

**MIGRATION, URBANIZATION AND POVERTY  
IN DHAKA, BANGLADESH\***

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**Introduction**

The issues of rural-urban migration and urban transformation form an essential part in an analysis of urban poverty as they are creating severe pressure on cities and sustaining the urban absorptive capacities, thereby aggravating urban poverty. Massive changes are taking place in patterns of urbanization on a global scale. But the South is urbanizing very rapidly despite the fact that its various regions differ markedly in the level of urbanization they have attained.<sup>1</sup> About 95 percent of humanity will live in the urban areas of the South, whose population will double to nearly 4 billion over the next generation.<sup>2</sup> The most dramatic result will be the growth of new megacities with populations in excess of 10 million, and, even more spectacularly, hypercities with more than 20 million inhabitants. The number of urban poor living in slums in the world has already crossed the one billion mark-when one in three city residents live in inadequate housing with no or few basic services and often face forced evictions from their settlements.<sup>3</sup> Hundreds millions of new urbanities will be involved in the peripheral economic activities in the informal sectors of the economy who become a living museum of human exploitation in the age of a surplus humanity.<sup>4</sup> During reforms under neo-liberalism while market becomes very dominant due to the declining role of the state the proliferation of fortified enclaves has created a new model of spatial segregation and transformed the quality of public life in many cities which marginalizes the poor urban communities. The policing of poverty has been strongly spatialized through the segregation of the poor on the urban periphery and through slum clearance justified as urban renewal or development.<sup>5</sup>

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Bangladesh is currently facing huge challenges of rapid urbanization. The rate of growth of urban population is likely to fall to some extent in the future, but would still be quite high. The UN projection for urban population of Bangladesh for 2030 was 86.5 million.<sup>6</sup> The proportion of urban would possibly cross the 50% mark by 2040 and the 60% mark by the year 2050 when the total urban population would rise above 100 million.<sup>7</sup> The city of Dhaka in recent years has emerged as one of the fastest rapid growing cities in the world. It began with a manageable population of 2.2 million in 1975 which reached 12.3 million in 2000. The growth rate of Dhaka City's population will remain high and it will be the top ranking megacity with a population of around 25 million by the year 2025.<sup>8</sup> Urbanization of Dhaka is closely linked to the rural displacement triggered by the government's structural adjustment policies and concentration of wealth and employment in urban centres. In addition, natural disasters and vulnerabilities through climate change displace millions of population in the coastal areas who migrate to the city and mostly take shelter in the urban peripheries to escape from poverty. Thus, Dhaka's urban periphery has sprung up as rings of urban poverty in recent decades.<sup>9</sup> Most of the new migrants to the city take shelter in the peripheries due to easily available low cost housing. In addition, the urban poor from the city centre are increasingly being forced out to the peripheries due to increasing demand for land for urban development in the city centre. The new urban poor living in the peripheries are economically marginalized due to exclusions from the formal sectors of the economy. They are also marginalized in terms of the access to housing and infrastructure services in the city. They also remain socially and culturally marginalized in the new urban peripheries. The poor urban communities are often become the victims of the circumstances and they are treated as the criminals by the authorities.

It is in the context the paper aims to explore the recent migration and rapid urban transformation which has created the new challenges of urban slums and poverty in the peripheries of Dhaka. Combining the frameworks of urban political economy and urban ethnography developed by sociologist and anthropologists it will document the poverty and marginality of the new migrants who move to the urban peripheries to escape from poverty during the recent decades while the city has been significantly transformed due to neoliberal reforms.

### **Rural Displacement and Migration to the City**

The urbanization of Dhaka is linked to rural displacement and massive migration of rural population to the urban peripheries. Agriculture can no more

solve the economic needs of a growing rural population. Many people involved in agriculture are gradually being displaced from their land and involved in non-farming activities like services, trading and commercial activities. Many of them are moving to the city for employment which is also very common in many other developing countries.<sup>10</sup> In Bangladesh inequality in the ownership of land is also crucial for such rural displacement. Land is centralized in the hands of those who are not directly involved in agriculture. Remittance plays an important role for increasing inequality in the ownership of land. Ali moved to Savar, the rapid growing suburb of Dhaka, explains his experience of displacement in the Southern district of Barisal where he passed most of his life. He points out, 'I had nothing to do in my village as I was unable to work as a wage laborer there. I was forced to sell my land to my neighbors due to my debts. You know, our village life has been changed due to money sending from overseas. Those who are receiving money from their sons are buying land. Still I want to go back there but I do not know when I will be able to go there'.

Moreover, land is being leased by firms especially in the surrounding districts of Dhaka. Small landowners are unable to keep their land due to the increasing demand of land from the rich and firms. Over the years the government took policies for redistribution of land among landless which did not work much. In fact, land reforms have failed to resolve the problem of poverty in rural areas. In addition, modernization of agriculture through investments and new technology also causes new forms of rural displacement. Rural poor working as wage laborers are being displaced and they are migrating to the peripheries of Dhaka. The story of Rahman reveals the increasing trend of land leasing in the surrounding districts of Dhaka. He was working in his land in Gazipur inherited from his father which he had lost a couple of years back. Now he is living in Pallobi with his family of five members by working as a security guard in a garment factory. He mentioned, 'We were happy to cultivate our land over the decades. A group of people from Dhaka offered us to lease our land for ten years. We had no way to reject them as they had both money and power. At last they bought our land and we became landless. I had lost the money received from them and the only option remains for me to move to the city of Dhaka.' Thus, peripheries of Dhaka become the destinations of the new urban poor in recent decades.

Along with structural adjustments and modernization of agriculture the changing climate is playing a significant role in rural displacement in Bangladesh. Environmental disasters and vulnerabilities due to climate change force millions of rural poor out from their land. In the recent decades the rural

poor living in the coastal areas were frequently affected by natural disasters like cyclones. Huge number of poor people who used to work in their rural land became the new migrants in the cities. They have chosen migration as a strategy to escape from poverty and vulnerabilities. These climate refugees are mostly lacking of skills and employment training needed for jobs in the formal sectors of the urban economy. They usually move to the urban peripheries where they can find low paid jobs. In Kamrangirchar a huge number of migrants moved from the Southern districts of greater Barisal Division after disasters like Sidor and Aila. They lost their livelihoods in their villages and compelled to move to the city. Akther migrated here with his family commented, 'We lost our house, land, cattle and we were unable to manage our livelihood there after Sidor. Now we are alright here as we are working in the factories.' Despite such huge disasters poor people are also joining to the city slums on a regular basis due to river erosion. Rashid has recently moved to a slum in Mirpur with his family from Bhola, the mostly affected district of Bangladesh due to climate change. Rasid had lost his land by river erosion and had the only option to move to the city. He says, 'I never wanted to move here but I had no other option to choose. When my land was destroyed by the river, what I can do there. I have learnt pulling the rickshaw to bear my family here'. The fact is, a huge number of climate refugees are joining to the urban slums located in Dhaka's peripheries on a regular basis.

The existing laws of inheritance is also playing significant role for landlessness and migration to the city of Dhaka. Women in Bangladesh rarely have equal property rights and rarely hold title to land. Social and customary practices effectively exclude women from direct access to land. Similarly, although national law accords men and women equal rights to access to property and land, family law and practices are barriers for women. The fact is, women own very few assets in rural Bangladesh. Their situation is further impaired by discriminatory inheritance laws and cultural norms. Daughters inherit half the share of property received by sons, and women a one-eighth share of their husbands' property and one-sixteenth of their sons' property in case the sons predecease the mothers. Overall, Bangladeshi women are unlikely to claim their share of family property unless it is offered to them. This situation sometimes compels many rural women to migrate to the cities in Bangladesh.

In fact, the issue of rural-urban migration is closely linked to urban poverty as the poor are mostly rural migrants. The substantial body of literature available reveals that people move to the city for economic reasons.<sup>11</sup> When people are asked why they moved, they usually cite 'better prospects' in the urban

economy as the chief reason. The sight of severe and widespread poverty in the city of Dhaka easily leads to the assumption that migrants do not really know what to do and are unaware of the risk of being trapped in urban poverty. The fact is, they are often misled by migrants returning to rural areas who have described the city as a place of opportunities. Such myths have been perpetuated by returning migrants who wish to build up their image and their exploits. But they often underplay the problems they encounter in the city.

However, the relative success of most migration is due in large to the fact that it is embedded in social relation in Bangladesh.<sup>12</sup> Migrants typically receive considerable assistance when they move, in adapting to the urban environment, in securing a foothold in the urban economy. Once a group of villagers had gained a foothold in the city, they attracted others ready to leave the village. In many instances, potential migrants wait in their villages until their urban contact signals a job opportunity.<sup>13</sup>

#### **Neoliberal Urbanization and Peripherilization**

Neoliberal urbanization is characterized by economic restructuring and relocation of the poor communities in the urban peripheries. It is evident that in the global cities economic restructuring has been playing significant role in reshaping the urban space.<sup>14</sup> It is playing an important role in the formation of new urban peripheries in Dhaka. Formal urban labor markets stopped absorbing labor, generating a substantial increase in unemployment and underemployment. Increasing number of technology based employments in the Central Business District (CBD) of Dhaka creates the new challenges for unskilled and semi-skilled workers migrated from rural areas. Poor migrants are mostly illiterate and lack employment training being unable to get access to these emerging information based employments. Jalil's family has been recently moved to Demra where he is working as clerk in a factory. He explains his experience of displacement from the city centre: 'It was hard to continue job there due to increasing competition from technically sound people. Everyday new employees having better skills are joining there. We are older generation and unable to cope with the changes. We are better here as we can find few jobs.'

The existing informal sectors are unable to absorb the surplus labor force. Moreover, the authority is regulating informal sectors through restrictions over the years.<sup>15</sup> Ibrahim, a street vendor working in Jatrabari, previously worked as a street vendor in Gulistan where he often experienced harassment from the authorities. He says, "I moved here to continue vending in the street. In the city

centre streets are often cleared by the police. Hawkers were evicted to make the city beautiful during the last cricket game. I moved here to start this business but my earning had decreased.' The consequence is a general degradation in living conditions of millions of urban informals brought by structural adjustment policies in the last decades which is also valid for other countries.<sup>16</sup> In the context of employment restructuring they are moving to the peripheries of the city where new manufacturing and garments factories are developing. The new migrants prefer to live in the peripheries as they can easily find out a job. However, peripherilization of Dhaka is linked to economic restructuring and the changing pattern of employment.

In the period of neoliberal urban transformation the urban renewal and redevelopment justified for beautification of the cities become a common phenomenon around the world. The urban renewal and redevelopment affecting Dhaka like many other cities favours a very small portion of urban population. The city in short span of time has transformed, the landscape now dominated by new developments and an array of real-estate advertisements offering lucrative land and housing deals dot the city. The majority of these development projects are of high-end real-estate for the powerful and affluent classes; with the exception of a few housing projects where access was determined on having connections with political parties. Under the new wave of privatization a significant number of private schools, universities and hospitals have been established where the rich and affluent only have the access.<sup>17</sup> The fact is, Dhaka has emerged as the city of the new shopping malls, restaurants, cafes, beauty parlours and gymnasiums. This privatization of urban space discriminate the urban poor who are forced to move to the urban peripheries.

Beautification projects in the city have also marginalized poor communities from the city. The government has recently inaugurated the Hatirjheel project which has displaced huge number of poor people to the new urban peripheries. A major objective of the project is to have a storm drainage system to prevent flooding of the capital alongside urban beautification and environmental conservation. However, completion of recreational and landscaping components, including celebration point, water court, floating walkway, viewing deck, child play equipment, water taxi terminal, lakeside landing steps, and amphitheatre is expected by this year. The project costs Tk 1,971 crore, with Tk 1,048 crore spent for land acquisition and the rest for construction of various structures.<sup>18</sup> Poor people used to live in the area over the decades have been displaced and moved out to other places especially the peripheries of the city. A number of poor people still living nearby the project were interviewed

about their relatives and neighbors. They informed that they mostly moved to the new urban peripheries for low cost housing.

In the peripheries of Dhaka land grabbing becomes the source of different crime and violence. Frauds, kidnapping and killing are the most common urban crimes related to land in greater Dhaka. It is a huge challenge to continue the possession of land in urban peripheries by land owners as land grabbers are very powerful. In many cases the owner of the land are tortured and forced to leave the city. Local *mastans* and terrorists are often used to force them. Manan is currently living in Kachpur who had lost his control over land beside the link road of Dhaka-Narayanganj. He was tortured and forced out from his land by the carders of a local gang leader. Every year a number of land related cases are filed in different police stations in greater Dhaka. As the cases are lengthy and influenced by powerful parties, the victims do not get justice. Violence and protests for protecting their land are very common in the urban peripheries. In Rupganj, Narayanganj local residents protested against the authority to protect their land in 2010. Few protesters were killed and the government had to stop the project. But the question is whether local residents will be able to hold their control over land as it is needed for rapid urban expansions. Recently a number of protesters in Rupganj were interviewed who did not want to disclose their names for security reasons. One of them mentioned, 'You know, we won against the authority through huge protest but we could not protect our land later due to the increasing pressure from the authorities and private developers.'

#### **The New Urban Poverty and Marginality**

The urban peripheries become the dumping grounds of the urban poor in the new age of surplus humanity. The nature of life and labour in the peripheries clearly reveals their poverty and vulnerability. Most of the urban poor are involved in low paid peripheral economic activities in Dhaka like many other developing cities.<sup>19</sup> They mostly work as rickshaw pullers, street vendors, construction workers, transport workers, garments workers and low grade employees in the government and private sectors.<sup>20</sup> Women are mostly employed as garments workers in the new urban peripheries. The poor mostly experience harassment at their work place either by employers or police. Sadek recently moved to Mohammadpur is pulling rickshaw explains police harassment: 'I am riding rickshaw in this area as the authority has blocked the main streets. If any case I go to the main road, I need to pay bribe to the traffic police. Otherwise, they physically harass me and damage my rickshaw.' Street vendors also experience police harassment and they need to pay bribe to run their business. They are also threatened and harassed by the clients of local

political leaders. Those clients of political leaders force them to pay money to run their businesses. It is found that money collected through this process is distributed among them. Workers involved in construction and transports are seriously affected by recent political chaos through strikes. They are unable to go to their work during strikes which causes huge stress in their households.

The poor women working in the garment factories are getting low wages despite working long hours. The condition of their work place is very unsafe and they often become the victims of accidents. In the past year more than one hundred workers were burnt in Tazrin garment in Savar. The victims of this accident did not get any benefit from the employer or government despite huge promises. More than a thousand workers working in garments in Rana Plaza in Savar died due to its collapse. Thousands of workers are also injured and many of them will not be able to return to work. This tragedy attracts huge attention from national and international communities. Still garments workers are demonstrating to raise their pay and to improve the condition of their workplace. But the government does not pay attention to the demands of the workers despite their significantly contributing to the economy.<sup>21</sup> Rather, their demonstrations are stopped by the police. This reveals the vulnerabilities of garments workers, and as we all know, in Bangladesh garments have been emerged as the main source of employment for the new urban poor.

Poverty is clearly seen in the pattern of consumption of the poor migrants living in the urban peripheries. Poor people are involved in low-paid jobs and they have insufficient earnings to support their livelihoods. Their low level of earning means that their expenditure level is also low with most of their earnings spent on food. As a result, essential non-food items like health and education are often neglected.<sup>22</sup> The urban poor usually buy food items at a low cost and generally avoid costly items for their daily meals. In recent times chimerical is overwhelmingly used as preservative for food especially fish and fruits. Although people from all social strata are affected, the poor communities are severely affected as they have no option to buy quality food from super markets where there are some means to prevent it. Abdul Halim, a rickshaw puller says, 'We are poor and we always buy cheap food from local market to survive. We have no option to choose quality food from super market which is reserved for the rich. We do not bother for formalin though we are mostly affected by this harmful chemical'. In fact, chronic malnutrition and poor health is the result of deprivation of necessary food items over a long period of time.

Housing is an important aspect of the quality of life and necessary expression of material well-being. Although many of them improved their conditions in terms

of their income and food consumptions, the poor living in the urban peripheries are marginalized in terms of housing. Material deprivation and higher levels of vulnerabilities of the urban poor to housing conditions clearly revealed through tenure insecurity and poor quality of housing. The poor communities have no access to urban land and the most have been forced to settle on vacant land on the periphery of the city, where they have been relocated because of increasing demand for land and its increasing value. The poor quality of construction materials makes their houses vulnerable to annual floods. They have limited access to urban infrastructure services despite living in the city for a long time. Whatever the reason for the appalling environmental conditions in which poor people live, the sanitation is far from satisfactory when their health is endangered and they are also obliged to devote time which could otherwise be used for productive income-generating work to obtain daily supplies of potable water or fuel.<sup>23</sup>

The poor people living in the urban peripheries are the real victims of environmental injustices as they are suffering from environmental problems in cities of the South.<sup>24</sup> Sufia living in Hajaribagh explains her experience of living near the tannery. She says, 'We are living here in very dangerous situation in terms of environmental risks as we have no option to move. It is hard to live for humans in such an unhealthy environment'. The poor living in other peripheries are also experiencing the similar forms of environmental injustices. The fact is, the poor physical and environmental contexts, which is the lot of the poor, is the result not only of rapid urbanization and limited resources, but critically of a lack of political will of urban and national governments and individuals to invest in much needed infrastructure.<sup>25</sup>

People living in poor environment are sufferings from different diseases. Infant and children are the most affected groups in the urban slums. Despite ill health and prevalence of diseases the urban people have limited access to available healthcare services. Long-wait and less attention are the common groups for avoiding public hospitals by the poor people. Moreover, privatization of urban healthcare facilities has created the new challenges for the urban poor in recent decades. Manan, a resident of a poor settlement in Badda, points out, 'We cannot think of going to see a doctor in a private hospital or clinic because of his/her high fees. These private hospitals and clinics only serve the rich people. Even doctors in the public hospitals do not pay attention to the patients because they are mostly busy for private practices'. The exclusion of the poor from the city healthcare services often compels them to undertake a variety of alternative treatments. Poor women often seek help from untrained persons for childbirths,

which causes deaths among pregnant women. Poor children are extremely vulnerable to diseases and they do not get proper medical treatment because of the low household incomes, resulting in a higher rate of infant mortality in the city slums.

The peripheralization process has created the new enclaves of poverty. The poor people living in the peripheries are often treated as criminals by the authorities. Punishing the poor becomes the most important agenda of the neoliberal state.<sup>26</sup> The metropolitan police of Dhaka often raids in the urban peripheries to search criminals and gang members. The fact is, residential segregation has created stigmatization and the city of walls.<sup>27</sup> People living in upper and middle class suburbs also consider the peripheries as the places of criminals. People from wealthy suburbs of Dhaka are scared of visiting the urban peripheries. A number of interviews were conducted with residents of Dhanmondi about the images of the poor neighborhood of Kamrangircha. Most of them consider the place as dangerous neighbourhood where the criminals are mostly living. Some Nazim Uddin replied: 'I never think of visiting the area at the night time. Even I am scared of visiting there in day time. I think it is totally occupied by criminals and dangerous people.' However, fortified enclaves are developing in the peripheries of Dhaka through urban planning and policy over the decades.

The poverty and marginality leads to violence and protests in the urban peripheries. The exclusion and deprivation of the new urban poor and their victimization by the authorities make them desperate. Thus, Dhaka's peripheries become the location of huge number of insurgent and rebel citizens.<sup>28</sup> In Savar people involved in garment factories often demonstrate for increasing their payments. Interviews with a number of garments workers reveal their justifications for the protest. Rafiq, a young protester complains, 'Both the police and mastans (the clients of local gang leaders) are forcing us to stop the protest. We need help from the civil society to make it successful'. Currently the poor workers are fighting for increasing their pay and improving the condition of workplace in Dhaka's peripheries. It is true that exclusions and deprivations of the new urban marginals lead to violence there. In fact, urban slums have always been sites of violence and social confrontation but globalization has only produced more complex violence through diversifying cultural and social identifications globally.<sup>29</sup>

Urban poverty is linked to the emergence of the new Islamist politics in the peripheries of Dhaka. In recent decades huge numbers of poor people having no

access to the urban services provided by the government get services from different faith based organizations in the peripheries of Dhaka. The poor people mostly take health and education services from these faith based organizations and they have some support to their activities. Mousseau observed the support for Islamist groups among the urban poor in many Muslim countries including Bangladesh.<sup>30</sup> It is evident that a number of Madrassas have been developed in Dhaka's peripheries. The poor children having no access to schools often prefer to go there for learning. The poverty has forced them to depend on such faith based education. They are most likely the supporters of Islamists. They think their poverty and vulnerability could be ended up through the establishment of the new faith based society. Kalam, a young boy attending a Maddraasa in Kamrangirchar posits out, 'The existing political system is unable to establish a just society as the leaders are corrupt. We will establish the new society through the new Islamist movement'. However, the poverty and marginality in the urban peripheries leads to the faith based political movement in Dhaka.

It is true that armed with the MDG goals of poverty alleviation and urban shelter, international agencies and NGOs have become involved with grassroots organizations concerned with gaining secure tenure of land, adequate and durable housing, and access to elements of urban infrastructure, notably to electricity, transport, sanitation and allied services.<sup>31</sup> This grassroots politics is revealing 'new geographies of governmentality' shaped by three elements: first, the emergence of new forms of globally organized power and expertise within the existence of nation-states; second, the redundancy of national government as governance is outsourced; third, the explosive growth of non-government organizations of all scales and varieties fuelled by the UN development system and the emergence of a global discourse on human rights. The crisis of slum housing has become a major focus for 'deepening democracy' in the city rather than the nation.<sup>32</sup>

However, as sites of social and spatial emergency, slums have also created opportunities for international intervention. Apocalyptic urbanism which refers to the new urbanism outlived its original purpose due to the emerging urban climacteric has been the formation of a number of international organizations and projects to alleviate urban poverty. The UN-Habitat report, *Challenges of Slums* identifies some of these international initiatives, for instances the Cities Alliance, the Urban Management Program and the Municipal Development Program.<sup>33</sup> The Cities Alliance launched the project of cities without slums based on an alliance between the poor, local authorities and their international

associations, national government and bilateral agencies and multilateral agencies (World Bank, UN-Habitat). Slums developed in the new urban peripheries as an emergency measure has emerged as a kind of humanitarian problem.

### **Conclusion**

The formation of new urban poverty in the peripheries represents a vital area of research which can only attract greater attention. The rapid urbanization makes the city of Dhaka a major site of research. The research reveals that the urbanization of Dhaka is closely linked to the rural displacement triggered by the government's structural adjustment policies and concentration of wealth and employment in urban centres. Along with these factors environmental challenges push huge number of rural poor to the city of Dhaka. This massive migration of rural population to the city leads to the development of the new urban peripheries of Dhaka. Moreover, the urban renewal and redevelopment justified for beautification of the city has forced the urban poor to be resettled in the peripheries during the period of neoliberal urban transformation.

Thus Dhaka's peripheries become the dumping grounds of the urban poor in the new age of surplus humanity. Life and labour in the urban peripheries reveals their poverty and marginality. Poverty is clearly seen in terms of their consumption, housing and access to the services in the city. The exclusion and deprivation of the urban poor and their criminalization by the authorities often make them desperate and violent. The fact is, poverty, widespread violence, and massive population movements to the urban peripheries of Dhaka have combined to significantly deteriorate the living conditions of the people. The experience of poverty and violence for the migrants living in the peripheries follows the urbanization without development, the very opposite to their expectations and aspirations.

However, the peripheries of Dhaka become the new location for theorizing contemporary urban life. The city's politics of citizenship can be studied through the marginality in the peripheries. The poverty in the new urban peripheries will remain an important focus of social research because of the intensification of urbanization. The urban peripheries will be attracted by international development agencies for future interventions. They will be designing programs in the new pockets of poverty with the partnership of local authorities under neoliberal urban governance.

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