

**HOW DO BANGLADESHI ELITES
UNDERSTAND POVERTY?***

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Summary

The poverty of most Bangladeshis is viewed as an important - but not urgent - issue by Bangladesh's elites. They do not feel threatened by the extent of poverty, or by poor people. Some sections of the elite appear to know little about the poor. The poor are instead viewed through a somewhat idealistic lens, as homogenous, deserving objects of traditional elite philanthropy. Poverty alleviation is at one level viewed as a moral project. At another level it is synonymous with the broader, technical project of development: development will solve the problem eventually, without any special focus on the poor. The state is expected to provide education for the poor, but not to act in any more direct way to protect their livelihoods. The proper role of the state is to promote development in the broad sense, not to ensure that the poor are fed.

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1 INTRODUCTION

Does it matter what Bangladeshi elites think about the problem of poverty? History suggests that it matters a great deal. Historical scholarship tells us that understandings of poverty have often affected the degree of priority that elites have been willing to accord to poverty alleviation and the nature of anti-poverty policies they are willing to support. These lessons from history may be very relevant to developing countries, where anti-poverty policy is often 'owned' less by national governments than by international organisations. Here, anti-poverty agendas based on the perceptions of aid donors rather than national elites may have failed to generate adequate support and commitment from the elites. It is worth enquiring into differences between national elite and international aid donor agendas and perceptions. In the Bangladesh case, these two sets of perceptions are not very far apart, at least with respect to the policy implications. Bangladeshi elites do not accord poverty a high priority on the national poverty agenda, nor do they view direct poverty alleviation as the responsibility of the state. Direct poverty alleviation should be motivated by moral rather than ideological, class, or party-political concerns, and should be conducted within the framework of personal charity or 'civil society' (including NGOs). The main contribution of public action should be education that will serve to raise the 'awareness' of the poor, i.e. to induce them to adopt a more activist and instrumental kind of economic rationality in organising their lives. The redistribution of assets is not seen to have a significant role in reducing poverty. Language borrowed from international aid policy discourses often serves to justify beliefs about the nature, causes of and solutions to poverty that could equally well be expressed in 'traditional' idioms of personal charity. The policy implications of Bangladeshi elite perceptions are congruent with those of most aid donors and international financial institutions: a limited role for the state in direct poverty alleviation; an emphasis on the benefits of education; and a belief that the state should focus on promoting national economic development, the best route to poverty alleviation in the long term.

What are the implications of these findings about elite perceptions of poverty in Bangladesh? On the positive side, there is a substantial implicit meeting of minds between elites and aid donors over long term strategy. But this implicit strategy does not give any great priority to poverty. Insofar as poverty is understood as an issue about the productivity of human resources and thus of national economic development, the vulnerable, 'unproductive' poor are excluded. Assigning responsibility for poverty reduction to the more technically capable NGOs and to private charity takes poverty off the political and electoral agendas. Political pressure is not viewed as an appropriate way of addressing the issue. The Bangladeshi elite is not hostile to the poor, but lack of hostility may reflect the distance between the two groups. The elite in fact have few direct relationships with the poor, and no great stake in their future. Except for potential electoral pressures, and of the growing labour needs of export-oriented labour-intensive industries, the elite are unlikely to perceive themselves as having personal material interests in poverty alleviation. They can afford to view the anti-poverty agenda as a diffuse moral issue, to be dealt with by those most capable and in the medium-term, than as an urgent issue requiring immediate political action.

Section 2 situates the present research in traditions of historical and comparative research on elites. Section 3 briefly describes the research project on elite perceptions of poverty in Bangladesh on which this paper draws. Section 4 introduces some theoretical considerations about the nature of our findings. Section 5 deals with the

'developmental' idiom within which the elite discuss poverty, and Section 6 discusses their views on charity and responsibility for the poor. A preliminary explanation of the elite's views on poverty is given in Section 7, illustrating the lack of a threat to their well-being or of a sense of interdependence with the poor, and compares their preference for non-government provision with their lack of faith in the state. Section 8 concludes the overview of elite perceptions of poverty in Bangladesh, raising some broad issues about the treatment of poverty in development research.

2 ELITE PERCEPTIONS OF POVERTY IN HISTORICAL AND COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE

Historians offer us two alternative ways of understanding the contribution of elite perceptions of poverty to public policy. The first focuses on the historical development of Western European welfare states, and stresses the development of a form of social consciousness that encouraged increasingly collective and broad-based forms of welfare provision. Poverty was thought at different times to pose a threat to elites through crime, epidemics and insurrection (Beier 1983). Responses to these threats ranged from the repressive – e.g., the *dépôts de mendicité* in which beggars and vagrants were forced to work in nineteenth century Tuscany – to charity and municipal assistance for the 'deserving' or the 'respectable' poor (Woolf 1986). In one account, a 'logic of collective action' argument is used to explain why parish-based assistance in Western Europe eventually gave way to broader municipal systems of assistance (De Swaan 1988). Elites came to believe that rich and poor were mutually dependent, that poverty could and should be tackled by the state, and that it was in their best interests for action to be taken on behalf of the poor. Welfare provision was seen as increasingly public, state-sponsored and administered, and decreasingly the domain of particularistic, private charitable initiatives.

In these accounts it is elite recognition of self-interest with respect to poverty alleviation which helps to explain the evolution of the welfare state. There is assumed to be a close connection between changes in the objective conditions of the poor and changes in public policy. More recently, with the welfare state no longer seen as the single best solution to welfare provision, historians have begun to argue that such accounts are overly teleological and rooted too deeply in modernisation theory to have much explanatory value (Jones 1996; Daunton 1996). In particular, they may be neither accurate nor conceptually helpful in explaining the complex, non-linear relationship between private charity and state provision (*Introduction* in Barry and Jones, 1991). Rather than seeing the welfare state as the culmination of a progressive march from narrow, often repressive charity for the poor, to a collectivist response to the demands of the working classes, recent approaches emphasise more varied understandings of the motivations behind anti-poverty policy and charity.

This second approach to understanding the effect of elite perceptions of poverty involves a closer examination of elite motivations and of debates about poverty in their specific historical contexts. Elite women's organisations successfully promoted social policy favouring mothers in early twentieth century America (Skocpol 1992), while the 'moral imagination' of the Victorian elite advanced a new focus on the deserving but not the destitute poor (Himmelfarb 1991). Sandra Cavallo's path-breaking work on charity in early modern Turin (1991) emphasises the crucial role played by intra-elite conflicts and discourses – rather than the extent of poverty itself - in shaping the response by municipality and individual donors to poverty. Some such responses,

for example a focus on the situation of poor widows, emerged out of intra-elite debates over patterns of inheritance adversely affecting aristocratic women, rather than any direct concern about poor women.

It becomes clear from these accounts that shifts in perceptions of poverty may be closely linked to shifts in ideas about elite society, and society in general, and therefore part of broader debates about society or gender relations. Indeed, the motivations for changing policies against poverty may not even be located in the actual conditions of the poor, as Himmelfarb has shown. In Victorian Britain, for example, a shift in focus from the 'undeserving' to the 'respectable' poor had little to do with the changing conditions of these groups, whom statistical evidence shows were in fact becoming better-off at this time. Far more important influences were the work of individuals such as Charles Booth, as well as sensationalist pamphlets, purporting to highlight the scandalous and immoral conditions in which even the respectable poor were living, which successfully attracted the attention of reforming elites (Himmelfarb 1991, chapter 4).

One important contribution of these approaches is to show that poverty policy is not necessarily driven by the extent or the effects of poverty. Ideas about poverty vary in different contexts, and understanding contemporary debates around poverty can help explain the motivations for taking action against poverty, and the character of that action. Poverty policy is understood in these accounts to change randomly, not linearly towards a welfare state.

Cavallo situates her research on elites and poverty in Turin within an older tradition, that of moral economy studies. Elite perceptions of poverty can be studied to explore elite-poor relationships, and she views the charitable act as the result of negotiations between rich and poor (Cavallo 1991: 59). Elite perceptions, ideologies and discourses have similarly been themes in other studies of poverty and famine which employ a moral economy framework (e.g. Greenough, 1985; Scott, 1990; Thompson, 1993). A concern in such studies has often been that the perceptions, ideologies and practices of the poor - Scott's 'hidden transcripts' - have tended to be under-researched and poorly understood compared to the ideologies and practices of the elite. The public discourse of the elite is by contrast generally more easily available, and therefore generally better understood.

While it is true that historians have been able to study elite perceptions of poverty in the West, little is known of the perspectives on poverty of developing country elites. Within the development studies field the impetus for studying elite perceptions of poverty comes from an assessment of the shortcomings of poverty research; these include an overemphasis on the technical aspects of poverty (measurement and definition); the tendency to study the poor in isolation from society; and in the neglect of the motivations of the non-poor in enacting or blocking effective anti-poverty policy (Oyen, 1996). John Toye argues a strong case for 'nationalizing the anti-poverty agenda', i.e., for the importance of making anti-poverty agendas nationally relevant, rather than the domain of international institutions (Toye, 1997). Part of the failure of previous attempts to significantly reduce poverty in developing countries can be seen, he argues, as a result of the failure to engage the national political will necessary to deal with poverty. Anti-poverty programmes were framed and implemented without much reference to developing country agendas or concerns, and therefore may have failed to attract the political support essential for their success. In this view, an understanding of how elites in developing countries understand the problem of poverty is an important prerequisite to developing action programmes that have a chance of success.

3 RESEARCHING THE BANGLADESHI ELITE

Some research has been done on sections of the Bangladeshi elite¹, but relatively little is available in the academic literature on elite networks and circulation in Bangladesh. Observers note that 'a very small educated elite, connected by family and friendship, tends to dominate the decision-making process in Bangladesh' (cited in Lewis, Sobhan and Jonsson 1994: 17). Even the most casual of observations confirms the existence of a small and tightly-knit network of prominent people. Within our own sample we discovered that there were three siblings whom we had not initially known to be related to each other: a senior politician, a prominent academic, and a civil servant. 'Everyone knows everyone here' is a phrase commonly used by the elite to describe this circle. This is an elite group highly concentrated in one city, Dhaka², and with relatively weak rural ties (see Siddiqui *et al* 1991; Khan *et al* 1996). In addition to the close-knit nature of this group, many of the elite circulate between elite professional groups. Khan *et al* (1996) notes that 70% of their sample of political elites were in business, with the highest concentration in the two major parties. As we found during our interviews, a member of the elite may be a former minister, a former civil servant, a published academic, and a journalist. An MP could also own a magazine, a manufacturing concern, and an NGO or charity organisation, while being a member of the social elite. That these are not hypothetical examples should indicate the significant degree of homogeneity across elite groups, as well as the ease with which ideas and language can travel between them.

Our interest was in powerful individuals, and covered both direct decision makers and those who exercise indirect influence over decisions through their ideological power. The scope of our study thus extended beyond state (political, civil and military bureaucracy) and business elites, and covered media and social elites, intellectuals, NGO, religious and student leaders. Our interviewees were mostly 'national' elites, but we also interviewed some people living outside of the two main cities (Dhaka and Chittagong), whom we have labelled 'regional elites'. We did not seek direct information on the influence of elite groups' policy. However, given the close-knit nature of elite circles, and the extent of crossover between elite groups, that influence is likely to be particularly strong in Bangladesh.

We selected semi-structured interview formats, and attempted to cover topics such as the extent, nature and causes of poverty; assessments of existing anti-poverty programmes and their implementation; responsibility for anti-poverty action; and the impact on the elite. Hypotheses and specific questions about the gender dimensions of poverty and categories of poor people were introduced later, and we probed further on particular issues such as education, which the pilot interview round had indicated were particularly important to the elite. The tables included in the text below are only indicative of the responses we gathered. Despite our attempts to direct the interviews, many interviewees had their own concerns and did not answer all our questions fully or explicitly. An attempt to review the print media for its content on poverty was abandoned once it became clear that, while virtually no articles were published using the specific terms of 'poverty' and 'poor people', virtually everything which appeared in the press could be viewed as pertinent to our subject. Instead of a comprehensive review, we opted to focus on media coverage of topical events with specific impacts on poor people: the recent cold spell and deaths from illicit alcohol. We also directed discussions towards these and similar events, discussions which were revealing because they helped us get beyond formulaic responses about poverty.

One of the largest obstacles to researching elites in any context is access (Hertz and Imber 1995). In the Bangladesh context this is compounded by the importance the elite assign to personal contacts and limited public access to information about the elite. 'Cold-calling' was not generally a successful tactic, and the field research team spent most of their time making personal contact and arranging meetings. This frequently involved 'pre-interview' interviews for the respondent to vet the researcher. The research team members were selected in part on the basis of their contacts and relationships with individuals and sections of the elite,³ and these strategies of using personal contacts and repeated visits paid off, by reassuring respondents about the nature of the research and the identity of the researchers. Thomas (1995) attributes his success in gaining access to elites by his strategy of offering the respondent the opportunity to 'teach' the researcher, a strategy which also worked in Bangladesh, particularly as the field researchers were all younger than ('junior to') the respondents. The junior status of the field researchers also appears to have had some impact on the interviews themselves. Most respondents treated the interviews as opportunities to explain the issues around poverty to the researchers, and represented their views not as personal opinion but as fact. The 'vetting' procedure, personal contacts, confidential nature of the interviews, and our junior status seem to have reassured our respondents to a great degree, and many were extremely candid as well as generous with their time.

4 ANALYSING PUBLIC DISCOURSES OF POVERTY

The argument in this paper draws largely on the elite's public views on poverty, as expressed in interviews and in certain public contexts such as the media. Members of the elite may hold other, less 'politically correct' views about poverty that they keep private; however, our research strategies seemed to encourage an unusual degree of openness. Here we treat these public expressions not as ideology, nor as reflections of the elite's 'real' beliefs, but as distinctly public modes of thinking and talking about poverty. We limit ourselves here to how poverty is talked about, keeping a clear distinction between discourses and practices, but will show that the way in which the elite talk publicly about poverty should be a practical concern, because it shapes the possibilities for public action on poverty. Scholars of policy discourse have shown how 'framing' of problems to be tackled permits alternatives to be excluded (Apthorpe and Gasper 1996). Our story is very much one of the importance of the 'frames' of the poverty problem in public use, specifically attempting to show that framing the problem as alternately a technical issue of development and a moral issue of private charity excludes issues of politics and conflict.

Two of the idioms in which poverty is discussed by Bangladeshi elites are outlined below, the intention being to show how these converge in important ways. 'Idiom' is used here to denote clusters of ideas, concepts and language, but not holistic systems of thought. The two main ways of talking about poverty are a developmental and a charitable or 'moral economy' idiom. These are distinct in that they appear to derive from different types of knowledge, and give meaning to different aspects of poverty. A developmental idiom is used to talk about the macro conditions of poverty and the identity of Bangladesh as a poor country. The language and concepts used in this idiom derive from academic and policy debates which often originate elsewhere (e.g., international organisations such as the World Bank). Issues discussed within this idiom are models of economic development, comparisons between Bangladesh and other countries' development trajectories, and state and

NGO capacity to provide effective anti-poverty and social development programmes. But members of the elite also talk about poverty as they observe and relate personally to it. Important in this second idiom are elite constructions of their 'traditional' responsibility for the poor, elite commitment to assisting the poor, and the need for social unity in anti-poverty action. While the elite tend to refer explicitly to religious rules and 'historical' practices within this idiom, these are given meaning in part by a recognition that private welfare provision is part of an international agenda far broader than local tradition.

These idioms of poverty come into use in specific contexts, and do not cover the same conceptual territory. Within the idiom of charity, for example, elites have well-developed and clear ideas about responsibility for the poor. When talking about national poverty and development, however, ideas about responsibility for poverty reduction are vague, and elites talk more clearly about capability. These two idioms do not therefore represent two sides – modern and traditional - of the same coin, but weave together to make up the public discourse. These two ways of talking about poverty also rarely represent poles of conflict: instead they support each other, and are frequently mutually justifying. Talking about responsibility within an idiom of charity, for example, is justified in part by neo-liberal emphases on withdrawing the state from direct provision. For our purposes, it is the priority assigned to reducing poverty which is important: here we will attempt to show how these distinct idioms feed into a discussion which reinforces framing poverty as an apolitical issue and one which is only indirectly manageable, effectively assigning poverty a low priority. This public discourse is represented here as fairly homogenous - partly because of limitations of space, but mainly because there seem to be larger areas of consensus over these issues among the Bangladeshi elite than in other countries. Some challenges to the consensus are discussed, but crucially, these serve to illustrate how perspectives apparently emanating from very different ideological positions can actually converge to produce similar discursive outcomes.

It was in thinking about the conceptualisation of responsibility for the poor and poverty that we first noticed significant contradictions within public debates. The conceptualisation of poverty as a problem on a vast national scale did not appear to fit with allocations of responsibility favouring individualised, personal responses to the problem. This prompted us to think about the categories and meanings of poverty and the poor being employed in different contexts. In the response to vast national poverty, for example, we started to see that an idea of national poverty was being met with a response which the elite felt was publicly appropriate – that of personal concern and charity for individual poor people, and which they could explain with reference to 'tradition'. We started to look more closely at language, the sources of knowledge about poverty, and at differences within the elite. A contrast began to emerge between styles of discourse on national poverty and on poor people as individuals and communities. The semi-structured interview format we initially employed was inevitably focused on assessments of poverty as a national problem, but our interview transcripts began to fill up with detailed anecdotes and accounts of personal encounters with poor people. The elite's somewhat limited knowledge about poverty seemed to derive from distinct sources: academic and policy-based accounts of the macro conditions of development on the one hand, and a form of practical knowledge of the poor, and their relationship with the elite, on the other.

5 THE DEVELOPMENTAL IDIOM

5.1 National Poverty

Within the developmental idiom, the object of discussion was usually an understanding of national poverty, with two meanings: 1) an understanding of the objective condition of mass poverty within the nation, and 2) a symbolic significance as part of national identity in relation to the outside world. Discussions of national poverty drew on development orthodoxies such as poverty lines (a tool with which the Bangladeshi elite are familiar, see Table 1), international comparisons which the elite themselves are capable of making, and the representation of Bangladesh in the international media. These tools of comparison and measurement seem to be the elite's major sources of knowledge of national poverty. Poverty professionals - state elites with direct involvement in welfare, education and planning, NGO leaders, and development experts - tended to speak exclusively in terms of national poverty, and tended to offer the interviewers 'information' (including literature) instead of presenting their views as subjective or personal. Most other discussions featured broad, brush-stroke assessments of the problem, characterised in many cases by their nebulous nature. Despite pockets of detailed knowledge of poverty-related issues, proposed solutions to poverty often seemed vague, mainly because discussions of poverty alleviation had a marked tendency to elide into discussions of development more generally.

Table 1: Determinants of poverty/ characteristics of the poor

| Determinants mentioned | Number of responses | |
|--|----------------------------|------|
| Below the poverty line/level | 18 | 20% |
| Nutritional/ insufficient food/ basic needs | 18 | 20% |
| Homelessness/ landlessness/ lack of assets | 13 | 15% |
| Low income/ unemployment | 12 | 14% |
| Lack of education/ consciousness | 8 | 9% |
| Inability to defend rights/ dependency/ fatalism | 7 | 8% |
| Lack of access to safe water/ sanitation | 6 | 7% |
| Other | 6 | 7% |
| Total | 88 | 100% |

That some ideas about national poverty derive from global academic and policy discourses is evident from the language with which they are expressed. The poverty line or level, 'basic needs' and nutritional status were definitions and measurements used in 40% of responses (see Table 2). Although the success of local NGOs and micro-credit institutions such as the Grameen Bank have probably meant a two-way traffic between Bangladesh and the outside world in ideas and language of poverty, the penetration of the donor language of development is prominent. One business leader spoke of 'a two-pronged attack on poverty'⁴, the need for 'an enabling environment' to be provided by government and PPP (purchasing power parity). He then proceeded to give an assessment of the Grameen Bank, its institutional status, and its effectiveness as a programme for alleviating

poverty. Others not involved in development work displayed equal familiarity with 'technical' debates, and some cited specific World Bank and UN organisation reports to support their arguments. The elite English language newspapers frequently carry lengthy features detailing development projects, with several columnists' contributions devoted entirely to such issues. The language of 'human resource development' (universal primary education, non-formal education) is also conspicuous, and the concept of 'gender dimensions of poverty' has certainly filtered through to the elite, although this may be most evident at the level of language (the 'double burden on women', 'intra-household distribution', etc). Language seems important, however: the extent to which poverty alleviation and development ideas use English-language terms is striking – suggesting strongly that many of the concepts in use have no Bengali equivalents in common use⁵. A clear example of this is the term 'development' itself: usually translated into Bangla as *unnayan*, it has been claimed that this was a Sanskritised term, reinvented to capture (imported) ideas of economic development and modernisation (UBINIG 1995). *Unnoti*, the term for development apparently more commonly used by the Bangladeshi poor, has more local connotations of self-reliance and social uplift (Farida Akhter, personal communication).

Ideas about national poverty also contribute to the content of Bangladeshi national identity. The contrast between the present-day international image of Bangladesh and the mythical *Sonar Bangla* (Golden Bengal) is repeatedly raised by elites to highlight the gap between party political rhetoric and reality. The myth of Bengali agrarian prosperity and abundance may bear slight relation to historical accounts of calamities and exploitation (Greenough 1985). It has, however, been an important construct for Bangladeshi national identity, carrying an implicit political agenda based around the removal of exploitative Pakistani colonialism and in particular, providing 'the dream which fuelled the imagination of those who struggled for a free and independent Bangladesh' (Guhathakurta 1997:1). Many members of the elite now view the idea of *Sonar Bangla* as little more than a political catch-phrase, and are far more attuned to the international image of Bangladesh. Although they resist one-dimensional representations of Bangladesh as 'only poor', the elite are themselves fully aware of the prevalence of poverty in Bangladesh, with 71% putting the proportion of the poor at over 50%, against only 4% claiming it to be less than 50% (see Table 2). That is, the idea that Bangladesh is one of the poorest nations in the world has been accepted, and representations of Bangladesh as such are considered to be unnecessarily biased and unfair, but not inaccurate.

Table 2: The proportion of the poor among the population of Bangladesh

| Responses | Number of responses | |
|--------------------------|----------------------------|--------|
| Statistics are unhelpful | 4 | (5%) |
| No clear answer | 11 | (14%) |
| Large proportion | 5 | (6%) |
| Less than 25% | 2 | (3%) |
| 25-49% | 1 | (1%) |
| 50-74% | 31 | (39%) |
| 75-99% | 25 | (32%) |
| All | 79 | (100%) |

The recognition that Bangladesh is one of the poorest countries in the world raises interesting contrasts with elites in other contexts, particularly where poverty was perceived as threatening the wealth or international stature of the nation. The prevalence of poverty in rich countries has been viewed variously as a drain on national wealth, an obstacle to national productivity (Innes 1996), or as a national security threat (for example, English concerns about the 'state of the race' during the Boer War (Himmelfarb 1991; Rosenthal 1986). Can such concerns have any resonance for the Bangladeshi elite? Perhaps not, given that in this context 'poverty' is not only about poor people, but is a concept with application to the country as a whole. Comparison with elite perceptions in other poor countries may help us to better understand whether or not poverty in poor countries can be seen as a significant national security or efficiency threat. In addition, as is suggested in section 7.2, the elite have a weak sense of interdependence with the poor. Perhaps, also, it is important to keep in mind the point made by Toye (1997): that anti-poverty programmes in developing countries have tended not to emerge from national concerns and agendas, but from those of the international organisations. It is plausible that Bangladeshi elites have a weaker sense of poverty policy 'ownership' than they have of 'owning' broader development policy agendas, in which they have more of a stake.

5.2 Promoting Productivity

Most respondents gave a range of solutions to poverty ranging from indirect and general (political accountability, the promotion of nationalistic feeling) to directly productivity-enhancing (micro-credit, employment creation). Education dominated, however, as the single best direct means of reducing poverty, and was rarely rejected as a solution. This faith in education draws on an understanding that education promotes 'awareness' or 'consciousness', the lack of which is a major cause of overpopulation, poor health practices, fatalism, and the 'inability to think beyond tomorrow' ascribed to poor people. Education is the first step, to many respondents, because without it, the poor cannot make use of the opportunities available to them. It is thus a fairly simple solution to a wide range of poverty-related problems.

The stress on education is also at times explicitly based on models of development drawn from other Asian countries, in particular the East and Southeast Asian 'tiger economies', as well as Sri Lanka and Kerala. It is significant that what were at times detailed explanations of how these models could be applied in the Bangladesh context omitted mention of land reform and redistribution, although agricultural investment was raised. The lessons drawn from these Asian models may be summarised as high literacy levels having the potential to transform the burdens of large, intelligent populations into assets:

(The national priority is) to turn a burden into wealth. Population just by itself is a burden, but a trained population is wealth. And given the needs of the information age, the 21st century technology revolution and all that, education, human resource development, skills training is really the only answer (Editor, English daily newspaper).

It is significant that Western countries with their welfare states were excluded from this discussion on national poverty. One member of the social elite claimed that

Ultimately it is government (which is responsible for poverty). I am not advocating a welfare state though, that didn't work. What has to be done is to create an environment which allows people to develop themselves.

The welfare state model has almost no relevance for the Bangladeshi elite. Even where the language of direct provision and safety nets is used, it is about *promoting*, not *protecting*, the capabilities of the poor:

Economic growth has never taken care of poverty anyway. Particularly with a massive poor population like in Bangladesh. We'll have to have a safety-net, definitely.

In what sense a safety-net?

Well for example, government will always need to invest a lot of money in skills training and human resource development. And this human resource development programme will have to be a government programme, massive government investment. Private sector will not be interested in coming in in a big way. So economic growth will pull the country upwards, but for the bottom, for the 45% of the population to jump onto that wagon of growth, there will have to be a push up from the bottom. Which means human resource development, training, a massive investment in education. And micro-credit. Micro-credit is that push from the bottom - you can picture this as a huge rocket going up towards the sky and people are not being able to reach it, and you give it a push from the bottom, and then they will reach it (Newspaper editor).

The imagery used here is instructive. Removing poverty is about increasing productivity, and this frame excludes any options as short-term, crude or immediate as handing over resources to the poor. The passage above implies that Bangladesh will not (should not) attempt to emulate older Western models of development. Although the scale of the poor population will require an extra 'push', interventions designed to increase productivity, such as micro-credit, will (should) take the place of welfarism. A government minister spoke similarly of Bangladesh being in the 'pre take-off stage'. This dynamism contrasts sharply with the image of handouts: 'government', it was asserted, 'cannot feed everyone'. The announcement of pensions for the rural elderly received mixed reviews - praised in some quarters as evidence of the Prime Minister's personal concern for the poor, it was derided in others as tokenistic and for political patronage⁶. An attempt to unearth explicitly moral distinctions between 'deserving' and 'undeserving' groups revealed that these distinctions were considered less salient criteria than that of 'productive potential'. Most responses which ranked groups on the priorities for income assistance selected 'productive' groups (marginal farmers, landless labourers, rickshaw-pullers) over 'unproductive' groups (widows and other female household heads, the disabled, the elderly, prostitutes, beggars, children, etc.). One respondent said that although it seemed callous, this was a pragmatic response, as these groups could contribute to the economy.

This reluctance to discuss state-sponsored social security was not matched by universal faith in economic growth alone as a solution to poverty, with a third of respondents stressing that growth was necessary but not sufficient (see Table 3). A somewhat vaguely conceived notion of pro-poor growth seemed to inform this 'necessary but not sufficient' view of the contribution of economic growth.

Table 3: Will economic growth solve the poverty problem in time?

| Responses | Number of responses | |
|--|----------------------------|------|
| Yes | 23 | 33% |
| Necessary but not sufficient/ potentially | 23 | 33% |
| Ambivalent | 2 | 3% |
| No | 13 | 19% |
| Other | 9 | 13% |
| Total | 70 | 100% |

Framing poverty alleviation as exclusively about the promotion rather than the protection of livelihoods meant it proved difficult to direct discussions towards forms of social assistance not seen as directly enhancing productivity. Even where the terms of the discussion emphasised 'safety nets' and direct provision for the poor, it became clear that the most direct intervention which would be countenanced was skills training, as in the editor's views cited above. Where mentioned, ideas about state social security were rejected in favour of the provision of 'enabling environments'. The key enabler is education, which appeared as the solution to a wide range of ills: fatalism and laziness, high fertility, a lack of 'consciousness' or 'awareness' of the causes of poverty on the part of the poor, the inability of the poor to plan or manage their incomes and so on. Significantly, apart from education, few direct interventions for specific groups of the vulnerable poor were mentioned. Meaningful distinctions drawn between poverty and absolute poverty were rare. There were slight indications that some groups of the poor, e.g., the disabled, may be entitled to welfare provision, but on probing it became clear once again that this should take the form of enabling them to work through the provision of skills training. Women-headed households were also mentioned on occasion, but without reference to income transfers or safety nets: education and training, and micro-credit were the preferred solutions for these groups. Models of gender relations – specifically a belief among male elites that widows and other single women are assisted by their communities - clearly influence this position (see below). But the important point for our purposes is that a frame which keeps productivity in tight focus excludes groups of the poor whom education, training and even micro-credit are unlikely to help in the short term. The remarkable entrepreneurship displayed by poor Bangladeshi women, in particular, may strengthen the focus on productivity, at the expense of one on vulnerability.

Contrasts with Victorian elite perceptions of poverty illustrate this point. Himmelfarb (1991) documents how the public (elite) imagination at the end of the 19th century became dominated by perceptions of the 'respectable' labouring poor as vulnerable - who despite seeking their independence, were liable to sink into the ranks of the paupers or 'undeserving' poor. An emphasis on the *vulnerability* of the livelihoods of the - productive or otherwise - poor, perhaps even more crucial in the Bangladesh context, seems to be excluded by emphases on the homogeneity of the poor (see below) and on productivity. In addition, this stress entirely excludes recognition that the experience of poverty may be marked by life stages during which productivity is not a consideration.

Perceptions of successes and failures in social policy clearly inform elite conceptualisations of the problem (see Smith 1997: 998). Recent rises in primary enrolment rates may have encouraged the elite to see a solution to poverty within education. This was one area where our respondents gave their government both credit and responsibility⁷. Similarly, a record of local success makes micro-credit another popular solution, and also one which appears to fit it in with the idea of safety nets as essentially about productivity. In sum, tried and tested solutions to low productivity enacted mainly by the government and the NGOs are favoured forms of public policy, but the links between problems and solutions are often poorly comprehended. Public discussion of 'national poverty' strategies seems to be rooted in these successes, but the appearance of consensus among the elite may mask a lack of clarity in thinking about the problems.

5.3 Poverty Alleviation = Development

This lack of clarity can be explained in part by the fusing of discussions about poverty alleviation with debates about 'development' generally. As suggested above, the idea of national poverty has symbolic significance as part of national identity, and reference to national poverty often evokes a sense of national dysfunction more generally. What this means is that the elite, while fully aware of the image of Bangladesh as extremely poor, are themselves attuned to other problems are of more immediate concern to themselves, and as they perceive it, to the long-term future of the country. A link between poverty narrowly defined and development more broadly is justifiably drawn, and the elite shift easily into discussions of development as a result. Poverty is by no means a discrete issue, and solutions espoused as poverty reducing may in fact take their primary justification from an altogether different objective.

Given the broad significance of the idea of national poverty and the extent of poverty in Bangladesh, it is no surprise that discussions about poverty overlapped considerably with discussions of national priorities (see Table 4). This is not a radical finding, nor are the elite wrong to view poverty alleviation as part of a broader development project. This does, however, seem important when viewed from the angle of the political possibilities for anti-poverty interventions. Can poverty become a high priority when it is conceptually inseparable from a host of other high priorities?

Most individual interviewees gave separate, different responses to the questions about national priorities and the causes of poverty, although a handful claimed these were identical issues. The overlap between the two categories may therefore suggest an element of arbitrariness as to whether the problem fell into the category of 'national priorities', or of the 'causes of poverty'.

The most obvious explanation for this overlap between the perceived causes of poverty and the national priorities for government to tackle is that the elite believe that the causes of poverty, and therefore poverty itself, is (or should be) the national government's priority, and that these are, therefore, the same issues. At one level it would seem to be true that 'poverty' is a priority problem, according to the elite. However, the term 'poverty' often seems to symbolise far more than simply a large proportion of people below the poverty line: it at times evokes an entire nexus of ideas about the obstacles to development. These include natural disasters, historical legacies of colonisation, poor governance, religious orthodoxy, 'backwardness' and overpopulation.

Prioritising 'poverty', therefore, is at one level indistinct from prioritising 'development'. Few people in Bangladesh will argue that 'development' is not a priority.

Table 4: Elite perceptions of national priorities and the causes of poverty

| Responses | National priorities (number of times the response was given) | Causes of poverty (number of times the response was given) |
|--|---|---|
| Motivational factors among the poor themselves (awareness, religious orthodoxy, fatalism) | 7 (4%) | 16 (9%) |
| Education/skills/human resources | 39 (22%) | 34 (19%) |
| Political factors | 22 (13%) | 23 (13%) |
| Economic management | 42 (24%) | 47 (26%) |
| Structural inequalities in access to resources, including 'poverty' | 30 (17%) | 24 (13%) |
| Overpopulation and pressure on the land | 14 (8%) | 22 (12%) |
| Natural disasters, land erosion | 3 (2%) | 6 (3%) |
| Women's rights | 2 (1%) | 0 (0%) |
| Law & order | 17 (10%) | 0 (0%) |
| Donor dependence, colonialism | 0 (0%) | 10 (6%) |
| Total | 176 (100%) | 182 (100%) |

Some members of the Bangladeshi elite would, however, contest the model of development being pursued:

The general Bangladesh economy itself is very dependent in many ways, the whole type of production and growth, the whole industrial and commercial sector has not been of the type of growth that one needs ... When you're trying to develop an economy, that should not be within a system which is going to exacerbate poverty, keep the country in future insecurity – see what happened in Southeast Asia (NGO Leader).

Such challenges to the dominant discourse come mainly from a section of the NGO leadership, intellectuals and politicians from the left. 'Structures', the need to change 'social relations of production' through land reform, and criticisms of service-providing NGOs tended to feature in these discussions. Interestingly, however, some accounts combined radical critiques with references to traditional elite responsibilities and rural social systems. The dominant models of development are understood to exacerbate poverty, as in this account of why discussions of 'safety nets' are inherently flawed:

Why design a system that people fall out of in the first place? Isn't that the point? That is unacceptable, just accepting the negative outcomes of development, justifying developmental

activities. What needs to be done is to strengthen the community, so that they can support their own (NGO/Advocacy group leader).

A poverty focus is itself constructed as problematic, as it fosters dependence and does not promote the capabilities of the people. NGOs are criticised as having 'capitalised on the poverty issues', and perhaps in reaction to such criticism, some NGO leaders stressed that their organisational focus was empowerment, rather than poverty reduction through service provision.

Similar debates are well developed within NGO and academic circles and while they find faint echoes among other members of the elite, seem to be increasingly marginalised. A strong emphasis on poverty is within these perspectives considered suspect for a number of excellent reasons: it downplays the issue of power; it is to an extent an imported perspective on the problems of Bangladesh, with imported solutions; and it belies the capability and agency of the poor themselves. Even more marginalised within these challenges is a belief in traditional support systems, and a corresponding suspicion of state involvement in supporting the poor. Despite their position as challengers, these views support the dominant discourse by downplaying the centrality of poverty. Suspicion of the state's motives means that the dominant position of ambivalence towards direct public action often seems to go unchallenged.

6 THE CHARITABLE IDIOM OF POVERTY

The second idiom within which the elite spoke about poverty was personal and charitable. The implicit focus was not so much 'national poverty' as 'traditional' elite responsibility for individuals and groups of poor people. Most respondents seemed confident talking about poverty in this way, and spoke more concretely about what poverty meant and how it should be alleviated. Many interviews featured detailed descriptions and anecdotal evidence about the nature of poor people, based on actual encounters and relationships, so that discussions drew less on a form of practical knowledge of poor people rather than an imagined poor population of huge proportions. Three issues are introduced in this section: how this responsibility is conceptualised and captured in language; perceptions of the nature of poor people; and the mediation of practical knowledge of the poor by understandings of Bengali Muslim tradition. The section concludes with a discussion of an area in which the developmental and the charitable idioms converge.

6.1 'Traditional' Responsibilities for the Poor

Themes of private, personalised provision for narrow welfare communities were present in many discussions. Public discourses of responsibility, as suggested above, were important in unearthing an arena of discussion that the idiom of national poverty failed to bring out. Table 5 suggests that there is some ambivalence about the role of the state. It should be noted that even when 'government alone' was allocated ultimate responsibility for poverty, this was usually seen as the responsibility to provide enabling environments, and not to direct resources towards the poor. In part, the elite explain this emphasis on non-state responsibility with reference to notions of Bengali Muslim tradition, with a focus on personalised, voluntary provision for 'one's own people'.

Examples of how the elite could have an impact on poverty by helping out 'their people' were frequent, and took many forms. The wife of an industrialist, head of a charity herself, considered her husband's strategy of recruiting factory employees from 'his village' to be an excellent example of the principle that 'charity begins at home'. A former government Secretary and university Vice-Chancellor detailed proposals from English language newspapers on his idea of 'Micro-credit from Micro-sources' – that all rich people should set up personal micro-credit schemes in their home villages, to be personally overseen, and to involve personal vetting of suitably able but poor people. These proposals received widespread praise.

Table 5: Who is ultimately responsible for poverty alleviation?

| | National | | Regional | | Non-state | | State | | All | |
|--|-----------------|-------------|-----------------|-------------|------------------|-------------|--------------|-------------|------------|-------------|
| Government alone | 20 | 38% | 0 | 0% | 13 | 30% | 7 | 35% | 20 | 31% |
| Government & others (NGOs, individuals, society) | 23 | 43% | 10 | 91% | 22 | 50% | 11 | 55% | 33 | 52% |
| Others (NGOs, individuals, society) | 10 | 19% | 1 | 9% | 9 | 20% | 2 | 10% | 11 | 17% |
| Total | 53 | 100% | 11 | 100% | 44 | 100% | 20 | 100% | 64 | 100% |

The strength of the charitable impulse for one's own community is not restricted to the elite's private dealings with the poor; Members of Parliament also couch their responsibilities towards constituents in this idiom of personal responsibility:

I'm not a very rich woman ... my responsibilities to my constituents and also to my people - I cannot provide for or meet all of their needs, and all that they ask for. In that sense, I am also lacking in money, because I cannot afford to give them everything they want. You see I am trying in my most humble way, with whatever I can from my own resources give them. Sometimes I do work for them, I give them.

Other politicians talk of 'their' villages, and indicate that their political duties are conceived of as very much about bringing resources to their 'home' districts. MPs not directly involved in poverty alleviation or development programmes spoke almost exclusively in this idiom of personal charity, and rarely mentioned their role as national policy makers. Women were most likely to draw on their experiences of dealing with domestic servants, and to assert that their practices of helping their servants, particularly through educating their children and supporting them in times of crisis, was a valid means of alleviating poverty:

Privately, we do a lot, hospital foundations, donations, but how much can you cover? We start from our house, with our servants. They are very poor, we educate their children, assist them first. If every house had to do this, it would be so much better (Businesswoman).

Exceptions exist, but observations of how domestic servants are generally treated within rich households reveal a far less rosy picture⁸. The elite's relationships with their servants reveal vestiges of rural dependency relationships transferred to the urban setting, with many household servants brought from householder's home villages, and in firmly non-contractual relationships with their 'employers'. These relationships are important because they are some of the closest relationships the elite have with poor people.

Personal experience of assisting the poor appears to prove its value to the elite. A former civil servant recounted a story about a poor man who had been trying to migrate to Dhaka for a job, but had been cheated out of the job and his savings. Our interviewee gave this man the money to get himself back to his village, the moral of the story being that 'if we had more social responsibility like that, then it would be alright'. When asked to make comparisons between two incidents that occurred during the interview process, involving deaths from illicit alcohol and from cold weather, the responses repeatedly highlighted the desirability of personal provision. Deaths from illicit alcohol were usually deemed to be the fault of the law enforcement agencies, and therefore the responsibility of the state to prevent. The deaths from cold weather, by contrast, were understood as an act of God, and rich society was held jointly responsible with government for helping the victims:

Death from cold happens every year. Poor people live from hand to mouth, sleep in the street under the open sky, how can they afford warm clothes? Government alone is not responsible, we who live in the five-storied buildings should deliver old warm clothes to them ... In the case of alcohol deaths I think the likelihood of such an incident remained in the knowledge of the police as they allowed that illicit trade. I don't accuse the total government, rather the concerned law and order restoration authority neglected their authority. This is preventable by strict enforcement of chain of order and sincerity. Death from cold is really painful. There should be distinctive government plans for preventing such an inhuman incident each year. We noticed various organisations, parties, government, individuals distributed warm clothes when they got informed of these deaths through the newspapers. This help was great for the cold-stricken poor people (Religious leader).

When talking publicly about poverty within this idiom, the emphasis is firmly on the responsibility of the elite to assist the poor, rather than on the outcomes of that assistance. An illustration of this emphasis is in the response to the cold weather in January of 1998. The elite media, at least, appeared to consider the names of those who had made donations to the Prime Minister's Relief Fund more newsworthy than the actual suffering⁹. Questioned on the impact of these well-publicised acts of charity, the elite praised the response, and generally considered it adequate. There were no suggestions from our respondents that the government could have co-ordinated a more comprehensive relief effort. The two such demands for co-ordinated state action made in the newspaper editorials reviewed were counter-balanced by calls on the 'affluent people of society to come in aid of the distressed specially those who are suffering from severe cold' made by representatives of government (The Daily Star and The Independent 24 January 1998).

The sense that the elite held personal social and moral responsibility for groups of the poor, particularly those from their home villages/districts, was pronounced. The failure of members of the elite, particularly the

'nouveau riche', to fulfil this responsibility towards the poor was more severely and frequently condemned than the failure of successive governments to make inroads into poverty. Phrases such as 'elite failure', and the lack of a 'moral elite' were used; philanthropy was generally deemed to be a dying cause, and the 'new elite' were generally singled out for these failures. These themes take their meaning very largely from a particular reading of Bengali tradition, in which *zamindars* made direct provision for 'their' poor, particularly in times of crisis, and also built schools and hospitals. Elite women, in particular, are expected to continue this tradition:

The tradition of charitable work in which I am involved has always been with moneyed people here - not all moneyed people all of the time, but some. I can keep giving, myself, starting with my servants and their families - we always take care of the whole family, and people generally do help their servants. But very few people go out to the slums, and help those in the slums.

Why do some wealthy people help the poor and not others?

It is a social problem - those who feel for the country do help. Some people spend thousands of dollars going to *Hajj* and all that, but never think of opening a school. Look at my father-in-law, who helps his entire village. My husband's company is full of people from the village - they always get first priority with jobs. We are always looking after the village - after all, charity begins at home.

Is a solution to the problem of poverty more philanthropy?

I think so. But things are changing. When I used to live in my parents' house, there were always some poor old women, widows and people who used to eat at each of the family's houses every day. They would come in and have their rice, and maybe do some work. These were genuine beggars. But nowadays the beggars are all professionals who have the help of the authorities, with the police taking a percentage of their earnings. One shouldn't give money to professional beggars at all.

The effects of the private charitable activities of elite women on public anti-poverty policy have been the subject of much historical study (Himmelfarb 1991; Lewis 1996; Skocpol 1992). Many references to the philanthropic tradition of Bengal were idealistic, and spoke in favour of close personal ties in structuring poverty alleviation efforts. Others were less idealistic, focusing on the benefits to the elite from helping the poor:

Where we talked about elites in Bangladesh it has historically been in the context of feudal Bangladesh, where the feudal lords were preserving the poor people for the taxation, if not this year, then next year. Now the elites in Bangladesh are not really feudal, but more mercantile, bureaucratic, political people, who do not have the same kind of necessity as the feudal lords had to do. So they would be less likely than the feudal lords to look after the problems of the poor or anything like that. The elites are now as much dependent on the poor as much as it impinges on their conscience. That when I am eating well and going to sleep it would feel better if everyone else was doing the same than if everyone else is not doing the same (Businessman).

Still others pointed out that the weakness of ties between an increasingly urban elite and the rural poor were making this tradition die:

It was an old Bengal tradition, a subcontinental tradition, helping the poor stand on their own feet.

Is this tradition dying out?

We're not in the villages any more, the gulf between us and the rural people is becoming much much wider. Formerly you would see that on the Eid day, almost everyone would rush to the villages, but now it's only those of the lower economic strata, those who have links to the rural areas, those who still get their share of crops of rice.

Some members of the elite were aware that the tradition of *zamindari* philanthropy had few Bengali Muslim representatives, as *zamindars* were mainly Hindu. However, Islam also provides clear guidelines about provision for the poor, and religious obligations such as *zakat* (Islamic tax on wealth) and feeding the poor at Eid festivals were frequently invoked. On occasion this gave rise to contradictory positions: while very little support was given to the idea that taxes should be raised for more poverty alleviation programmes, mostly on the basis that taxes are not collected (see Table 8), it was frequently suggested that *zakat* collection could be institutionalised to provide for the poor¹⁰. It seems plausible that the elite believe that such funds were less likely to be misappropriated, but also that fulfilling religious obligations towards the poor was more likely to appeal to the elite than state tax collections. In nineteenth and early twentieth century France, Catholic as well as liberal elites opposed to institutionalising the 'right to assistance' made precisely these claims: state assistance programmes, it was successfully argued for many decades, threatened 'both the spontaneity and the interpersonal character of the act of giving' (Smith 1997: 1002). Notions of the virtues of charity, it seems, contribute to a reluctance to allow the state to appropriate this role as providers for the poor. The positive appraisal of NGOs, on the one hand, and the discussion of their shortcomings, on the other, also has clear links with the perceptions of traditional charity. These issues will be discussed below.

6.2 The Deserving and Undifferentiated Poor

One implication of the emphasis on charity is that the poor should be deserving. Fortunately for the proponents of charity, there appear to be few models of the undeserving or dangerous poor, other than professional beggars, who are not believed to be 'genuinely poor'. This was matched by a reluctance to differentiate among groups of the poor. When asked to categorise the poor, or to prioritise them in order of need, the elite were resistant, often on moral grounds. This resistance seems to emanate in part from the desire to represent Bangladesh as ethnically homogenous, and in part from an emphasis on the lack of caste or strict class divisions in Bangladeshi society. For whatever reasons, the poor were generally perceived as universally deserving. This point is more important than it might seem. In other contexts, e.g., the nineteenth century English Poor Laws, the poor were categorised as 'deserving' and 'undeserving', and allocated direct assistance and punitive measures accordingly (Squires 1990: 94). Changes in elite perceptions of types of poor people have frequently prompted radical welfare reforms and extensions (Himmelfarb 1991).

It could be argued that the Bangladeshi elite do have implicit categories of the poor for assistance, according to whether or not they are 'their' moral community (from their home district, or an employee, etc.). But the genuine poor are universally constructed as unthreatening and generally honest people, struggling for simple respectability. As will be seen below, the poor are not considered to be a threat to the elite, and this is attributed to their inherently moral nature:

I do not connect (the law and order situation) with poverty, because the majority of the poor people are law-abiding ... you cannot generalise that we have many poor people so the law and order situation is deteriorating. No, there is no such connection. The poor people would like to have an honest living. These people who migrate from rural areas, they take to rickshaw-pulling, hawking, domestic service and all kinds of jobs. They are used to having a respectable living with hard physical labour. When they fail to do that, they will start begging (Government Secretary).

The argument above against a connection between poverty and crime is on the basis that the poor are essentially 'honest', seeking a 'respectable living with hard physical labour'. The contrast between this perception of the poor and that of the elite in early twentieth century Uttar Pradesh is instructive. In Uttar Pradesh 'the *shudra* poor were the objects both of scorn and suspicion of their social superiors and they were seen as virtual outcasts and as a lowly, volatile, riffraff, floating, rootless population' (Gooptu 1997: 888). In the UP case, the poor became the object of resettlement programmes designed to remove them from town centres and side-step the public health threat they were expected to pose. Beier highlights the importance of a 'literature of roguery' – popular accounts of the underworld of beggars and tramps – in developing the elite pressure for state action on poverty in fifteenth and sixteenth century England (1983: 16). By contrast, the poor traditionally appeared in classical Bengali literature within themes of pastoral beauty and rural idylls, although replaced more recently against a backdrop of rural crisis by motifs of dispossession and peasant resistance (Beck and Bose 1995). This literature has rarely failed, however, to represent the poor sympathetically, whichever political position was taken. There seem to be few indigenous models of the undeserving poor for the Bangladeshi elite to draw upon.

Although categories based on whether or not the poor are deserving are largely absent, descriptions of the poor sometimes revealed normative judgements which the elite did not seem to consider moral distinctions. After lengthy discussions, in some cases, concepts like the 'gendered dimensions of poverty' and 'intra-household distribution' began to slip away to reveal that for male elites, at least, the operational model of 'poor person' was that of a poor man with dependants. One male MP explicitly stated that

Women are not independent, they are part of the main. Because they are somebody's wife and somebody's mother. Poverty does not differentiate between male and female, it has to be a family. There is no male and female poverty, there is just poverty for the people of this country. And a female is part of a family, as a wife as a mother as a grandmother.

That poor people are generally understood by male elites to be male householders was also made clear in the instance described above, where small farmers, landless labourers and rickshaw-pullers, explicitly treated by

respondents as male categories, were selected as targets for income assistance, on the grounds that they were productive.

6.3 A 'Social Movement' against Poverty

One theme in which the issues of national poverty and personal responsibility seemed to converge was in discussions of the nature of the national effort required to alleviate poverty. Many members of the elite argued that a broad 'social movement' was required to tackle the problem (see Table 5), with three basic features. The first was that this was not a matter for conflictual class politics, nor for democratic political competition. Collective action was required, but not necessarily on the part of the poor. What was required was individual commitment, particularly of elites. In some accounts, present politicians' lack of commitment to reducing poverty was attributed to the lack of 'nationalistic feeling' or 'feeling for the country' on the part of elites generally. 'Doing politics with the plight of the people' was one frequent assessment of political competition over poverty. This view partly reflects a perception that anti-poverty policies are overridden with each in-coming government, but also a belief that the elite are not genuinely committed to poverty alleviation, or national development generally:

The most important (cause of poverty) is that we are not nationalistic, we don't have any feeling for the country, we are very selfish.

Who are 'we'?

Selfish people, those who are in power. The people who do politics. Political persons are not doing politics for the country's sake (Jatiya Party MP).

The category of 'political factors' in Table 5 contains a large proportion of claims about a lack of commitment to poverty alleviation, and the use of poverty as a political football between parties. There is a strong sense among the elite - and this includes many of the political elite - that poverty is an issue which rises (or should rise) above the realm of democratic party political competition. Reasons for such a united social front include that 'you can't expect the government to do everything' or that 'government alone cannot cope with such a vast problem', and at times draw on neo-liberal ideas about the desirability of downsizing the state.

The second feature of this 'social movement' was that its contents and the mechanisms by which it might work to reduce poverty are unclear. Some suggestions were that the media could be used to channel information which would 'motivate people into a social movement against poverty'. But the stress on social unity is itself significant, given the historic importance of ethnic divisions in Bengali/Bangladeshi nationalism (Mohsin 1996). The association of ethnicity and/or religion with class in political conflicts has historically been strong in the region, perhaps even to the extent that the elite fail to identify the potential for political divisions which are not communal in nature. The language of a unified moral community 'against' poverty appears to derive in part from the emphasis on social action against poverty within Islam, and on the idea of *Umma*, which denotes an undivided community. This idea of a social movement also clearly takes some inspiration from perceptions of the liberation struggle, in which rich and poor pulled together successfully to overcome another national evil¹¹. As Hashemi (1996) reminds us, Bangladesh has a rich tradition of 'civil society', often overlooked by outsiders

in the current enthusiasm over NGOs. The elite appear to draw on this tradition in thinking about the responsibility for action against poverty.

Thirdly, this 'social movement' does not amount to a civil society movement to demand action from the state. Within this social movement it is not 'the poor' who are expected to push collectively for anti-poverty action, but 'all of society', 'everyone', or the 'educated, conscious people'. Leaders of NGOs involved in service provision concurred more with ideas that action against poverty should be social rather than party political or class-based. NGO leaders and activists involved in 'demand-building' or consciousness-raising emphasised their role in building poor people's capacities to make demands on the government, i.e., political action. These differences within the elite NGO community reflect broader internal debates over the proper roles of NGOs (Lewis *et al*, 1994). Intellectuals were also more likely to emphasise that poverty alleviation was by its nature political, and tended to assign responsibility to the state, rather than society as a whole. A well-developed critique has emerged on the role of the service-providing NGOs as a result of these differences.

In sum, poverty reduction is viewed as ideally a moral issue for society, and above the realm of politics, a position strengthened by neo-liberal views of state action. Party political competition is disallowed as a motivation for poverty alleviation: the elite instead hope for stronger personal commitment to reducing poverty, with morality as the motivation. It is interesting that within these discussions a number of interviewees questioned the value of democracy itself, and appeared to regard it as an unfavourable condition for poverty alleviation. The preference for apolitical approaches to poverty alleviation has clear links with the ambivalence towards state responsibility for poverty discussed above.

7 THE LACK OF URGENCY

Neither of the idioms employed by the Bangladeshi elite in talking about poverty contribute to a sense of urgency. While very different in their intellectual and linguistic origins, these idioms converge on a key debate: that the state should limit its direct provision for the poor. This is based less on a sense that direct provision will breed dependency than that resources could be better spent in enhancing the productivity of the poor. A frame of productivity and, implicitly, of pro-poor growth, delimits the discussion so that neither redistribution nor income transfers (nor safety nets) can feature. The importance given to education in these debates does, however, suggest that the elite would support specific forms of social policy which would favour the poor in the longer-term, although assistance for the poorest of the poor may remain excluded within these terms. That poverty is viewed as neither an issue requiring immediate, short-term attention, nor as one requiring urgent state action, suggests that the elite do not assign it a high priority. It will be argued below that the lack of a sense of threat from poverty is one explanation for the lack of urgency assigned to poverty reduction.

7.1 The Lack of a Significant Threat from Poverty

As mentioned above, in other, well-documented cases direct public action has been taken against poverty in part as a result of threats from poverty perceived by the elite (Beier 1983; De Swaan 1988). In such cases the 'spectre of the crowd' increased the urgency of tackling poverty. Poverty seems to lack this urgency for the Bangladeshi

elite, partly because, it will be argued below, they do not perceive the poor to pose a significant threat to their welfare.

The threat of poverty leading to social unrest - so prominent in the minds of 19th century western elites - was barely mentioned by the Bangladeshi elite, and then only in passing. There was very clearly no potential for insurrection by the poor, but instead a far weaker notion that the current situation may not be sustained indefinitely. One businessman claimed that revolution was simply 'not possible in the current world context'. A prominent NGO leader suggested that the Bangladeshi elite were not directly concerned about poverty, except to the extent that it might in the future impact negatively on their prospects:

I don't think they are worried about the poverty issue, but I think that most elites in Bangladesh are probably worried about the future of Bangladesh, whether elites' lives will be affected directly by this grinding poverty, the breakdown of law and order, whether there will be any jobs for their children, when they come back from the United States after getting their MA. That kind of thing. Is there a future for the elite? That kind of thing.

Mechanisms that could trigger dissatisfaction and unrest among the poor were seldom mentioned. An industrialist suggested that the aspirations of the poor were being raised through access to information about other lifestyles through the global media and returnee migrant workers. Another comment was that poor people's perceptions of the widening gap between the rich and themselves were encouraging aggressive behaviour towards the elite. Specific mechanisms and perceptions of dissatisfaction like these were isolated views, however, and did not represent the bulk of opinion.

A study of elite attitudes in Brazil found that the elite were similarly unconcerned about social unrest and the threat of revolution, but that they did, on the other hand, consider 'private' urban violence, crime, and the lack of safety to be a result of urban poverty (Reis and Cheibub 1994). South African elites also made a clear connection between the prevalence of poverty and crime, and were concerned about its impact on their own welfare; however, they tended to view the crimes of the poor as relatively petty (Manor and Kalati, forthcoming). In the Bangladesh case, the elite clearly feel that Dhaka city is under pressure from apparently rapid urban population growth and spiralling crime rates, but they perceive a weak link between crime and poverty. Once we recognised that urban migration was a major concern, we probed for possible perceptual links between migration of the rural poor and rising crime. But poor rural migrants and poverty more generally were not seen to be at the root of the problem (see Table 6), and our national elite respondents, in particular, repeatedly rubbish the idea of a link between crime and poverty. Poor people were rarely seen as the instigators of criminal activity, although they may in specific instances have been sucked in by other, non-poor gangsters. As in the South African case, the petty crimes of the sort associated with poverty were thought to affect the elite very marginally. Organised crime associated with political party youth wings was considered to be a greater problem, but the perpetrators were understood to be 'students', 'the drug addicts of the middle classes or rich men's sons', and even members of the police force themselves - in sum, not the poor. The Bangladeshi elite tend to frame concerns about crime in terms of inadequate law enforcement, but also to view

the law enforcement agencies as part of the problem. The issue of poor people committing crimes was decidedly sidelined in these discussions, and is evidently not a concern for the elite.

Table 6: Is urban migration of the poor linked to the rising crime rate?

| Responses given | Number of each response given |
|---|--------------------------------------|
| No | 28 (43%) |
| The poor are not the main perpetrators | 6 (9%) |
| Yes, but crimes are not committed against the elite | 2 (3%) |
| Yes | 17 (26%) |
| No clear answer | 12 (18%) |
| Total | 65 (100%) |

Urban migration was a concern mainly because it entailed pressure on weak public services, traffic congestion, and general disorder. One suggestion was that improving rural employment prospects would reduce the need for migration and hence relieve some of the pressure on urban services. Other comments, however, revealed that the richer sections of the elite were not entirely dependent on public utilities, and that therefore, this sort of pressure affected them relatively little. The issue of declining urban services was linked more closely to poor urban planning on the part of the municipal corporation than to the presence of the poor. The visible signs of poverty resulting from urban overcrowding - *bustees* (slums) and beggars - were widely considered unattractive, but not dangerous to the elite. Health problems and the unsanitary conditions of the poor were similarly more a matter of distaste than of concern. Ill-health and uncleanliness were frequently seen as functions of the lack of knowledge, education and awareness, rather than of poverty as such. In other urban settings, the elite have indicated that the presence of the poor was a public health risk to themselves by having the poor relocated (Gooptu 1997) or by changing their sanitation and housing conditions (De Swaan 1988). Although forced evictions by government officials is a fact of life for Bangladeshi *bustee* or slum tenants (see Islam *et al* 1997), it does not appear to be public health but property rights which are at issue in these evictions¹².

Discussions about the morality of the poor provoked comparisons with the non-poor, and consistently unflattering descriptions of elite morality. Crimes committed by the elite and other groups of the non-poor such as *mastaans* (thugs) were characterised as far more serious than the petty crimes of the poor, which were committed to feed starving families. Although religious leaders were inclined to see a general moral decline in society, the poor were usually characterised as not only more moral than the rich, but less greedy, and more contented with their simple, hardworking lives, particularly in rural areas:

Families in rural areas never think in terms of a motor car, a refrigerator, air conditioner and so on. I lived in the village for nearly 15 years. I think I was quite satisfied about it. It's hot, you go under the tree, you stay there for a while. Food, water you drink from the well, the pumps. Then you cook twice a day, so you don't need a refrigerator. Whatever little you have you cook, these are fresh things...that sort of life can be better. In Dhaka you drive, you have got all the tensions,

you have got a *lakh* of *taka* in your hand but you have accumulated a lot of funds. So you go for another *lakh*, and another – it's like a craze is going on. But that fellow, the meal for the next one or two days - he doesn't bother about the rest of it ... I think they are quite satisfied (Former Government Secretary, senior diplomat and educationalist).

As one prominent newspaper editor put it: 'one does not really fear the poor people. On the other hand ... poverty creates a sense of diffidence or dependence'. These qualities of diffidence and dependence combined with an inherent honesty and simplicity supply a discourse of the poor - and particularly the rural poor - as both absolutely and relatively unthreatening.

That the poor are not a menace may also be attributed to the elite's insulation against many of the problems of the masses. The rich sections of the elite reside in what are designated 'posh residential suburbs', and are geographically separated to an extent: for them the encroachment of slums and shanty-towns are little more than an eyesore. Less wealthy members of the elite appear to perceive urban poverty as a greater threat to their wellbeing – perhaps a reflection of their relative physical proximity to the poor. Another reason that poverty poses only the weakest of threats to the elite seems to be their sense of mobility. The elite strive to maintain their exit options, and foreign passports are prized, even among the richer elite. An NGO leader explicitly stated that fears about the future of Bangladesh could encourage him to leave: 'I could just go away to England and live there, if I am too worried for myself'. The exit option seems to be present for many of the wealthier elite, and although perhaps not an entirely practical option, that it exists certainly seems to contribute to the elite's psychological insulation from the problems and potential threat of poverty.

The elite also appear to believe that the possibility for tension between rich and poor is defused by the appearance of concern for the condition of the poor:

Maybe we are largely shielded because our poor are not so violent. If they were violent it would affect us very very much, because they are the majority. I don't worry about (the threat from poverty). Because I believe that we are not terribly insensitive. We do care. There are of course the super-rich and the defaulters who do not care. But by and large I think we do care (Former Minister and Government Secretary).

Characteristically, 'other' sections of the elite were assumed to be negligent in their social and moral duties to provide for the poor. Although government action is understood to be limited in its effectiveness – often attributed to politicians' lack of patriotism and commitment to poverty reduction - NGO and private charitable activities have more credibility, particularly because of their visibility. There seems to be a belief that the visibility of charitable actions gives them the image of a caring elite, and that this carries considerable weight with the poor themselves. Similarly, E.P. Thompson suggested that a moral economy could be seen as about the negotiation of class relations: 'It shows how hegemony is not just imposed (or contested) ... and can be sustained only by concession and patronage (in good times), by *at least the gestures of protection* in bad' (1993: 244-345, emphasis added). Scott makes a similar argument when he claims that the ideological bases of the elite public transcript generally have some resonance for those they claim to rule (Scott 1990: 18). At any rate, the Bangladeshi elite appear to believe that their gestures of assistance do help to legitimate existing elite-poor

relations. Where poverty has been viewed as a threat, descriptions of the poor have characteristically displayed fear and loathing: the lack of a significant threat from poverty in Bangladesh seems to belie this need to construct the poor as dangerous or bad.

7.2 Mutual Dependence and the Social Compact in Bangladesh

Metaphors of social compacts and bonds have generated ideas of mutual dependence between rich and poor in a variety of contexts. In some historical studies of European elite perceptions of poverty, a belief in mutual interdependence between rich and poor was a key ingredient in the elite consensus that action had to be taken against poverty (Toye 1997). An organic metaphor for society was understood to characterise the poverty discourse in sixteenth century England, in which society was depicted as the 'body commonwealth' with 'the monarch ... as the head or the heart, magistrates as the eyes, artisans as the hands, and husbandmen as the feet' (Beier 1983: 17). Mutual dependence and obligation between rich and poor were read off this metaphor for society. Similarly, ideas of social exclusion within French discourse are understood to draw on a sense of the rupture of the social bond, and/or of the disintegration of national solidarity. Do similar ideas of the interconnectedness of society shape the Bangladeshi elite's perceptions of poverty?

There is some scope for suggesting that ideas of traditional elite responsibility - whatever the accuracy of this reading of history – refer to mutual obligation and reciprocity. The elite appear to be referring to a form of 'moral economy' values, involving traditional Bengali virtues of indulgence and benevolence towards the poor (Greenough 1985). On a very small scale, at least, these ideas seem to work by giving meaning to rich-poor relationships. However, the emphasis for the elite is firmly on voluntarism, and far less on reciprocity, and publicly, at least, the idea that assisting the poor should have any tangible benefit for the rich is condemned. It may be that ideas of unselfish benevolence which have the most meaning for the elite, have been 'scaled-up' to explain the relationship between the elite and the masses at a national level. But can such values provide the basis for thinking about social interdependence?

To the extent that a social compact between rich and poor is present in any sense, its major referent would seem to be the national liberation struggle. A symbolic contract between rich and poor is implicit in the united sacrifice involved in the effort. The socialist leanings of the political groups which led the movement, and the fact that the struggle was about economic as well as political equality, also give weight to this view. But the symbol of the liberation movement holding a unified cultural and linguistic national identity together is heatedly contested, with religion competing to define nationhood (Osmany 1992; Guhathakurta 1997). Guardianship of the liberation struggle symbol is claimed by the Awami League, the party of the present government, that also led the movement:

Nowhere else in the world is a nation divided into pro-independence and anti-independence groups or powers. The anti-independence group is still effective - they don't love the land, so they don't love the people. Another is the bureaucratic complexity - they work for themselves only. I think people of different mentality cannot work for the poor people. (MP, Awami League).

It is partly this guardianship which gives the ruling party a stronger claim to a pro-poor stance, as suggested by the MP in the extract above. However, the partisan political nature of claims to identify the national community may weaken the sense of a 'commonwealth' of rich and poor.

The weakness of the sense of interdependence between rich and poor in Bangladesh may also result in part from the very scale of the poor population. Despite the large proportion of poor people in Bangladesh, there may be enough educated, healthy people to fulfil the personnel needs of the elite. This perception was highlighted in discussions of the personnel needs of the military. In the context of the Boer War the physical and educational weakness of the average British soldier was of great concern, for example, but this is a problem which Bangladeshi military leaders did not seem to consider. In response to direct questioning, one retired Brigadier commented that 'there is no shortage of suitable people joining the army, we always get the best, so poverty does not really affect us in that way'. Despite large-scale poverty, therefore, the elite may still have a large pool of suitable people from which to draw their labour supply. In that sense, they do not 'need' the very poor.

One final point about the weakness of a sense of social interdependence may be that some sections of the Bangladeshi elite seem to identify more strongly with other country elites than with the rest of society. The 'exit option' was mentioned above, and although it may not be a practical alternative for the elite, it is an option which is present at some level. Foreign passports are highly prized, and one intellectual gave a detailed history of periods of elite exit and re-entry coinciding with periods of political instability and opportunities for the elite. Younger elites (and large sections of the middle classes) are now educated abroad, and many do not consider returning on a permanent basis. Some respondents believed strongly that many of the richer sections of the elite now identify more with 'the world elite', and certainly the social distance between the richest elites and the rest of the population seems to be vast.

7.3 The Lack of Faith in the State

The scale of the poverty problem itself may not give the elite much confidence in its feasibility. Most of our respondents put the proportion of poor people at more than half the population, which at 60 million is daunting enough; the frequency of natural disasters also tend to mean a periodic erosion of the progress made by poor people. Perhaps most importantly, however, the record of state-led poverty reduction is unconvincing, and the elite display little confidence in the state's ability to reduce poverty *directly* (see Table 7); this is not surprising given the lack of faith in the state's ability to even collect taxes (see Table 8).

Table 7: Is the government effective at reducing poverty?

| | Non-state elites | | State (politicians, civil & military bureaucrats) elites | | All | |
|--------------------------|------------------|------|--|------|-----|------|
| No | 23 | 53% | 9 | 36% | 32 | 47% |
| Ambivalent | 4 | 9% | 1 | 4% | 5 | 7% |
| Less effective than NGOs | 3 | 7% | 0 | 0% | 3 | 4% |
| Potentially Yes | 8 | 19% | 8 | 32% | 16 | 24% |
| Yes | 5 | 12% | 7 | 28% | 12 | 18% |
| Total | 43 | 100% | 25 | 100% | 68 | 100% |

Table 8: Would you support raising taxes for more and better poverty alleviation programmes?

| | Non-state elites | | State (politicians, civil & military bureaucrats) elites | | All | |
|---------------------------|------------------|------|--|------|-----|------|
| No | 11 | 26% | 4 | 22% | 15 | 25% |
| Ambivalent | 2 | 5% | 3 | 17% | 5 | 8% |
| Collection is the problem | 21 | 50% | 7 | 39% | 28 | 47% |
| Yes | 8 | 19% | 4 | 22% | 12 | 20% |
| Total | 42 | 100% | 18 | 100% | 60 | 100% |

Conversely, there is some complacency about the successes of education and fertility control programmes, which are considered acceptable methods of tackling poverty. With the exception of those involved in poverty alleviation research or policy work, the elite are poorly informed about existing government programmes¹³, and have even less information about their successes. Many members of the elite described such programmes as 'an eyewash', and the outcome of governments leaping on successive donor-driven bandwagons:

(T)hese are all just fads, first poverty alleviation, then environment, then violence against women. Everyone is talking, and nobody is doing anything about it. Nobody is studying, judging, planning anything. We have no idea of how *we* can do it, we're just copying others (Jatiya Party MP).

There are no specific programmes, apart from things like vulnerable group feeding with the aid of other organisations ... government should not take credit for these things, it's just acting as a conduit (Former government secretary).

There is clear consensus that the implementation of state programmes is plagued by corrupt and inefficient management, and that there is a lack of united political commitment to poverty alleviation. In part these factors are understood to be the inevitable outcomes of political history in Bangladesh, in particular the prolonged periods of military rule:

Poverty is a great problem indeed and requires firm political commitment and also assurance of policy sustainability, even if the governments change. Up to 1975 a civilian government existed, after that it was interrupted by military rule. In my position I noticed senior posts occupied by army officers... they would do anything to consolidate power, and poverty alleviation was a distant matter to think of (Trade Union leader).

Those members of the elite who are brought in contact with poverty alleviation programmes showed more optimism, but they tended to pinpoint specific cases of success. This was usually the Local Government Engineering Department, which was understood to undertake the best rural development programmes as a result of good personal leadership.

7.4 The Capacity and Visibility of Non-Government Organisations

The low visibility and poor evaluation of state performance contrasts with the detailed information the elite displayed about non-state organisations, specifically Grameen Bank, BRAC and a few other large NGOs. Despite some serious concerns about their institutional status, they generally received warm praise for their perceived successes. Indeed, most of the perceived improvements in the international image of Bangladesh were attributed to the positive global media portrayal of Grameen Bank.

As others have suggested, the role of the NGOs, in particular the fact that the larger representatives challenge government social service provision in scale and coverage, has been the subject of much discussion in Bangladesh (Hashemi 1996; White forthcoming). Some of these discussions represent significant challenges to the NGOs, focusing on the lack of formal accountability to the people, and the reliance on donor agendas. But in our experience of talking with the elite, the dominant criticisms of the NGOs represent a shift in this thinking. It is partly scale, but mostly the professionalisation of the NGO sector, with which the elite take issue.

The voluntary activities of the NGOs are praiseworthy ... (but) NGOs are getting huge amounts of money from home and abroad and now they are only thinking for the expansion of their sphere of influence, disbursing money and recovery of money. Their policies are adopted looking at their foreign donors. Foreign donors have lost their confidence upon our government administration since the NGOs have convinced the donors, making derogatory remarks against government and spoiled our national image abroad in order to get funds. They also put pressure by donor status if government fails to comply with them. NGOs and government can work jointly, but what about their accountability? I doubt their financial transparency. Their activities are salutary as long as they are confined within the definition of voluntary activities. If they pursue interventionist policy

in governmental decision-making, or attempt to protest fundamentalism, they must be resisted (Religious leader).

Most sections of the elite have reasons for taking issue with the professional nature of NGO activity. Business leaders usually emphasised the unequal treatment of NGO 'businesses' by government policy, often asserting that they pay fewer taxes and therefore have an unfair competitive advantage. Members of the state elite¹⁴ stressed that better salary structures for NGO employees meant that they had an unfair administrative advantage over government employees. Religious leaders, as illustrated above, keep a close eye on NGO activities, and frame their objections in terms of the lack of accountability, and of voluntarism in NGOs. That NGOs 'have become a business' is a popular topic of conversation among the elite; there are a number of extremely high-profile NGO leaders who are identified as synonymous with their organisations, closely paralleling the identification of large business houses with their founders/main owners (see also White forthcoming). That many of the state elite are themselves believed to be setting up NGOs on retirement¹⁵ may, cynically, be seen as testament to the profit potential of the NGO sector in Bangladesh¹⁶.

Arguments against the professionalisation of the NGO corps are easily justified, however, within the idiom of charity. The pressure from the elite is evidently for non-state anti-poverty institutions to conform more closely to voluntary and charitable models. A former civil servant devised one such model, which was published in English language newspapers and praised by members of the elite. The central idea was that micro-finance did not have to come from large, impersonal institutions; instead, the provision of micro-credit should be the responsibility of individual wealthy citizens. This model was termed 'micro-finance from micro sources', and emphasised its voluntary and personal nature, and in particular the building of social bonds between the rich (citizens, 'those who can afford at least Tk.5,000') and poor members of 'their village'. Personal, rather than target group selection would replace the need for peer group monitoring. That these ideas were approved of in many elite quarters highlights the emphasis on the ideally voluntary and personal – charitable, in essence – response to poverty. The major criticisms of the NGOs are thus framed as their insufficiently charitable/voluntary character.

Despite the fears that (large) NGOs are becoming more like the state or business sectors than charities, there was relatively little secular criticism of their activities, and a great deal of praise for their effectiveness. This positive appraisal of NGOs does have the effect of downplaying government activity, on the one hand, but raises other questions, in addition. Could the NGOs be seen as the elite's response to poverty, for example? What is the extent of elite (as opposed to poor people's) involvement in and 'ownership'¹⁷ of NGOs? A few respondents suggested that the success of the NGOs in Bangladesh has to do with elite support for their activities, without which they would not have succeeded to the extent they have done. Whether or not this is indeed the case merits further study. Consider the proposition of an industrialist, one of the few respondents to claim that the elite were feeling pressurised by poverty:

I think they are feeling this pressure building up, but they still don't know what to do about it. And in fact I feel that a direct result of this pressure building up, is why these NGOs have been so

successful. Because the NGOs could not have been successful had the elites not supported their activities. So you see that there has been a tacit support for the NGOs' activities.

If the elite supported the NGOs, was this because NGOs constituted 'their' response to poverty, where the state was unwilling, unable, or inappropriate to undertake action? That is, do the elite feel that sufficient attention is being paid to the problem of poverty through the activities of NGOs, so that further action is not urgent?

The second issue which the high-profile successes of the NGOs raises is that of ambivalence towards state responsibility for the poor (see Table 5). As discussed above, this is an issue of some importance in Bangladesh, as it is by no means clear that the elite have working models of state-led direct poverty reduction strategies. Certainly the sheer capability displayed by the NGOs has led to a strong sense among some of the elite that they, and not the state should be engaging directly in poverty reduction action:

In fact it is not *whether* (the government) should engage in anti-poverty work, their entire mission should be to combat poverty, but there is a difference. Government should go in for attacking poverty - a good government should do it on a macro-level, by putting an enabling environment in place which attacks poverty. But one doesn't expect the government to go in and do the fieldwork direct anti-poverty work - that should be left to the NGOs or the private sector or the charities or whatever (Business leader).

This stress on comparative advantage and capability makes the issue of state responsibility recede into the background, as debates on the implications of the 'NGOification' of Bangladesh have shown (Wood 1994; Feldman 1997). The prominence of the large service-providing non-state institutions may further erode already weak state capacity: 'If the state is no longer even nominally responsible for guaranteeing a minimum level of welfare to its citizens, to whom should they complain when provision falls short?' (White, forthcoming). The importance of the perception that the state is not ultimately responsible, or is equally responsible as non-state institutions, is clear: pressure for action cannot be put on an institution which is not clearly held responsible for that action.

8 CONCLUSIONS

Bangladeshi elites do not consider poverty to be the most urgent problem facing Bangladesh. To some extent, the fact that Bangladesh is as a whole a poor country means that separating out the obstacles facing poor people, and those facing the development project as a whole, is conceptually tricky. There often seems, therefore, to be little sense in focusing narrowly on pro-poor interventions such as safety nets, when broader, pro-growth interventions are also understood to be in favour of poor people.

The elite are not wrong to think broadly about poverty alleviation; their views are often fully in line with global academic and policy discourses. They also favour education, although as a means of removing the most important obstacle they see the poor as facing – their lack of 'awareness'. But education may do little for those currently living in destitution, and the elite are unwilling to see the government take the responsibility of providing them with any form of social security which does not directly enhance their productivity. In part, the

elite lack faith in the state, and see the micro-credit activities of the very high-profile NGOs as preferable to state welfare provision. In part, also, they prefer to view responsibility for the poor as individual, traditionally voluntary, personalised, and focused on selective, narrow welfare communities. Beliefs in the virtues of charity are also strengthened by the positive coverage of Bangladesh's NGOs in the international media, which has given them a far higher profile than any government programme.

Features of elite perceptions of poverty in other contexts are largely unimportant in Bangladesh. The elite are well-insulated from, and have a detached relationship to, the poor. They have very little reason to view their relationship with the poor as antagonistic, or even as interdependent. The poor are seen as homogenous and moral. There is a reluctance to make the moral distinctions among sub-categories of the poor that have, in other contexts, helped mobilise political support for tackling particular types of poverty around which, in other contexts, elites have managed to build political pressure. Instead, the Bangladeshi elite stress the ethnic homogeneity of their country. The elite itself is relatively homogenous, as are their views about poverty. But there is some diversity. Some of the less orthodox – in particular some NGO leaders and activists who see their role as organising the poor to pressurise the government for action – do represent a challenge to the *status quo*, but one which in the current ideological climate is muted.

How might the elite's understandings of poverty change? There are some indications that the influx of poor rural people into the major cities is already having an impact on the elite's well-being, although still indirectly. If the elite were to view the poor as capable of affecting their welfare, this may well result in more action. The recent decision by the Bangladesh Krishi Bank (a government bank) to provide poor city residents with large loans to enable them to return to their villages, based on the belief that poverty drives rural-urban migration, appears to be one such reaction. In addition, successes in attracting investment in low-cost labour-intensive export industries may mean that the business elite become more reliant on the labour of the poor. The increasing visibility and influence of business associations may mean that greater reliance on the poor brings them into sharper policy focus.

This preliminary overview of findings from research on elite perceptions of poverty in Bangladesh draws attention to a number of issues more usually sidelined in research on poverty within development studies. Firstly, it treats the motivation to act on poverty as itself problematic. What is it that prompts governments or societies to provide for the poor in the first place? How can variations in the priority given to poverty be explained? Secondly, it relies on the locally relevant ideas, meanings, and language of poverty, to open a discussion about the nature of provision for the poor. As historians have been able to show, provision for the poor is not only about the actual nature and extent of poverty, nor solely to do with resource or technical considerations, but is linked to different ideas about the poor, or even about intra-elite conflicts with no bearing on poverty. Finally, it suggests that explanations about developing country failures to reduce poverty should turn to local, and in particular, elite, perceptions of the urgency of the problem. These perceptions may in turn derive from an understanding that some version of pro-poor growth will take care of the poverty problem in time, and, like our Bangladeshi respondents, prefer to ignore the third 'prong', the safety nets, of that particular anti-poverty strategy.

NOTES

- 1 See Barua (1978), Sen (1987) and Khan et al (1996) on political elites; Rahman (1989) and Rahman (1991) on administrative elites, and Sobhan and Sen (1988), Siddiqui et al (1991) and Kochanek (1993) for business elites.
- 2 We devised an Index of Metropolitan Concentration to measure this phenomenon: the proportion of the combined populations of the four largest cities that lived in the single largest city. This figure was 64% for Bangladesh (Dhaka), with its population of 120 millions, compared to 36% for South Africa (Capetown), with a total population of only 41 millions; 49% for Brazil (Sao Paulo); and 34% for India (Mumbai). Among large poor countries, only Mexico has an Index of Metropolitan Concentration higher than that of Bangladesh (Mexico City, 75%) (The Times Atlas of the World 1997: 64).
- 3 The Field Research Team included Abul Hossain (religious, student, Comilla), Sumana Alam (Rangpur), Sabina Rashid (political), Reshmi Choudhury (civil bureaucrats, political, Chittagong), Satarupa Barua (intellectual and political), and Naomi Hossain (all national except religious and student leaders, and overall coordination)
- 4 Note that the third 'prong', safety nets, was absent from this account.
- 5 Interviews were conducted in English and Bangla, and most usually a mix of the two. Some of the elite chose to speak in English, even when the interviewer's (and, we assumed, the interviewee's) first language was Bangla. Even in interviews conducted mainly in Bangla, 'technical' terms were often in English.
- 6 From recent newspaper reports it seems that this programme was in fact launched in Tungipara, the Prime Minister's home area.
- 7 Family planning is another area in which some of the elite consider the government to have been successful. There is some complacency about these achievements, however, so that population control does not seem to be the favoured solution for the future, although the scale of the current population is still viewed as a problem.
- 8 See Blanchet (1996) for an account of the treatment of servants in middle-class homes in Dhaka.
- 9 Three prominent English language newspapers were reviewed over the four week period which covered the extreme cold weather. More than twice as many articles were about donations than about those who suffered from the cold.
- 10 There is a flourishing debate on poverty alleviation through *zakat* and other redistribution mechanisms derived from Islam in the Pakistani Islamic economics literature (see issues of The Pakistan Development Review). In at least one context, however, state collection of *zakat* has proven extremely unpopular with the poor (Scott 1987).
- 11 Guhathakurta (1997) locates the ideological origins of the indigenous NGO movement, which could be characterised as a 'social movement against poverty', as rooted in the nationalist movement, a point echoed by the NGO leaders whom we interviewed.

- 12 Significantly, it is in the public health rather than the economics of poverty literature that the 'general threat' from poverty is raised, in a number of different public health contexts (see Harpham 1988; Lipson 1998; Skold 1998; Stephens 1996; Wallace 1997; Watt 1996; WHO 1997).
- 13 Only a tiny minority, for example, mentioned food distribution/ration schemes, perhaps because these are universally understood to benefit the rich in Bangladesh. Slightly more attention was paid to public works programmes.
- 14 The state elites obviously have direct competition as a reason for being critical of NGOs (see Lewis, Sobhan and Jonsson (1994: 17) for an account of conflict within the government's NGO Affairs Bureau).
- 15 We are aware of at least one MP whom we interviewed who had set up an NGO prior to entering Parliament, which had then been 'given' to a family member to run, as the European funders had threatened to withdraw as they could not fund a politician's private activities.
- 16 One NGO leader informed us that applications for top administrative posts in the NGO sector came predominantly from military and civil bureaucrats (not retired).
- 17 In Dhaka elite circles, founders and directors of NGOs are frequently described as 'owners' of the organisations they manage. This is partly slippage, but also at times denotes a view of NGOs as a lucrative business.

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