

## Commentary

# A Tale of Two Worlds: Wealth and Wastage, and Scarcity and Sustainability

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**Abstract:** Sustainable consumption is assumed to lead to sustainability. The old wisdom that consumers in rich countries tend to consume more and pollute more than the poorer countries is affirmed by the life styles of the consumers in emerging economies. It is also claimed that poor in developing societies put pressure on nature. The context of this paper is neither the rich nor the emerging economies, but the life styles of the urban rich and the livelihood of the rural poor in a poor country, Bangladesh. Combining historical analyses, observations, in-depth interviews and narratives it draws together threads of a number of research works to arrive at a somewhat integrated idea of likelihood of wastage by the urban rich. A preliminary analysis show that the urban culture stimulates competitive consumption and a life style based upon conspicuousness. There the interaction between individuals and their environment, both social and natural, is disrupted. A contrasting picture is the livelihood of the rural poor people who mostly live in harmony and interaction with nature, something that resists technological innovation. However, when needs around they find a solution without disrupting the interacting relationship between man and nature. They adjust to the changed environment and find new ways to survive.

**Keywords:** Adaptability, Bangladesh, Consumption, Development, Sustainability

## Introduction

Development, implies both economic growth and human progress. The process involves changes in social organizations of production, distribution and consumption of produced goods as well as scarce natural resources. The modernization paradigm was primarily concerned with economic growth and accumulation of wealth through mass production. In this regard, the mainstream economic theorists with their strong conviction in the logic of growth asserted that mass production followed by mass consumption would make life good. The message was “having things is good”. They were relatively unconcerned with the problem of scarcity [Hettne B.1990; Martinussen J. d.; McMichael, P2008].

Observations and studies show that growth strategies, with the aim of accumulating wealth, generated unanticipated problems, both social and environmental, not only in affluent industrialized societies, the home of mass production and mass consumption but, also in poor countries [McMichael, P 2008; Miller, D. 1995]. It is due to the priority to short-term economic benefits ignoring long-term consequences of wrong policies. The consumption patterns of the rich added more. Development researchers now are showing interests in the relationship between consumption and sustainable development. Sustainable consumption is assumed to lead to sustainability [Klein, N.2000; McMichael, P. 2008; Seabrook, J.1996].

There are two widespread views on the relation between consumption and sustainability. The first view asserts that consumers in rich countries and the emerging economies tend to consume more and pollute more than the poorer countries [McMichael, P.2008]. This view is affirmed by the life styles of the consumers in rich countries and in the emerging economies. The second view concerns poorer non-industrialized countries and it relates local scale environmental problems to poverty. It assumes that poor people take short-term strategies since their livelihood is based on primary commodity production; poverty drives poor people to seek survival through means, which degrade resources on which they depend [Becker, G, S.1998].

The context of this paper is neither the rich countries nor the emerging economies but the life style of the urban rich in a poor country, and the livelihood of the rural poor, Bangladesh. It recognizes direct impacts of consumption on

sustainability. But, it presents a different view on the impacts of poverty on sustainability. Combining historical analysis, observation, in-depth interviews and narratives this paper draws together threads of a number of research works to arrive at a somewhat integrated idea of likelihood of wastage by the urban rich. Their consumption behaviour affirms the assertion that “having things is good”. [Rahman 2011] They prefer to live in “The World of Goods” [Rahman 2011]. They compete for accumulating wealth, and to this end, they mostly invest in real estate, cars, electronics, luxury items for household etc [Rahman 2011]. The pervasive effects of such a lifestyle can be observed in building boom, traffic congestion, air pollution, bad sanitation, energy crisis, shortage of pure water etc. Cities now turned to arena for competition for show-off and for privileged access to economic resources. The old interaction between human being and their environment, both social and natural, is disrupted. Dhaka, the capital city, became unlivable. It is now a dying city.<sup>1</sup>

A contrasting picture is the rural livelihood. The poor people in villages manage their livelihood with whatever they have, in interaction with their environment. They also compete for scarce resources. But, when needs around they cooperate and find a solution without disrupting the interacting relationship.<sup>2</sup> This paper presents evidence on how rural peasants make effort to adjust to the changed environment and found a new way to survive. Floating vegetable cultivation, an innovation in agricultural development is one example. People around the coastal belt making their living with informal economic activities is another. Small-scale farming, horticulture, poultry etc., with micro-credit uplifting vast rural poor is world known.<sup>3</sup>

The section to come describes, briefly, urban life styles and rural livelihood in Bangladesh. The following section analyses urban life style-styles, characterised by competition, expressed both in their consumption patterns as well as in their struggle for material gains. Then it makes an analysis of the rural livelihood, characterised as continued interaction between man and nature that sustains cooperation. Finally, the discussion section highlights the varied patterns of interaction that explain the urban-rural contrasts with theoretical reflections.

### **Life styles of the urban rich**

I take Dhaka, the capital of Bangladesh as a case. In this city, with more than 15 million people, everyday life is full of stress owing to many factors: Its infrastructure is inadequate; the transport system is chaotic; thousands of new vehicles hit the road every year contributing to increasing air pollution and severe traffic congestion; there are constant shortages of energy and water supply; the drainage system and wastage management made the surface water polluted; ground water level is receding due to over extraction resulting dearth of pure drinking water. there is shortage of civic amenities. On top of these, there is competition of illegal constructions causing dearth of open space and sleepless nights. The list of malaise that trails Dhaka is long.

Let’s look at the transport problem, first. Roads are under the constant load of traffic. Roads are always under repair works, those are pulverized, cratered and pot-holed. A striking feature is that while those who ravish the city and imperil its future get away with illegal gains, the vast majority of its citizens suffer the consequences of traffic congestion, pot-holed roads, garbage accumulated in front of their houses,

Dhaka’s never-ending traffic congestion adds more to its existing woes. On may 11<sup>th</sup>, 2013, a garment factory collapsed, almost 4000 people died. The casualties would have been much less if the rescue team could reach the place in time. On 3<sup>rd</sup> June, 2010, a devastating fire broke out in the city, s one of the central area. The fire station was less than a kilometer away, but it took the fire service more than an hour to reach the inferno. Just after five weeks, the same year, millions of Dhaka city dwellers were left in dismay at the deluge as heavy rain caused severe water logging in the city. With water knee-deep on many streets, daily life including business came to a standstill. The transport system came to a halt.<sup>4</sup>

Low quality high density housing, power shortage, poor sanitation, irregular water and gas supply, dirty roads, piled up garbage, outrageous air pollution, lack of security, wrecked public transport etc., making people exposed to airborne and waterborne diseases. Following is a story of a middle class family, which I visited one afternoon. Sitting in the air conditioned living room, drinking tea and talking life in Dhaka. Lights were on in the absence of day light.

<sup>1</sup> Excerpts from observation, interviews and media reports.

<sup>2</sup> Observation, field works in a number of villages in Bangladesh.

<sup>3</sup> Grameen Bank, BRAC are among some of largest micro credit institutions and their achievements are recognized world wide.

<sup>4</sup> The Daily Star, A national daily.

“The family of Alam (his wife, Silvi, and their only son Arif) belongs to the middle class. Both earning, their incomes allow them living a life style, they described comfortable, in Dhanmondi residential area. They own an apartment of 3300 sqft, in a ten storied building, four apartments in each floor. That means 40 apartments in the building. On an average, four to six people living in one apartment. At least 200 people living in the building. The plot where the building stands is 100 meter by 100 meter. Five decades ago there was only one single one storied building and one family, of six or seven members, used to live in the same area which accommodates now 200 people. Their use of power, water supply, gas etc., now forty times more than what it was in the 1950s, the sewerage system now has to take forty times more household wastes. The neighboring buildings with similar structures and not enough space between the buildings do not allow air or light to come in”.

Not only Dhanmoni, but all residential areas ( Banani, Gulshan, Uttara, and the old Wari) and whole the old city, fit into this description. Once posh and spacious residential areas now turned into jungles of concrete structures and there is hardly any space for quick movement.

Dhaka, a mega city, fails to deliver basic services to a large proportion of its residents- services that in any part of the world would be taken for granted. Open space is significant for a city. Dhaka could boast of parks, gardens, lakes, canals. That was in the past. During last four decades, parks are becoming smaller, both in number and in size. Gardens, lakes and the canals are shrinking due to constant process of land grabbing and encroachment.

In the shadow of the swanking new high-rise buildings of the posh residential areas, lie many slums. Just strip of water, or a narrow lane, separates the two worlds- a dark viscous liquid that seems to part reluctantly before the bow of the boat.

Alam, a 12 year old boy working in a garment factory, lives in a tin roofed shack with his sister, in the slum locally known as *Korail basti*. He says the water supply is irregular and the sewage system is non- existent. In the summer they sometimes have to queue up for water when the DWASA (Dhaka Water and Sewage Authority) truck comes.<sup>5</sup>

There are thousands of children living in basties (slum areas) along the railway line, by the lakes, and canals who have the same life situation like Alam. They work more than 10 hours a day, six days a week, receiving a dollar a day for their work. They lack free time, they are deprived of education, health services. They want to get out of the *basti* but not capable of renting elsewhere. They don't have any safety net. Contrasting such a world, only a hundred meters away, there is a world unknown to them.

Dhaka is surrounded by four rivers. Due to continued encroachment, those became narrower. On the top of these is the contamination of the major river, Buriganga (old ganges). With hundreds of factories throwing in toxic waste and its 16 million people emptying human excreta and rubbish in the river, its water looks not like natural water, but thick and black. It is so polluted that hardly any organism can survive in that water.<sup>6</sup>

For drinking purpose Buriganga was the major source water supply for the people of Dhaka. But, now, water of Buriganga poses a threat to health. Therefore, 85% of water demand is met through underground water causing the ground water sinking. That is another nightmare the people of Dhaka is living with- the city is sinking.

The disposal of solid wastes adds more to the nightmare. The underequipped Dhaka City Corporation can only collect half the trash while the rest is left to rot in the open contributing more to the water logging. Dhaka lacks a satisfactory drainage system.

The lack of adequate infrastructure and services, and increasing social and environmental problems turned Dhaka to one of the most unliveable city in the world.

### **The rural livelihood**

While Dhaka became unlivable, the rural livelihood presents a different picture. Resources are scarce in rural Bangladesh. Moreover, rural people, especially along coastal line, are exposed to natural disasters. But they have learned how to live with the nature and how to cope with natural disasters. Like urban people, the rural peasants also compete for scarce resources. But, they mostly cooperate and they make joint effort to achieve their common goals. During the last four decades, rural households in Bangladesh have undergone major socio-economic and demographic changes. Based upon earlier studies, this paper presents three cases, illustrating the dynamics of the rural economy: 1. Floating vegetable cultivation, one example of innovation in agricultural development. 2. Livelihood of boat people illustrate their adaptability to the nature. 3. Income generating activities among rural poor

<sup>5</sup> Interview with Alam, in connection with a documentary on child labour.

<sup>6</sup> Weekly magazine, The daily Star.

women with micro-credit making them independent as well as a difference for the macro economy. Rural Bangladesh, in the rainy season, especially most lower areas become flooded, due to rain and water coming down from the Himalaya. A number of the world's largest rivers are flowing through Bangladesh. Due to siltation and continued erosion, these mighty rivers become over-flowed and most low-lying areas go under water contributing to shrinkage of arable land. The peasants cannot cultivate enough vegetable according to their needs and for exchange. They look for alternative cultivation near around. There are innumerable small ditches all over Bangladesh, which are breeding places for water hyacinths. The peasants make use of hyacinths, as the floating beds, prepared out of hyacinths, for vegetables and seedlings. After cultivation of vegetable, the peasants are using decomposed floating bed as organic fertilizers, producing seedlings of different crops on floating bed. They are minimizing cropping season in the rainy season when the main land goes under water.

Vegetables produced in floating bed are environment friendly, and do not require chemical fertilizer owing to water hyacinth as the natural growth factor, making it a low cost technology. What required is to set an optimum size long bamboo on floating water hyacinth. One or two persons stand upon the bamboo and set sequentially according to expected size, using pressure of legs they make the bed compact. After preparing the bed, the bamboos are removed. The hyacinths require 20-25 days to decompose. After decomposing the peasants sow and when seedlings appear they transplant those. Small balls are prepared by decomposed hyacinths, excess water is extracted from the ball by hand pressure before transplanting.

A group of poor people live on boats, traditionally known as *Baidya*, (*river gypsies*). One major reason why many poor live along the coastal belt is access to so called common resources [Stave, S.E. 2004]. There, landless poor, fishermen and other marginalized groups find opportunities to make their livelihood based upon fishing, and plantations in the mangroves and newly emerged shoals (small islands around the coastal area).

Both these ways of livelihood have contributed to increased food intake of poor people, ensured them nutrition security, and a new source of income. Both these have their share in attaining self-sufficiency in food production in Bangladesh. The micro credit program for the poor women added more to socio-economic changes in Bangladesh. In Bangladesh, during 1970s, more than 80% of rural people lived below the poverty level. Today, it is a third of the population. A recent survey of 62 villages (Funded by Research and Evaluation Division of BRAC found the average size of rural household 4.93 in 2008 which contrasts 5.32 in 2004, 5.67 in 2000 and 6.15 in 1988. This decline is partly due to migration, partly to a fall in the ratio of children in the total population etc. As I look at it, the most significant factor is the possibility of women to make decision by their own, when to get married, when to have children and how many. This is empowerment and thanks to microcredit program for the rural women. Economic independence contributed to their health and life expectancy. The proportion of people aged 65+ had been on a rise. For the first time, the life expectancy for women is higher than men.<sup>7</sup> The obvious question is how to explain the contrasts. In the following I explain what make the rural peasants productive and what make the urban rich consumer.

### **Competition for a world of goods: Wastages and woes**

History tells us, Dhaka was not like what it is now. In 1823, a British Surgeon, a writer and an artist, James Atkinson, travelling India, wrote: "Dacca is one of the most delightful stations in India, its climate being healthy and agreeable, its bazaars abundantly supplied ... and each commodity the most excellent of its kind".<sup>8</sup> How Dhaka has changed to its present form?

For the urban planners, the woes of Dhaka owes to unplanned urbanization. Once a city of half a million (just four decades ago) with green parks, lakes, is now gripped by increasing number of population. It is one of the most densely populated city in the world. More than 15 million people live in an area of 1530 square kilometers. Its population keeps on increasing at an alarming rate. With 300,000-400,000 new migrants swelling its ranks each year, Dhaka is one of the world's fastest growing cities. By 2020, it is projected, Dhaka will rank third in the world with 20 million inhabitants.

Economists, echoing urban planners, think that the city is under pressure due to the swelling population. The most crucial challenge is the use of land. With the fast population growth, the city has pushed outwards from 73 sq. km in 1950 to 1530 sq km by 2009. Its population swelled, but Dhaka is not able to keep up with the needs of exploding population. Dhaka, a mega city, faces mega challenges.

<sup>7</sup> World Bank, 2011.

<sup>8</sup> Atkinson, J. quoted in Chowdhury, J.R.2014.

The explanations of the urban planners and the economists have lot to say in their own right. Its population growth is incompatible with available resources. This study adds more; it includes socio-structural phenomena. Historically, Bangladesh has always been an agrarian rural society. Land is the main physical resource of Bangladesh.<sup>9</sup> People lived mostly in rural areas. There were a handful urban settlements until mid 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, Dhaka as the centre of administration of Bengal during the Mughal empire, and during the British colonial rule. Chittagong was the major port city. Since Bangladesh became an independent state in 1971, Dhaka became its capital. The city turned out to be the hub of all economic, political, educational, cultural activities. It is in Dhaka where people can realize their dream, both economically, politically, socially. People living in Dhaka have better access to education, job market, health services than people living in rural areas. People migrate from other parts of the country to Dhaka mainly for economic reason. Not only the elites of all kinds can make more money, people living in Dhaka have income higher than the average national income. A section of people, 2-3% of its 15 million, earns plenty.

Unequal access to resources and political power left impacts on the existing spatial structure of Dhaka. At the early phase of urbanization, various occupational groups lived in different areas. The city was divided accordingly. During the English colonial era, there were residential areas for the Europeans. In post-independent Bangladesh, attempts were made to compartmentalize the urban community into various socio-economic groups.<sup>10</sup>

Inequality is structurally embedded. In Bangladesh, the power to make decision is seated in political, military, and bureaucratic institutions. Economic institutions and business interests are linked with decision makers in those institutions in Dhaka. Political leaders, top bureaucrats and rich families have always tended to come together to form power triangles through exchange of favours, cajoling, kickbacks and lobbying. The centralized administration and political organizations facilitates control various state institutions and the elite of all kinds can pursue their interests through their networks. Surplus and resources accumulate in the hands of the few elite who invest the accumulated surplus in luxury consumption.<sup>11</sup> The number of the newly rich swelling, followed by the city's skyline thrusting aggressively as well as bringing every inch of land to housing complexes to meet the demand. The life style of this mega city is not environmentally sustainable. Not only environmentally, but Dhaka is also not socially sustainable. Inequality in terms of distribution of income, access to resources, and consumption of goods and services keeps on growing. According to BBS<sup>12</sup> data for 2010, the top 5% of the population controlled 23.62% of income, compared to 18.30% in 1983-84 and 18.85% in 1991-92. The income of the top 10% was 34.68% during the same period. This fraction of the total population (less than 2% of a total population of 150 million)<sup>13</sup> are again concentrated in a few posh residential areas in Dhaka. Despite their small number, they with their ownership and control over vast economic resources and command a disproportionate influence on the rest of the society including institutional function. Network connections are decisive for access to resources.<sup>14</sup> There also are interacting relationships between informal relations and the functioning of formal institutions. The elite networks have the capacity to make impacts on any policy, or make exemptions from existing policies, including urban planning, undermining environmental consideration in city planning and housing construction. The following case is illustrative.

In 1991, the government decided that unplanned growth no longer be allowed and approached UNDP and UN Habitat for help. International urban planning experts were brought in to formulate a plan for the city expansion and the Dhaka Metropolitan Development Plan was finalized in 1995. It laid down guidelines for future land use. But political inertia and bureaucratic tangles resulted in delay in implementing the plan allowing unauthorized construction and land encroachments. In 2004, the work finally started. Land developers and real estate business people came out strongly against the Master Plan, who claimed that the plan has been drawn up by non-governmental organizations, not by urban planners. A ruling party lawmaker who also is the acting president of Real Estate and Housing Association of Bangladesh (REHAB) says the plan was based on statistics from 1995, outdated.

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<sup>9</sup> Jansen, E.G. 1986.

<sup>10</sup> Siddiqui, K. 1989.

<sup>11</sup> Rahman, M. 2010

<sup>12</sup> BBS stands for Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics.

<sup>13</sup> This estimate is done according to residence in posh areas. Siddiqui (1990) also used this method. The exact number is hard to ascertain. The number of the elite is increasing, due to political patronisation. Every change in government opens up the possibility for new groups to be included in the dominating elite.

<sup>14</sup> Such a tendency also apparent in studies of Humphrey 1992; Kochanek 1993; Rahman 1990, 1994; Sobhan 1989, 1993.

The same lawmaker is also a businessman engaged in real estate. But the DAP has attracted broad support from cross section of people in the city, including civil society who fell that it is a once-in-a-generation opportunity to impose order on Dhaka's urban chaos.<sup>15</sup>

Not only in urban planning, the influences of the particularistic interests also plagues waste management and road construction. In the words of a city dweller: "Dhaka is a city where in the pretense of economic exigency, in the name of housing ethics, mere money-making is exercised, the environment is savagely brutalized". In the following, I elaborate this with explanations based upon observation and oral testimonies.

Dhaka, once was a city of canals. Those were vital arteries for the drainage. The rapid urbanization put enormous pressure on the limited land. Many of the canals have been encroached and even totally blocked by roads and buildings. The role of the housing and land development companies is crucial. They, with blessing of the political interests, are responsible for large-scale encroachment and turning Dhaka into a jungle of high-rise buildings with not enough space for road, air and light. Up to one third of this area again is occupied by floating shops, resulting traffic gridlock. This brings the issue of wastage of time. Getting anywhere in the city a distance of four kilometers may take two hours.

Traffic congestion and air pollution getting worst with every year 3000 new cars hit the road. The import policy allows import of car, imposing very nominal duty, without any consideration for road conditions and environmental impacts. Now, Dhaka has the worst traffic congestion in the world. It earned the dubious distinction of being the second worst polluted and unlivable city of the world by a survey conducted over 140 cities by the Economist Intelligence Group. A World Bank study suggests that the soaring pollution level in the city is causing the premature death of about 40,000 people every year.

The posh residential areas accommodating the rich groups. Not long ago they used to live in spacious villas, with gardens. Today, all those villas are reconstructed and most of those turned out to multistoried apartments. Once a city of gardens Dhaka now gripped by a large base of increasing number of high-rise buildings. Those apartments again are equipped with Air cooling systems, and all the inhabitants own TV, fridge etc. They consume more power than before. The energy problem became acute.

The political elite arrange different camps, during election, in different parts of the city where food is served, roads are decorated with arcades and festoons, the whole area is illuminated with florescent tube lights, while the residents of the area suffer from load-shedding. Such wastages are aimed at demonstration of wealth and power.

Wastages are also involved in religious ceremonies. The urban rich do comply with religious obligation. They feel good about charity and solidarity shown through charity. At the end of Ramadan (the muslim holy month for fasting), on the occasion of Eid, they give cash money, clothings as gifts to the poor. As a part of religious obligations, and as a ritual practice, they sacrifice cows and goats. On one occasion of such sacrifice, just in one day, more than two million cattle are sacrificed, leaving impacts on both the economy and environment.

Charity and sacrifices are to gain publicity and to achieve recognition. With similar objective the urban rich arrange grandiose wedding ceremonies. The dimensions, in terms of number of guests, decoration, food and gifts in connection with wedding ceremonies have surpassed any standard based on tradition and ritual. The marriages of their sons and daughters are marred by wasteful ceremonies. They are commuting between Dhaka, Bangkok, Singapore, Dubai and even London making purchases in connection with the forthcoming marriage of their sons or daughters. They arrange grandiose wedding ceremony. They follow standards set by their friends and neighbors. Breaking standards is distancing oneself from others. They are aware of a risk—violation of standard obligatory practices may result in the loss of status and prestige. Wedding ceremonies are marked by display of material affluence and wastage, of food in particular.<sup>16</sup> Display of wealth turns out to be ugly and pervasive.

Types and varieties of food symbolize and represents social and symbolic values, as index of status and identity. Maintaining these values people regard as an obligation, which displays both a social dimension and the influence of past experiences. Family traditions and relevant past experiences of consumption have a strong influence on choice of food—habits of the traditionally rich in present day Bangladesh replicate the old aristocracies during colonial era. Those who became wealthy more recently also have inclinations towards the past. Many of them, deprived of a

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<sup>15</sup> Sources: The Daily Star, a national daily.

<sup>16</sup> For details, see Rahman 2011.

decent life style, did not want their children to experience deprivation of any kind. Therefore, they make efforts to provide their children with something extra.<sup>17</sup>

Ownership of a house, though a family matter, has a social dimension. A well decorated luxury house in a posh area and membership of a club are sources of status. Neighbors have a significant influence on the choice regarding where to live, people adopting and imitating one another's way of life. Owning a luxury house in a respectable area is a way of participation in social life—they are a step closer to being recognized as a gentlemen (*bhadralok*), adding to their reputation. Social participation is not easy for those who have become wealthy more recently. They have to struggle to integrate with those who had been living there for many years and are critical of those moving into the neighborhood. Therefore, they make an extra effort to participate in social life through extra investments in real estates, in luxury car, exclusive goods and commodities for household, and the practice of gift giving at social festivities.

Gift giving is a reciprocal obligatory practice and according to Levi Strauss: “the automatic laws of the cycle of reciprocity are the unconscious principle of obligation to give, the obligation to return a gift and the obligation to receive” (Strauss 1987, 43). A striking feature of gift giving among the urban rich in Bangladesh is that they give expensive gold ornaments, clothes, furniture, a fridge, a stereo and in some cases a car as gifts on wedding ceremonies.

Life styles of new relations and acquaintances effect to escalate consumption of durables or the interior decoration of their houses. There is a tendency of maintaining homogeneity of neighborhood regarding status through possession of durables. Similarity of status facilitates social participation and interaction among friends and neighbors. With same objective parents make decision where to send their children for education.

The choice of education and education policies tend to perpetuate tendency of spending on unskilled human resources. As an outcome inefficiency and waste of resources (both economic and human) is notably high owing to the limited capacity of the labour market to absorb the graduated students. Both parents and education policies have created a phenomenon of educated unemployed. Potential resources of the society are excluded from participation in socio-economic development.<sup>18</sup>

Consumption of education takes place directly through the family's values and lifestyle. The choice of school is embedded in social relations over time, linking past, present and future. The dignity of the family, flowing from the consumption of schooling in the past, endowed parents with knowledge of the association between educational qualifications and future well-being, whether as a sense of personal fulfilment, for example, or a prestigious job. Since the capacity of state educational institutions is limited, there emerged private schools and universities in the major cities. There are 72 private universities in Dhaka only, in addition to 5 existing state universities. Most of the private universities and private schools are located in various residential areas, adding more to the existing housing problems and traffic chaos. Mushrooming educational institutions raises new concerns; the job market cannot absorb thousands of newly graduates. The educated unemployment is a social problem now.

The magnitude of consumption expenditures shows evidence of the financial strength of the urban rich by which they achieve a place in the world of others. By consuming luxuries, they convey the message to others of who they are and who they want to be. Their lifestyles signal exclusiveness regarding family dignity and identity. They desire positive evaluation of their worth by others, i.e. recognition. Recognition stipulates the requirements of status and honor, and is also a part of the struggle for accumulation of material possessions to satisfy a set of wants, both familial and social. They know being able to earn and spend money are qualities of a man with respect and prestige. Wastage, not only accepted, but also necessary, be that on consumption of goods, educational, wedding ceremony and religious occasions.

### **Dynamics of rural livelihood in a world of scarcity**

The great majority of rural people depend on agricultural activities. Most of them are deficit households, owing both to natural conditions (the uncertainty of harvests because of climate) and social relations (patron-client relations based upon ownership of land and the right to cultivate land). Deficit households have to borrow, for their sustenance for the time being, sometime cash and sometime staples like rice, lentils etc, from their neighbors, a few surplus households nearby. Extra needs may arise due to dearth, sudden illness of a family member, wedding ceremony of their children etc. Kin relationship is the first choice when one thinks of asking for help in such

<sup>17</sup> For details see Rahman, M.2011.

<sup>18</sup> Rahman, M. 2014.

situations. One can demand a favor from kin members who are relatively rich. This is due to a relationship of reciprocal obligations (Jansen 1990; Rahman 2010).

The rural values include looking at people not as problems or liability, but as resources. For the effective realization of these values, the rural culture rests heavily on generalized trust. Not only rural values, and scarcity, that distinguish the rural livelihood from the urban life style. The distinction is clear in the norm of reciprocity in network relations, the form of interaction, that defines common goals of rural peasants and facilitate joint efforts to attain the common goals. They find cooperation is beneficial for all; they can turn a crisis into a resource.

The norm of reciprocity makes people socially obliged to support a kin or a fellow villager in need. Like family, the kinship system defines rights, duties and status of kin members. Kinship, a network of relations among families, is a reciprocal and horizontal relation, even though a family may be better-off than the other. A wealthy family cannot deny the bonds of kinship. If some kin members are poor and have lower status, they support them by lending. Lower status of a kin may be threatening to one with higher income and status.

A rich family may show its consideration by extending a favor to the members of the village society whenever they ask for it. A favor is regulated by the norm of reciprocity, which operates in more than one dimension. Social obligation is one aspect. A rich man takes other factors into his consideration when he extends loan to the poor or do them a favor. Any favor, including giving credit is one important way to maintain his dominance and to secure the loyalty of the person who receives a favor. This is also at the root of uneven distribution of power. The nature of flow of favor determines the position of the person who extends favor and who receives it. Such exchange of favor within a village community functions "as part of survival strategies of the poor and investment strategies of the rich" (Jansen 1990), also encourages and perpetuates poor peasants' dependence (social and economic) on wealthier villagers (White 1991).

To norm of reciprocity further explains how networks work. Reciprocity in interaction, within a network of let,s say 3 persons, X,Y,Z. X somehow inducing Y to motivate Z to do something. X wants or would value. The example of a micro credit institution, where groups of women, in neighboring areas, induce each other to repay their loans so that others in the group might also have access to loans. The bank does not have to chase after the borrowers (Z) for repayment, because they have in a sense, delegated the incentive for doing so to other members (Y). The loans again are too small for the bank to use legal devices to enforce repayment. Micro credit organizations turn clusters into network as resources, one form of social capital, which make individuals capable of getting access to economic capital. For X to call on social capital is to have access to a particular Y who can motivate the relevant Z to act on Y's behalf.

Micro credit institutions give loans to groups and groups have joint liability for physical collateral. Furthermore, women receive credit collateralized by group guarantee, not by tangible assets. It means the lender cannot claim the borrower's property if the borrower fails to repay loan. On the other hand, at least theoretically, the women who participate in group lending will identify collectively to resist their common oppression.

The tales of Grameen Bank, BRAC and NGOs working with microcredit are illustrative. The need for credit has always been felt among the poor in rural Bangladesh. But, they, poor women in particular, had limited access to credit. They also had a negative attitude towards credit. Commercial banks did not reach the poor simply because, for them the poor are not considered to be borrowers of commercial interest. Let us take the case of Grameen Bank. It mobilized and organized poor women to form informal networks. Networks created trust and responsibility, and eventually fostered cooperation among the members, facilitated "borrowers' interactions at group meetings and the ability to establish and strengthen networks outside their kinship groups and living quarters" (Lisa Lawrance 1998:2). Result is outstanding: the phenomenal repayment rate; the documented ability to reach more than 8 million rural poor households; small loans that can made a difference to a family's wellbeing through increasing income of whom more than 90 per cent are women.

For the Grameen model, of crucial importance is the recognition that any individual is a potential person and each individual has much more hidden inside, that must be given chance to be explored. What requires is creating an environment that would enable her or him to make use of her or his potential through their interactions (Interview with Professor Yunus, Lofoten, September 2008). Access to credit is necessary but not a sufficient condition. Borrowers must invest loans in income generating enterprising activities.

What impacts such changes at individual status did have for the community? In addressing this question I allow myself to present the findings of an impressive study by Dr.Eirik Jansen. Jansen observed changes that have taken place in a village near Dhaka. During 1976-1980 Jansen participated in a large poverty study carried out by the



Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies in the village of Bhaimara. During his recent revisit, in 2010, to the village he found tractors, scooters, taxis and “no more houses with straw on the roofs”. Almost all the 100 families in the village are provided with electricity, they have their own television. More importantly, the visible improvements were access to education, clean water, sanitation system etc. The primary school is refurbished.. Microcredit and different types of training gave women the opportunity for earning and thus becoming more independent and confident (Jansen, 2010).

### Discussion

Important theoretical issues are implicit in the above analysis of urban lifestyles and rural livelihood. The rise of mass consumption in the industrialised marked societies has given sociologists much to study. Many claim that consumerism has deteriorating effects on the quality of life, destroying traditional cultures, social relations and solidarity. Studies demonstrate culture of self-gratification and the market norms lead to general flattening of life-destroying community life. Seabrook (1996) thinks this as weakening of creativity, the decline of participatory communities. More than hundred years ago, Thorstein Veblen recognised conspicuous consumption- through which social elites enhanced their status and created differentiation. Contemporary theories present a reproductive view of consumption, which means consumers are reproduced (Maus 1967; Bourdieu 1986), and a view that focuses differentiation. This study of the consumption patterns of the Bengali urban elite highlights some aspects of their consumption behaviour; those may demonstrate quality of life, but, those also created differentiation and those have environmental consequences.

It is beyond the capacity of this paper go discuss these theories. I think, of special interest is the contention that economic actions are human beings interaction with their environment. The claim calls for a discussion on the notion of rationality of economic activities including production and consumption.

In my study, the rationality of economic actions is seen to be inherent in the pattern of interaction that takes place within and between networks. Life styles of the urban rich and the livelihood of the rural poor are manifestations of different patterns of interaction with social and natural environment.

What I mean by the pattern of interaction is that individuals’ attachment to society via social relations may take different forms. Social changes (modernization through industrialisation, urbanisation etc) involve changes in the form of attachment, expressed in increased rationalisation, individualism, institution based trust.<sup>19</sup> It particularly appears in the manifestation of exchange relations (as claimed by Polanyi), increased formal rationality and the extension of purposive rational action in modern market societies (as claimed by Weber). Weber viewed the market in terms of exchange and highest degree of formal rationality<sup>20</sup> implying the absence of influences restricting market autonomy.<sup>21</sup> Coase and Baker did so when they defined the market as an institution that facilitates exchange.<sup>22</sup>

A brief account of Polanyi,s distinctions between the substantive-and the formal meaning of the economic, and Weber’s distinction between formal rationality and substantive rationality is in its place here.

The substantive meaning does not imply individual choice or means. Human beings, livelihood may or may not involve the necessity of choice. “if choice there be, it need not to be induced by the limiting effect of a “scarcity” of means; indeed some of the most important physical and social conditions of livelihood such as the availability of air and water or a loving mother’s devotion to her infant are not as a rule, so limiting.<sup>23</sup>” The formal meaning derives from logic. Contrasting the substantive meaning, the formal meaning of economic implies a set of rules referring to choice between the alternative uses of insufficiency of means”. Polanyi claimed, it is only the substantive meaning of economic, which has the capability of yielding the concepts for any investigation empirical economies of the past and the present.

For Polanyi, the ways in which the economy acquires unity and stability may display different patterns. A combination of patterns is called the transactional mode or a “form of integration” of which are there three forms: (1) Reciprocity; (2) Redistribution; (3) Exchange. Social transformations are changes in forms of integration. In earlier societies, production, saving and consumption were defined by reciprocal norms. Political and religious

<sup>19</sup> Durkheim 1982; Durkheim and Maus 1963; Weber 1978; Polanyi 1944; Zukcker 1954.

<sup>20</sup> Weber 1922(1978) p.635

<sup>21</sup> See Weber 1968. See also Platteau 1993, Sugden 1986.

<sup>22</sup> Coase 1988,p.8. Baker 1981,p.211

<sup>23</sup> Polany, K. 1957,in Swedberg, R and Granovetter, M. 1985,pp.29.

institutions performed the redistributive transactions. The exchange mode integrates market societies in a strictly economic sense and the self-interested economic man is a product of the market.

Bangladesh is in transition. Modernisation has not come to the level of the Western industrialised countries. It is urbanising fast, yet, a vast majority still live in rural areas. In general, it is the reciprocity form of interaction that shapes the base of types of institutions (also networks) enabling the creation of a framework for the economy. It thus accords the substantive meaning of the economic.<sup>24</sup> Individuals' choice of means to attain their goals also depends on such form of interaction. People use networks to interpret and adjust to institutional arrangements, social relationships and the economy. Trust is embedded in family, community etc., which provide security, ensure access to material resources<sup>25</sup> and create better outcome for the family and the community. That is why the most important consumption of the family is meeting its obligations.<sup>26</sup> This may explain why goals of duties to networks come to the fore, and what economic goals that remain behind such non-economic goals. Prestige, honour etc., may appear as obligations. Network norms are important for how people earn and spend money. Conspicuous consumption may be necessary for maintaining social contacts, which may be used for economic gains.<sup>27</sup> It may be rational to invest in political parties or matrimonial purposes, rather than in business. These kinds of investments take place since the norm of reciprocity, featuring the form of integration,<sup>28</sup> has the capacity to employ both redistribution and exchange. Economic actions include both economic and non-economic social goals.

The analysis directs our attention to interactions between individuals and their networks that constitutes structures within which choices are made. This calls for broadening rationality of consumption by formulating such interaction more substantially, and doing so I draw on Weber's (1978) notion of substantive rationality. Whether individuals are striving for maximising economic utility or power, and sharing values, it is the "social arrangement" that makes the goal meaningful or rational. Differences in "social arrangements" generate different types of interests, which are at the root of two meanings of "economic" "substantive" and "formal." The first refers to the interaction of human beings with their social and natural environment. The second refers to a process of economising scarce means to make the most efficient use of what is available for particular ends—economists use only this formal meaning in their economic analyses.

The point is, it is not the self interest but societally ascribed means people adopt to achieve economic goals that explain rationality. Weber's notions of formal and substantive rationality will clarify my points further.

For Weber, economic actions are not only means-end relationships, but also means to meet other social demands. Rationality refers to a system of reasoning and standard of orientations involving choice of a course of action in a given situation and weighing up of means and ends. The ends may be economic, non-economic, immediate and ultimate. Weber claimed, such standards change with the process of social change and different types of rationality become dominant at different stages of social change. It is in this connection Weber distinguished between substantive and formal rationality.

The notion of substantive rationality is not restricted to the straightforward attainment of goals. It encompasses economic phenomena, which remain external to what can be calculated or predicted. It includes values, which are shaped both by ethical and utilitarian standards. It appears as social rationality characterising a total system where formal rationality is one aspect.<sup>29</sup> Sahlins' notion of ecological rationality is nothing but substantive rationality; it is related to the adaptiveness of a society or population through its culture.<sup>30</sup>

Substantive rationality of economic actions refers to the degree to which action is shaped by an orientation to ultimate values regardless of the nature of goals of action. It implies the adequacy of actions for achieving ultimate

<sup>24</sup> Polanyi's emphasis is on institutions, not networks. In my study, I found networks of various kinds influence economic activities, shape choices of goals and means to achieve the desired goals, as argued by Granovetter. I take an intermediary position between Polanyi and Granovetter.

<sup>25</sup> Much of sociological theory emphasized the necessity of freeing individuals from the grip of the family and other social relations that inhibit economic development. See for example Weber 1978, Parsons 1951.

<sup>26</sup> This is a common phenomenon in most developing societies. See Caldwell 1976.

<sup>27</sup> Such orientations of actions are reduced to two major dimensions of consumption behavior of my respondents; social demands and domination.

<sup>28</sup> The form of integration is identical with the mode of transaction.

<sup>29</sup> Godelier 1967:11- 21

<sup>30</sup> Sahlins 1969.

goals, including economic welfare, quality of life etc. Goals of actions are not determined by actors themselves but by the social environment. Thus, substantive rationality is rationality for something.<sup>31</sup>

Formal rationality implies the economy as guided by certain criteria, based mainly on market principles. Rationality may be thought of as formal when there is a view to expressing a situation, solving a problem or conceptualising an action by a straightforward application of calculable standards.<sup>32</sup>

These two types of rationality, though distinguishable yet, are connected. A high level of formal rationality is possible only under certain substantive conditions i.e. a mix of self-interest, moral sentiments etc. People in market societies enhance their interest through rational calculation, whereas people in non-market societies are relatively more bound to satisfy social demands whereby the economic motives may remain in shadow, as ultimate motives.

For Weber, high formal rationality is dependent on a wide extension of market norms. The highest degree of formal rationality takes the form of capital accounting in the highest degree of market freedom. There, work, aimed at pursuit of wealth acquisition, is an end in itself. This is due to a belief in the value of efficient performance as a duty and a virtue. The process can be looked upon as both cause and consequence of spread of formal rationality in all spheres of social life in western culture.

In developing societies, affiliations and obligations to social networks guide individuals' economic actions. Economic self-interest persists there as well. 'Adventure capitalism' involving speculation or impulse existed in all societies in all periods of history. This was different from acquisition of wealth through disciplined work and rational calculation.<sup>33</sup>

The consumption patterns of the urban elites in Bangladesh are evidence of social life as the shaper of consumption preferences and practices. Consumer preferences and life styles that include food, housing, wedding ceremonies, cars etc. say important things about their obligations to those whom they interact with, who they want to be and what claims to social status they would like to make. Consuming and owning goods carry various meanings, which are associated with social and cultural values, enables individuals to communicate and participate in social life. Consumption preferences also play important role in economic life. Rationality of consumption includes both economic and social utilities.

In the account I gave previous section, individuals' perceptions of utility, cultural values, network norms and personal interests coincide and affect choice of goals. The utility of what people consume depends on what satisfaction and pleasure they gain by meeting obligations to network members, and their desire for recognition through consumption. Furthermore, utilities of any single commodity people derive from their social standing. My analysis accords the assumption that individuals take others, their past experiences and future outcomes of their present consumption into consideration when they make preferences. This assumption calls for recognizing multiple characteristics or utilities of consumption goods and defining consumption not only as goal in itself but also as a means to achieve other goals. The perceptions of obligations to networks has important impacts on perception of utility. People maximise utility, but they take both social and economic utilities into their consideration. They derive multiple utilities from their interaction with others. Their perception of utility depends further on the social context in which interactions takes place. This explains the urban-rural contrasts.

### **Concluding remarks**

What general conclusion can be derived from the above discussion? Clearly, life styles of the Bengali urban rich is not conducive to sustainability. The rural livelihood, on the other hand, shows adaptability. Consumption behaviour of the Bengali urban rich not only affirms the assertion that "having things is good", their aspiration goes beyond. For them "consuming is happiness", and "having more is even better". Their consumption behaviour also has accumulation strategy. Therefore, consumption is aimed at creation of exclusive networks, which may be used for privileged access to material resources. Consumption is important for the exercise of power and for competition for resources. The rich direct their consumption and investments at forming ties with significant others as wide as possible. Luxury consumption provides them with dispersed social networks, which are important to get access to more resources and secure political power. They compete for resources and power, which may take pervasive forms, including wastage. Their life-style have negative impacts on social and natural environment.

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<sup>31</sup> Weber 1968: 85-86.

<sup>32</sup> Weber 1968: 85

<sup>33</sup> Weber 1970: p.17

Rural agro-economy is simple, labour-intensive, small-scale, based on traditional technology, interaction between human beings and their fellows, as well as between them and the nature. The rationality of the peasant economy is rationality for something else, includes both others people interact with and the future goals, implying both the substantive meaning of the economic and the notion of substantive rationality. Such an interaction promotes cooperation. The rural agro-based economy can provide employment and hence additional income in rural areas where poverty and outmigration are common.

The combined effects of these rural economic activities can be observed in the increased income of rural household, increased enrolment in educational institutions of the rural poor, female students in particular empowering women. Small-scale economic activities played very important role in the process. Small loans, microcredit, and new method of agricultural cultivations made significant contributions to the welfare of the poorest of the poor, the rural women, through providing possible means by which they gained control of their economic life. This achievement, in turn, exerted pressure for social change that included child education, women's participation in the economy and politics. There are also cases of borrowers left worse off. The varied effect, apparently, the findings suggests, is due to structures of network relations. The analysis, therefore, includes a reassessment of how NET (Network Embedded Trust) works including the concept of social capital.

The picture is not that rosy. Poor peasants also have economic motive and they compete for scarce resources. But, the norm of generalised reciprocity in their community life promotes cooperation. They find cooperation and living with nature is beneficial for them. They are capable of adjusting to the changed environment and find new ways to survive. The outcome is bountiful. Not only employment in agricultural activities and small business provided the livelihoods for the majority of the rural families, the rural economy added more to the GDP of Bangladesh. The Economist (February 2013) claims the path through the field and microcredit. Most studies also confirms the claim. Big may be better, but not always. The case in hand suggest small is beautiful and beyond; small is bountiful. This is the subject matter for a forthcoming paper aimed at telling the story of increased agricultural production through small-scale business activities

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