

SOCIAL CHANGES IN CONTEMPORARY BANGLADESH*

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Introduction

The issue of social change cannot be addressed without reflecting on the theoretical approaches of its analysis. Hence there is a need for a brief attention to theoretical issues. In this paper the first part will consist of a brief discussion on the theoretical and methodological issues relevant to the understanding of social change and the second part will deal with the major changes that may be considered positive evidences while the third part will document a few challenges in this regard. The last part will be conclusion of the paper.

How Can We Interpret Social Change

There is a conceptual link between the notion of society and change. There are some theorists whose notion of social change presupposes understanding of their concepts of society. Marxian notion of social change is a relevant example. However, all approaches of social change do not necessarily derive from a concept of society. In order to focus on the uniqueness of each approach the following attempt for re-configuration is attempted.

- i. Holistic-deterministic
- ii. Holistic-functionalistic-cybernetics
- iii. Selective-specific
- iv. Post modernistic
- v. Change from resistance

Holistic-deterministic: In this respect the name of Marx and his approach would feature most prominently. Marx's famous theses XI on Feuerbach "The philosophers have only *interpreted* the world, in various ways; the point, however, is to *change* it" (Marx 1976:65). Above remark reminds us how much emphasis was put on the need for change by Marx. He departed from the

* The paper was originally presented at the seminar on "Bangladesh at 40: Achievements and Challenges", organized by the Asiatic Society of Bangladesh in Dhaka during 14-15 March 2013

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premise of Hegel who perceived history in idealistic terms as a site for change under the impact of dialectical process. Marx projected the notion of dialectic into society and identified the element of contradiction in the class structure. In a gradual process of historical development differential class structure emerged with a contradictory interest. Such class contradiction infused the dynamics of change in human society. Marx treated society in a structural manner in which he assigned determinacy to the materialistic base. Heuristically materialism is understood in terms of relations of production mediated through social classes. The contradiction of class interest is actually the divergence of material interest. The dynamics of social change originates here, and different classes in different periods play the pivotal role in bringing about change. In capitalistic mode of production the proletariat is seen as the main catalyst of social change. Marx in his theory treated the process of change as a manifestation of historical law with the element of inevitability although the revolutionary consciousness is significantly important. Apart from the determinism of the relations of production and class structure in the process of social change there is another facet of this determinism, it is the determination of base (conceived as relations of production) on the superstructure (politics and culture). Marx said in the famous book *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* the following thing: "In the social production of their life, men enter into definite relations that are independent of their will, relations of production which correspond to a definite stage of development of their material productive forces. The sum total of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real basis on which rises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite form of social consciousness. The mode of production of material life conditions the social, political and intellectual life process in general." (Marx 1971).

From the above statement of Marx it is clear that there is a correspondence between technological development and social relationships. The main determinant of social relationship is the relationship that arise surrounding production activities, which corresponds to class position. In turn class position determines one's consciousness as well as attitudes in a broader sense. Production relation is related to mode of production.

Holistic-functionalistic-cybernetics: System theorist like Parsons also took a holistic position by incorporating culture, politics and personality into this configuration. Although he found in normative structure the integrating element of system it is not assigned a deterministic status as it is the case in materialistic

Marxism (Parsons 2005:22). Any society is also a repository of a value patterns and the members of that society subscribed to that. Such value pattern (eg the values of entrepreneurship and making of wealth) are gratifying to the constituting individuals when it does not take place disequilibrium starts to surface. Parsons deals with the issue of change taking recourse to the concept of differentiation which could be institution as well as role. By creating new institution and new role such disequilibrium may be controlled. Later Parsons has incorporated the notion of cybernetics in his formulation which refers to a process of information and energy transmission in a circulatory process, in other words it more encrypts the notion of system.¹

Selective-specific: Development approach is selective in the analysis of change and progress. Economic progress generally receives more attention expressed in the indicator like GDP. However, development thinkers also paid attention to non-economic indicators like health and education. Nowadays women's empowerment or human rights are also associated. The discussion of change is based on such conceptual indicators. For example, the growths in GDP, literacy or longevity are a few relevant examples. This approach does not privilege one indicator over another.

Post-modernistic: In this approach there is a reservation against the application of meta-narrative like materialism or idealism in the understanding of social process. The name of Lyotard is well referred (Lyotard 1984) in this regard who saw in the acceptance of theories adherence to language games. It is observed that conformity with the main premise of a theory is a prerequisite for its approval, just like a game, which is meaningful when played out within the frame of its rules. Such arguments have restricted the application of theories in social science to a very wide context. Each theory deploys its own supposition, articulation and argument which resemble the structure of language game, it implies each language is constituted by its own set of rules, non-conformity with rules or not learning that rules would imply non-understanding or the incomplete understanding. Plurality of theories and understanding is a major argument of post-modernistic approach and the following comment on Derrida is indicative of it, "Derrida concludes...there is no *one* power...Similarly, there is no *one* knowledge. There are knowledges and there are powers." (Wolfreys 1998: 17).

¹ Please see Trevino (2001) for a brief reflection on the notion of cybernetics in Parsonian approach.

Change from resistance: Another important source of change is resistance, the issue is not completely new but theorizing this position is rather recent. Foucault in his argument put forth the view that the whole literature of feminism is an outcome of resistance of the women against patriarchy (Mills 2007). Social movement may also result from resistance which in turn may catalyze social change.

Macro Perspective

Market economy and globalization: Capitalism and market economy is the dominant feature of our economy. Social relations are accordingly shaped. Relations of trust, mutual support or moral obligation common in pre-capitalistic society gives in to contractual and profit oriented relations of a market economy when capitalistic development takes place it imparts significant changing influences on the entire body of the society.

Globalization is a much talked about phenomenon in contemporary time in relation to social change. It has created opportunities as well as threat in the economic realm. Opportunities are found in the establishment of new business which in turn created employment and subsequent reduction of poverty. Significant expansion of the readymade garment sector in Bangladesh is seen as the positive effect of globalization process Globalization speeded up capitalistic development in Bangladesh which started since the colonial time. It has integrated various economies, paved internationalization of production, distribution and marketing of goods (Harris 1993). Globalization presupposes structural readjustment spearheaded by the international financial organization like the World Bank. As a sequel to it public sector was squeezed and the private sector got expanded, it resulted in workers retrenchment, in Bangladesh the jute factories were common victims of such readjustment. Liberalizing of tariff structure also exposed the local products to competition from abroad. If the purchasing power of the Bangladeshi people keep rising the function of the corporate finance will also expand in Bangladesh. In some opinion globalization has increased the influence of the corporate capital in the Southern like Bangladesh. It sometimes poses threat to national sovereign power. However, globalization has not expanded in a smooth process. The case of Phulbari is an interesting example. Energy giant Asian Energy is keen to mine coal in Phulbari, Dinajpur and the local people is putting up successful resistance since such mining will destroy their agricultural basis.

Modernization-westernization: Another important macro feature of change is the initiative aiming modernization and westernization. In the 1960's in all over the developing countries modernization was important campaign. So called 'traditional' institutions were portrayed as inhibiting factor towards the journey of social progress. West was seen as 'modern' and replicating western institution and attitude became a strategy for societal progress. Westernization refers to cultural aspect which involved life style also. It was a wide ranging phenomena including food, dress, music and behavior. Western countries were symbolized as standard bearer of culture and a section of the people were eager to replicate that style. Westernization is still continuing in the country although modernization has faced criticism because of the fact that the replicated institutions could not operate well always.

Democratization: In the changing process of a society the function of politics is important because ultimately the mediating agent is politics. Societal autonomy is there but politics remains quite important. Oscillation between military rule and democratic governance has been there in the last four decades in Bangladesh. The implications of military rule in Bangladesh may be found in different aspects however changes in basic principles, namely secularism and Bengali nationhood took place. In the later phase of military rule Islam has been introduced as the state religion. Later on such changes have been subject to criticism with the observation that religion has been politicized. However the restoration of democracy has created another problem in relation to transfer of power between the successive regimes at the end of each five year. Consequent violence significantly affects the peaceful situation in society with a wide implication even reducing the effectiveness of democracy in public opinion. Despite the above pitfall the preset process of democratization has allowed the function of civil society and media which in turn contributed to the exercise of rights in society.

Commoditization of culture: Market principle has penetrated the field of culture also in contemporary Bangladesh. Commoditization of culture has rendered important influence in the sense that profit motive has become an important goal of cultural activity. If a cultural product could not gain commodity value it faces the risk of exclusion and sometimes the motive of profit encourages cultural production of the market type paying less attention to aesthetic standard. Mass production of culture is said to compromise with the aesthetic value of cultural creations like film, fiction and others.

Cultural admixture and Resilient Bengali culture: As a part of acculturation process cultural integration is an expected outcome. However, with the effect of globalization and religious politicization certain type of acculturation and cultural intrusion may be noted in Bangladesh. For example, the pressure of Hindi on local culture is portrayed as an effect of globalization. Similarly the syncretism in Bengali culture is pushed aside in favor of religious feeling. Interestingly such pressures did not function unilaterally and the relevant observation of an expatriate commentator has also voiced similar tone, it is said that there has been a continuous tension between secular and religious forces in Bangladesh (Lewis 2012: 3). On the other hand the site of culture has demonstrated its resilience by sticking to traditional Bengali practices, particularly in the observation of national festival in the fashion of Bengali culture (e.g., *pahela baishak*).

Economic progress: In the macro perspective of the society the economic institution is an important one since it helps create enabling condition. In the early 1970's immediately after the liberation the country's economic image was severely negative which has significantly changed over the course of years. It is expected that the country might attain a level of middle-income status in next few years. Country's economic progress can be easily identified from the reduction of the poverty level. For example 40% people was below poverty level in 2005 which reduced to 31.5% in 2010 (BBS 2011). The creation of enabling condition through economic progress has brought positive changes at other levels, such as health and education.

Evidence of Positive Changes

In this section attention is paid to a set of changes that may be considered as positive. These are related to class structure, attitudes as well as disadvantaged groups.

Emerging entrepreneurship and economic drive: Capitalistic mode of production is the premise of economic activity since long time ago. In the early 1970's several rural studies focused attention on the expansion of capitalist mode of production in rural areas. It was concluded that the process of Green Revolution has stepped up the expansion of capitalism in rural Bangladesh. A class of rich peasantry was emerging was the conclusion although the claim was qualified that it is not comparable with the capitalist farmers of other countries. It was also debated whether the agricultural working class could be considered

as a proletariat class. What was the type of capitalism is not the main issue in my opinion, what is more important is the emergence of strong entrepreneurship in both rural and urban areas. A peasant society is gradually becoming a capitalist one is the important issue here. Such change has got important implication: if a subsistence oriented society changes into a market oriented society changes at different levels follow. For example, modern agricultural technology (mechanical irrigation-HYV crops-fertilizer) has fast expanded, market production of crops, vegetable, poultry and fish is the predominant form. On the other hand exchange relationship between enterprising class and workers have also fast proceeded.

In urban areas industrial entrepreneurs are also emerging along with the market economy. The emergence of urban entrepreneur class is visible in the readymade garment, pharmaceuticals, ship breaking and other sectors. With the emergence of industrial entrepreneur class capitalistic relations of production has sharpened in the country and a new form of class contradiction has emerged particularly in the readymade garment sector. We are not elaborating the form of social violence that has emerged in the labour relation of readymade garment sector.

Economic drive has strongly motivated the young workers of rural areas to seek job abroad. There are a few villages in Bangladesh without family(s) young member(s) not migrated abroad as workers. Widely acknowledged is the effect of remittance earned by the migrant workers in economy particularly in the payment of import bills. There has been feminization of migration also. Economic mobility is an effect of such migration although there are cases where indebtedness of the migrant families is also reported. Migration brings additional status in the village but for the migrant women workers it is not always the case.

Changing gender relation & women's empowerment: Patriarchal norms still shape the gender relations of the country to a significant extent. However, it has encountered challenges both in urban and rural areas. It may be said that in the post-independence Bangladesh the change in patriarchy based gender relation or creating a balance in the gender relation is a remarkable achievement of the society. The importance of such achievement can be understood further if we take into consideration half of the population are women. Reducing patriarchal influence in gender relation implies at least two consequences: social justice has been achieved, empowered women are contributing to national reconstruction.

How it has been possible and how could we identify it? In the last four decades NGOs have become important development catalyst in the country particularly in the rural areas. In different programs of the NGOs particularly micro-credit, social awareness and skill training the women have been integrated. It has created new opportunities for the women. For example, when micro-credit program first started in the country in early 1980's men were the recipients but gradually women were preferred because of their better credit worthiness. While in many cases the women themselves undertook income generating activities (particularly the widows and abandoned), they also shared the money with their husbands or adult sons. Then it became a household activity in which the women participated in different ways (e.g., planning a business, management of portfolio). Such participation allowed women to come out of the traditional role of exclusively housekeeping or child raising. Different commentators observed that NGO program increased the spatial mobility of the women and increased their capacity for decision making at the level of household (Kabeer 2001).

Another catalyst for women's empowerment is the employment of women in the RMG sector. Such employment changed the notion of women's conventional role. We know that about 4 million are RMG workers of which 80 percent are women. Leaving villages behind the RMG women workers have lived in the urban areas, sometimes with their families and sometimes independently. They acquired control over money, decision making role as well as spatial mobility. These women have got transformed from covert to overt being, if we notice their role in the protest movement against the RMG employers on different issues.

Third catalyst contributing to women's empowerment is feminization of migration in rural Bangladesh. In the last few years women have migrated from Bangladesh in an increasing number. In a relevant report it is shown quoting from the statistics of the Government of Bangladesh that female's proportion in the migrant population is increasing day by day. For example it was only 0.20% in the year 2000 and rose to 4.68% in 2009 which was more than twenty two thousands in that particular year (Migrant Forum Asia, undated). However, according to the estimate of the International Organization for Migration the percentage of female migrant workers was about 14% of the total migrant workers of 2010.

From different parts of the country women now take part in migration to foreign countries. It is a significant change in the traditional role of women. Through

such migration and subsequent work the women have become active in the places thousands miles away from their remote villages. It is also different from the migration within the country, it requires adjustment with a new culture, learning the skill to ensure own security and others. Many of migrant women also come back to own villages with some saving and contribution to the family's well-being. However some studies have reported that still the migrant image of the women is not positive in the villages, unlike men's foreign migration which enhances their social status. But many of the migrant women who have come back have tried to build network among themselves and fight back the so called social exclusion. In is observed by a relevant observer, "Thus female migrants who have returned have begun regionally to distribute information and loans to women who wish to migrate, and the first locally embedded networks of women are emerging. They are also buying land in their own name. They are also questioning the criticism made against them because of migration " (Dannecker 2011).

Enabling condition through educational program: Another significant change that has been taking place is the country's literacy situation. The rate of literacy has increased over the years, in 2010, more than 55% of the country's population who were more than 5 years old were reported to be literate who could write a letter for communication (GOB 2011). Poverty is an important impediment to the expansion of literacy in Bangladesh, however, with the decrease of poverty and intensification of NGO programs literacy has expanded in Bangladesh. Non-formal Primary Education or NFPE is an important institutional innovation that has contributed to the expansion of primary education program among the poor children in remote villages. Special features of NPFE approach include flexible class time, parental motivation to send their children to school, and provide effective class teaching. At present few hundred NGOs are engaged in providing primary education program to the poor children both in rural and urban locations (BEPS 2002). Education is an important element for the creation of enabling condition, no need to mention. However, educational program at the primary and secondary level is not progressing smoothly, dropping out of students in different classes is a major problem with which is related the quality of education. Because of the inadequate quality and other problems dropping out process cannot be eliminated completely.

Evidence of Change with Mixed Implications

In the identification of social changes in the post-independence Bangladesh we would also pay our attention to a few that manifests mixed implications. Such changes actually indicate the width and depth of the process. It has touched the production relations, cultural contour as well as psychological make-up. It is difficult to assign a definite label to it, however, registering the changes is required to understand the trend.

Power structure in rural areas: Traditional power structure in rural society consisted of *samaj*, *gushti* and *shalish*. While the concept *gushti* represents clan type social structure built around common lineage background the concept *samaj* represents the feeling of community bond. The third one *shalish* refers to village arbitration. In social conflict the role of *gushti* was important in the past particularly in the process of mobilization against the opponents. It means *gushti* as a feeling used to help build a cohesive group. It is believed that the cohesion of the entity *gushti* has weakened at present, although the causes are yet to be precisely pointed out which may include individualism, the incorporation of market principle or the intensification of social inequality. Similarly the notion of *samaj* has also weakened owing to class differentiation in rural society. On the other hand *shalish* institution is now controlled by the elected leaders of the local bodies instead of the traditional elders or *samaj* leaders (Lewis 2012). Clientilism is present both in traditional and formal power structure, however formalization of power structure significantly weakens the moral element of social relationship.

Consumerism: Both in rural and urban areas the spread of consumerism is significant. The economic progress in the last few years and the subsequent prosperity at different levels has promoted the culture of consumerism. It is perhaps the new goal of life. With the expansion of capitalism the culture of consumerism has spread. There is a positive correlation between consumerism and materialistic culture. The latter runs the risk of diminishing attraction and consequent psychological frustration.

Satellite TV communication & internet: Wide scale television network emerged through satellite and internet deserves attention in the analysis of social change. Exposure to multiple cultures is a major effect of satellite television network. In the process of acculturation the effect of television programs is commonly endorsed. Such effect is not age specific although the vulnerability of the children to cultural change through television is given attention. We would quote here the findings of micro-level study to understand the nature of such

effect. The behavioral aspects on which it reported effect include among others, becoming fashion aware, developing inclination for fast food, developing liking for foreign music and manner (Shamsar & Abdullah 2012). However the same study reported limited effect of internet on the users. But the effect of internet particularly the social network on social interaction and relationship is given much attention, however the nature of direction is yet to be clear. The exchange of information by virtue of internet has increased which has made contribution to the formation of public opinion particularly notable in the recent youth upsurge at Shahbag.

English education & orientation: In the last few years kindergarten based English education has spread fast. These schools follow British curricula. Kindergarten education has become symbol of status and necessity simultaneously. With globalization more and more children are aspiring to study abroad which becomes easier with kindergarten background, secondly the use of English has also increased with the expansion of corporate culture in the country. The students of this stream are found to follow Western manners, food and codes more authentically. English education is also increasing Westernization. For example, Bengali words are pronounced with English accent which has created new Anglicized section in society.

Challenges

Social inequality and slum development in urban areas: Inequality has increased in urban areas. The average room numbers among the poorest were found 1.24 which was 3.40 among the richest (World Bank 2007:6). Average expenditure among the poor was found less than TK700, it was more than TK3000 among the rich. Most poor live in slums which are extremely deprived in terms of utility services. The urban poor are the victims of regular toll taken by the musclemen, besides the victims of drug and alcohol consumption. Illegal arms business, gambling, violence against women and children, murder and kidnapping also take place regularly in the slums. 35% crimes in the slums take place within the household. With the increase of slum child labour has increased in different hazardous job. These children are quickly getting exposed to risky behavior such as intravenous drug (World Bank 2007).

Increasing divorce: Industrial society are characterized by liquid relationship (Blackshaw 2007), which means normative basis of social relationships become fluid. Adherence also becomes loose. With the weakening of normative adherence social relationship and behavioral practices become volatile, it may

change and diverging within the same community. Different types of outcomes may take place with the increase of liquid relationship. It may be weakening of emotional bonds particularly at the level of family. Weakening of conjugal relationship is also taking place in Bangladesh, for example a recent study on divorce in Dhaka reported the increasing incidence of divorce in the following manner: "Divorce is currently increasing in Bangladesh. According to the officials of Dhaka City Corporation (DCC), almost 26 divorces occur every day. The number of divorce filings with the DCC in 2007 was 5,324, which increased in 2008 to 7,065. The number was about 6,000 cases in 2009 and 2010." (Akhter & Begum 2012: 639).

Fragile Democratic Governance: The country emerged through a liberation war in 1971. Military coup was staged in 1975 against a government which was democratically elected and led the war of liberation. The change created a severe crisis in the country's governance system because in the early 1990's people again wanted to restore the parliamentary democracy and became eventually successful. Despite the disruption of parliamentary democracy by the military, people's aspiration for it did not exhaust at all. At present the major challenge is institutionalizing a permanent election procedure, intense conflict and violence surfaced on this issue, but the commitment for parliamentary democracy did not falter. Pressure from the rest of the society on the political parties is quite significant to reach a consensus on this point. Societal aspiration for democratic governance has also been expressed in the youth led recent movement against the perpetrators of the injustices during the war of liberation. Aspiration for democratic governance has acquired a social root although institutional mechanism for the transfer of power could not reach a consensual basis posing a challenge to the democratic process.

Balance Sheet of Change and Labeling

The evidence of change is distinct in the context of Bangladesh. Capitalism and market economy has gradually expanded along with industrialization. The country has also experienced economic progress manifested in the reduction of poverty level and consequent consumerism. Sociologists are interested in the understanding of structural changes particularly in the context of social relationships. Generally the relationships which survive the time and space constraints receive larger attention in the analysis of structural changes. From this point of view women's empowerment in Bangladesh is a major structural change, expansion of market based relationships at different levels also indicate

the evidence of structural change. The increase in the number of literate people also indicates change with structural implication. Apart from structural changes there are cases of changes at the level of practices entailing politics (e.g. democratization) and culture (entrepreneurship). This paper has discussed about different changes, holistically one need to draw a balance sheet to conclude about the outcome of changes. There are terminologies such as modernization, capitalization, industrialization or urbanization to assign a label to the change. Contemporary thinking on society has pointed out the limitation of labeling which is always selective, arbitrary and linear. Conceptually it may be useful practically not conclusive. Thus the paper is of the nature of diagnostic than prescriptive.

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