass education and health standards as well as people’s technical creativity, and hence to the leading status of the province in India terms of the Human Development Index, has been very salutary. In Bangladesh such a movement was springing up in the first years after independence but got destroyed in the political turmoil of 1975 (Rahman 1997).

<sup>16</sup> like 6 community hall functions to celebrate a single marriage with a saree worth taka 75,000/- as the bridal gift from parents as the standard to be aimed at. Even parents of upper-middle income brackets cannot afford not to resort to corruption in order to meet such standard!

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<sup>17</sup> The thought of our Nobel laureate calling for liberation of the productive forces of the nation's disadvantaged, at least to stir up the nation to an awareness of the problem, is so very tempting, but he is so busy calling the whole world to give small credit only to the "poor"!

<sup>18</sup> Aristotle's concept of *entelechy*, meaning self-realization or self-completion. The term is also used in socialist literature but in a different sense than used here – e.g. "Self-realization is the development and application of an individual's talents in a way that gives meaning to life". (Roemer 1994: p 11). In the present paper self-realization is conceived to be a sense of life worth lived by engaging in something worthwhile in response to one's life's situation - this can be even in sacrificing one's life for a cause (e.g. independence struggle or socialist revolution) without necessarily one's talents being developed as conceived by Roemer.

<sup>19</sup> i.e. until full "communism" is reached, when "to each according to need" becomes a reality.

<sup>20</sup> Mao also never talked of the poverty problem to be solved, but just invoked the "foolish old man" to "move the mountain".

<sup>21</sup> The word "spiritual" is taken here to mean "inspirational" – e.g. innate commitment to serve nation, society, community, the disadvantaged, the environment, etc.

<sup>22</sup> "We in the West may have much to learn from this account of Tagore and the conditions and ideas for nurturing and trusting self-reliance in co-operative relationship with others." (Wadsworth, *loc cit.* p 228)

<sup>23</sup> e.g. Miloshević's Serbia; going back into history, Nazi Germany.

<sup>24</sup> one might start incorporating in the index as a first approximation a statistical measure of the percentage of a country's population associated with some kind of voluntary community service.