

### CONCEPTION AND RESEARCH IDEAS

of

Research Initiatives Bangladesh (RIB)

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### 1. Humanizing the Poverty Discourse\*

In recent times poverty alleviation has become a very fashionable activity in development discourse, research and action. The "establishment" - i.e. national and international power and professional structures - view of poverty puts the "poor" under an externally conceived "poverty line" and professes to want to get them above this line by giving them some kind of a "subsistence kit". Years of effort pretensions and discourses by the establishments have done little toward promoting the professed objective. Their statistics sometimes show some nominal progress, but this statistics itself is blissfully ignorant of the unfolding reality of life: new threats to the subsistence of people arising out of drastic decline in the quality of certain vital requisites for existence, some of which are included in the "subsistence kit" only very shoddily and some are totally ignored, today dominate the character of this reality. It is not in dispute that services like medical care, education, law and order and legal redress of inhuman oppression of many kinds, vital for living with minimum honour and security of life, body and property, have declined drastically in quality in recent years, implying in effect a fall in real incomes of people in terms of their "purchasing power" vis-a-vis these very essential services for subsistence. This alone prompts one to wonder whether there is a difference between "poverty watchers" and human beings! But looking beyond subsistence one has more reason to feel uneasy with the conventional treatment of the question of poverty.

#### **subsistence - of what?**

Some quarters are conceptualizing poverty in terms of a "one-dollar-a-day" line - a shabby conception that does not merit discussion. The "poor" themselves have their own conception of what they lack and need most, about which poverty watchers seem to be blissfully ignorant: when more caring researchers have gone and asked the "poor" about their criteria for "poverty" and "ill-being": they have presented elements like

- Ø lacking land, livestock, farm equipment, grinding mills etc.,
- Ø bad housing,
- Ø means to decently bury their dead,

- Ø having to accept demeaning or low-status work,
- Ø means to face crisis,
- Ø and some such others elements.<sup>1</sup>

Other respondents might perhaps add, as necessities for simply physical subsistence in specific circumstances, elements like

- Ø more serious medical care;
- Ø old-age security;
- Ø entitlement for women to safe transportation to and back from work-place;
- Ø means to buy law-and-order for security of life honour and property, and to buy justice when violated;
- Ø and such other obviously essential needs for subsistence.

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However, perhaps more puzzling is the preoccupation of poverty watchers with means of physical subsistence alone however inadequate the criteria are in their own terms, as if people (the "poor") are "livestock" to be kept alive to produce milk eggs and flesh for the "non-poor". As if they are not the same breed as we ourselves are, human as we call ourselves!

The humans of pre-historic days, who were unquestionably "poor" by any standard of today, are known to have excelled in some of the fine arts (e.g. as evidenced by their arts on the cave walls and rock shelters) despite heavy preoccupation for physical subsistence. And to build modern life from out of the caves the human has shown not only his/her urge for coming out of the pressure for physical subsistence but also to continue to express oneself creatively and aesthetically - undoubtedly every significant human step 'forward' toward modern civilization has been a step not only to meet their needs for physical subsistence and move beyond this toward advanced consumerism but also to do all this with creativity and taste. At the same time, the pursuit of knowledge, both to understand "who I am" and to apply knowledge in creative acts, have also been a constant pursuit of humans. This is what differentiates the homo sepean from other species<sup>2</sup>. To say only the obvious, in order to subsist as a human being one's brain (if not the "heart" as a transcendental entity) needs nourishment and 'entitlements' as much as one's brawns, for 'finer' pursuits like knowledge, beauty and creativity.

And as the cave dwellers have demonstrated, there is no linear progression in concentration of human activity from physical to the 'finer' aspects of subsistence - human activity in all ages has embraced both simultaneously, often attending to both in the same activity organically satisfying both the urges together, and often trading off the former for the latter according to unstandardized patterns of personal choices even under conditions of physical or material duress, e.g. deliberately sacrificing needed calories or medical treatment to devote scarce time and resources for pursuit of the finer urges of life. And who are we, intellectuals economists or whoever, to dictate that people should first satisfy the 'basic material needs' neglecting the 'basic human needs' to be attended later (or not to be attended at all, for we seem to be satisfied if all the "poor" are merely brought above a "poverty line" dictated by the needs primarily of material subsistence and eager to certify that, therefore, very impressive

'development' has taken place!).

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### **"hard core poverty"**

A notion of "hard core poor" has also become very popular among poverty watchers. This is identified with persons acutely struggling for sheer physical survival. The need for urgent action to uplift such persons is undeniable. But even such persons are also homo sepeans, and there is a question of what Amartya Sen has called choice of the "mode of life" to which they should be entitled, not just entitlement to the basic means of physical survival. The poverty of a domestic sweeper crouching and creeping on the floor to sweep the dust fallen from the elite's shoes, or a rickshaw puller wasting his life dragging other people with his leg muscles, can never be alleviated by merely raising his/her income - there remains the question of a life of dignity and pursuit of the human urges of existence to which even the "hard core poor" must be entitled and simultaneously, rather than as an entitlement for a "later stage of their lives", perhaps when the economy has "developed" sufficiently!

In asserting this we may refer to a dialogue one of us once had with a group of landless rural labourers about how a drowning person not knowing how to swim may be helped<sup>3</sup>. The need for someone helping him/her out of water cannot be in dispute; but there are different ways of rescuing such a "hardest core case" - e.g. by lifting her out of water like a log, versus having her place one hand on the back of the rescuer and swim to shore with the other hand so that she has a role of her own in solving her problem. In the said dialogue there was a clear assertion from the "poor" that no one likes to be helped by others like a log, and even in dire distress every human being wants the dignity of participating in the process of his/her own rescue or rehabilitation. The urge to participate, and in that process to advance in knowledge culture and creativity to express and fulfil oneself in whatever be one's calling or situation, is a basic urge of all humans however "poor" one may be. And this urge, as we have said above, is not a "second or third phase urge" - it is an urge that is co-existent with the urge to survive physically. And no external agent is entitled to prioritize these urges for anybody.

And finally, having built the foundation of human civilization the prehistoric cave-dweller who undoubtedly struggled to survive and died without adequate medical care has perhaps earned the courtesy by his/her creative and aesthetic pursuits to be asked of the minimum survival needs for his/her human soul as part of the measure of "hard core" poverty.

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### **dialectical and holistic character of human needs**

Social scientists trained only in the positivist tradition see things as either black or white. But reality is dialectical, embodying opposites as co-existing dualities, of which at any time one face or a particular synthesis of the opposites may be dominant, and this may change in response to specific circumstances or stimuli. The mix of material and human needs to which a person gives priority at any level of income and entitlements varies from person to person, community to

community, circumstances to circumstances, historic age to historical age. Among the "poor" there exist beggars without much visible by way of a sense of dignity; there also exist persons who would eat from the garbage trash on the street but not beg, or steal or commit dacoity to survive - certainly more dignified (also challenging their creativity!) than begging. There exist "poor" communities who take their poverty as a way of life in its evolution as it was for the ancient cave dwellers, engaging in pursuits for physical as well as finer pursuits according to circumstances and their own priorities, and proud of themselves as a people notwithstanding their acute struggle for life (like the adivasis in the Bhoomi Sena movement in Maharashtra, India<sup>4</sup> or the tepitans of Mexico<sup>5</sup>. Many are influenced in their view of themselves by the dazzle of elite life around them and the gaze of the elite and poverty-watchers upon them; but the duality remains. And the opposite - a sense of self-pride and creative engagement to show what stuff they are made of notwithstanding their material poverty, are known to have been rekindled by appropriate stimuli<sup>6</sup>.

Human needs and urges, furthermore, are holistic and not cartesian, simultaneously and organically embracing many dimensions both quantitative and qualitative. For both these reasons - dialectical and holistic character of human needs - notions of poverty and of poverty alleviation need to be reconceptualized if they are to serve and fulfil people and not master over them for the benefit primarily of the "masters", and also to get the best out of the people living, as they will live for long times to come, their lives of "poverty" in the modern world. And in the final analysis the conception must be that of the people themselves and not elite patrons/well-wishers of the people, for any social conception bestows power to the conceiver that may be misused.

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### **poverty as denial of share of civilization**

"the humanness of human beings is not in just subsisting<sup>7</sup> ... civilization consists of transcending mere subsistence."

- Rabindranath Tagore (Letters from Russia)

It is still legitimate to present one's own conception as a contribution to a social dialogue toward articulation of such a notion of profound social import. In doing this one may note, first, that the notion of poverty did not exist prior to differentiation of societies into the "rich" and the "poor". Hence poverty is a concept relative to affluence, and the "poor" relative to the "rich", as part of a co-existing duality. Indeed, one way to alleviate poverty would be to alleviate (relative) affluence. This, indeed, is ordained in the Constitution of Bangladesh as one of its fundamental principles by way of an egalitarian society, which I understand the affluent of the country who are ruling it have chosen to ignore.

The problem of poverty arises in this country in the first instance from out of this defiance within the society of its constitutional principle of egalitarianism. "Globalization" has accentuated this problem further by bringing the whole world of affluence in constant full view of the "poor". The notion of poverty, from the point of view of those viewers of global affluence who do not have a right to touch it, must be derived from a sense they naturally develop of wanting a legitimate

share of this affluence - i.e. a share of 'modern civilization' which is claimed to be represented by this affluence. A concern of the elite for poverty alleviation cannot be accepted as a mere 'humanitarian' pretence to see the "poor" somehow subsist with the elite chasing the moon; nor can "poverty alleviation" in such a "livestock" sense serve as a "safety net" against social unrest which is often aspired, with the 'animal' somehow helped to subsist and its surplus taken away to help in the elite's moon chase.

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two types of 'crimes'

A cursory look at household expenditure and behaviour patterns of people with low incomes in the neighbourhood or even below of the "poverty line" drawn by poverty watchers will reveal two different types of 'crime' by the "poor" in their bid to have a share of modern civilization.

One type of 'crime' is "stealing" from the "subsistence kit" that poverty watchers are granting the "poor" - it will be seen that these people steal money from this kit and spend it for items of "unauthorized" consumption - e.g. an elegant wearing outfit to visit friends and neighbours and receive guests; some little jewelry (at least imitation bangles); a watch and a radio if not a TV set; a second hand harmonium to help one's daughter learn Nazrul sangeet, a broken cricket bat to bid for inclusion in the World Cup team; family and social hospitality; participation in religious and social festivities; occasionally going to a movie or "jatra"; travel to visit relatives and even indulging in some sight seeing; buy and read books beyond the meagre entitlement provided in the subsistence kit for "education"; dowry for daughter's marriage (however unethical the practice is); protection of life property and honour; the consideration the helpless mother seeks to buy from the invading mastans to take her daughter "one at a time because she is only ten"8; etc.

With lack of adequate means such 'criminal action' by otherwise honest people, of stealing from the "subsistence kit" to pay for "unauthorized consumption" results variously in sacrificing some or other of the "authorized consumption" items and/or incurring heavy debt and eventually losing assets in an attempt to simultaneously meet both. Obviously, if such 'honest thieves' are to be really helped to consume the full quota of calories etc. provided for them in the "subsistence kit" they need to be given a larger allowance to provide for the unauthorized "leakage" therefrom.

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Those who do not see the reason for remaining 'honest' under these circumstances indulge in criminal action of the second type, i.e. outright crimes by way of violence upon others to claim their share of the affluence they see around them and on the TV screen thanks to modern technology, criminal action that we know has infected even the law-and-order services of the day. While human consumption urges may know no bounds and criminal action results from a desire to chase the moon as many among the affluent are indulging in, it may be suggested that the urge to have a reasonable share of modern civilization that is staring in one's eyes today as never before, motivates many-a-person to turn into a hijacker to snatch the purse or jewelry of a passer-by at dagger or gun-point.

We suggest that the concept of poverty as a humane as well as 'social safety net' notion be derived from a notion of giving to all a share of modern civilization instead of professing merely to condemn people to live the unhuman lives of livestock.

In a notional sense such a humane concept of poverty was implicitly articulated long ago by Rabindranath Tagore, who equated the very notion of development with every person progressively sharing not just (physical) subsistence but also the 'full glory of humanhood', in the following words:

"One sign of a nation advancing in the road to development is that the insignificance of every person of that nation is progressively disappearing. To the extent possible everyone will gain the right to claim the full glory of humanhood. Everyone there will live in decent house, get decent education, eat well, clothe well, will be protected from diseases, and will have sufficient leisure and individuality. (Kalantar, Collected Works of Tagore, Vol 24, pp 313-14).

The difference between this notion of 'decent' living, and 'subsistence' ("insignificant") living, with which poverty watchers are preoccupied, is immediate.

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How does one measure 'decent' education and eating and clothing "well"? Can a "poverty line" be drawn separating 'decency' or 'significant living' from 'insignificance' ? It will perhaps be fruitless to enter into a debate on whether one should be entitled to graduate as a "non-poor", to the collected works of Shakespeare and Tagore or a recreation trip to Rangamati; nor should it be desirable to seek to prescribe a precise minimum consumption kit for everybody denying one the right to choose from alternatives. But there can be a social consensus through social discourse on the broad level of aggregate income one should be entitled to as a minimum reasonable share of modern civilization, leaving the choices of specific directions of spending the income to the person concerned. The elite already have such a notion about themselves for income-tax purposes, in the tax-exempt income granted by the Finance Minister, who by thus granting obviously acknowledges that it is difficult for an elite to live below this line or unfair to ask one to do so. This "poverty-line for the elite" is also periodically reviewed and moved upward, following discourses between insiders and outsiders in the government/parliament among the elite, keeping in view the moving cost of living and world standard of elite consumption. The same Finance Minister has a different "poverty-line" for the non-elite. But should these be different? On what grounds? Shouldn't the tax-exempt income then be adopted as the "poverty-line" for all classes since the line already exists as a collective articulation of the vanguards of society as to the minimum income needs of its citizens? And shouldn't political parties seeking people's votes for state power be expected to vie with each other in proposing in their election manifestoes modification of this "poverty-line" for all classes of the society in line with rising global standard of consumption?<sup>9,10</sup>

With the best of intentions and efforts it will, of course, remain a long way for the general population of the society to reach anywhere near such a "human poverty line". (It remains a long way, of course, for the bulk of them to reach the "livestock" line for that matter.) But the goal will be a more worthy one to be set and to thrive for as a very concept of "development"(c.f.

Tagore quoted above) in order for "development" to have a humane meaning for the general populace of the society. In particular in the age of "globalization" that we are being asked to be so excited about, the "livestock" poverty-line is consistent only with an ideology of the elite of society (and foreign investors) wanting to exploit the cheap labour of the masses keeping them as it envisages at a bare physical subsistence level, thus giving an altogether perverse, inhuman, meaning of "globalization".

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One may surmise that once all the people in a society are thus given a share of civilization, which itself will shift upward as civilization (world standards of consumption and leisure) progresses, as the tax-exemption income limit does, 'crimes' of both the above kinds - i.e. stealing one's own resources away from "prescribed" to "unprescribed" consumption, and violence upon others for augmenting one's entitlements - will be reduced considerably. The 'social safety net' concept will also then become redundant.

die "poor", living full

However, for most societies this will take a long time to attain, and millions of "poor" will live and die "poor" in the meanwhile. There will, therefore, remain a serious question of keeping these people 'satisfied' with their lives doomed to poverty, with a promise that may be fulfilled only by their descendants in some uncertain future. How can "criminal activities" of either of the above two kinds be minimized without increasing pressure on the law-and-order machinery which itself is a drain of scarce resources of society and also subject to infection by the same virus? The answer, I suggest, lies not in promises but in the people having a role in their lives that may fulfil them even in their poverty.

Some instances of such roles in the lives of the "poor" are:

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numerous initiatives by the peasantry in Bangladesh to mobilize themselves and advance their lives after independence. Of these the most outstanding was the self-reliance movement in 1973-74 in 60 villages in the district of Rangpur, committed to collective effort to promote village development rejecting all outside material assistance, addressing first the needs of their poorest, and rejecting even relief and the gruel kitchen during the 1974 flood and famine which hit this district the hardest.

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the tepitans of Mexico, who stiffened and rejected the term "poor" used by a western visitor to characterize them who was gazing down at their impressive self-mobilization to stand up from the ravages of an earthquake, and called themselves "not poor, but (proud) tepitans" (Sachs, loc cit);

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the profoundly enlightening experience one of the authors of this paper gained when he visited the work of ORAP11 in Matabeleland, Zimbabwe in 1987 and told the mobilized villagers that they were not poor but very rich in showing the world the path to development (Rahman 1987): he was profusely thanked by a villager involved in the movement "for telling us that we are not poor", as if a burden had been lifted from his broad shoulders which had been aching with the indignity of being labelled as "poor" as if he was someone "inferior" despite his proud role in community self-development.

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the people of Barogram near Dhaka who seem doomed to live with unspeakably polluted water flowing through their habitat with all the wastes of the metropolis which is draining them of their lives, with no solution to the problem in the cards in the lifetime of most of them. There is no point in promising "poverty-alleviation" to these people who have to accept their life as a "cursed" or "challenging" one depending on how one stands up and faces it. Their challenge is to seek a meaning in their fated life standing by each other in solidarity, facing the terrible odds of their life collectively, thus showing their worth as humans and dying gloriously fighting against the odds leaving their imprint on the pages of Bangladesh history to inspire others to face life's odds with the same human spirit and valour.

Such a role in advancing or living their hard lives gallantly is "poverty alleviation" by itself, in terms both of progress when possible according to people's own priorities, and of enhancing their lives by way of tackling their problems in communal solidarity thus fulfilling themselves in creative engagement as human beings showing what stuff they are made of. Even in dire material poverty, and for that matter in any situation one may be placed in life (except in isolated prison cells) this fulfillment is possible if people have the space and power to become the principal actors in their own lives. And notwithstanding the pace at which this advances their material lives - for who are we to dictate others' choices - shouldn't such self-engagement be the most strategic element in a social thrust for poverty alleviation according to priorities by the people themselves?

This does not negate the role of others to assist in the people's own efforts to enhance the quality of their life with their own priorities, which is what poverty alleviation must mean. On the contrary, those with structural power, resources, access to relevant knowledge or possessing relevant expertise have an immense lot to contribute toward empowering and assisting people, as friends and not as masters, as 'equals' and not 'superiors', to enhance their lives as principal actors.

eradication of 'poverty of values'

In assisting for enhancement of people's lives care need to be taken to see that people's values are also enhanced toward desirable norms of civilized social life such as democracy, care for fellow humans, freedom of individuals within the framework of reciprocal rights, gender equality, rights of children, abuse of power and privileges, equity and social justice in sharing social wealth, submission to socially or communally determined procedures of law and justice, relation with nature and environment etc. (see section 2, dream four, and also the Ballarat address of

one of the authors<sup>12</sup>). The ordinary people have some of these values in their indigenous culture; some - e.g. gender equality and child rights - they do not or may not have in desirable measures. This, of course, applies to the elite as well, and poverty alleviating work must constantly strive to raise social awareness to eradicate such 'poverty of values'.

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### 2. An assembly of dreams for RIB's work

The initiators of RIB have dreams/visions (hereafter 'dreams') of their own on the work of RIB. These dreams which will guide the work of RIB, are presented below:

Dream one

Background:

Experience in working in a poverty-alleviation research programme in Bangladesh indicates that:

1.  
  
there is a very limited research community in Bangladesh with the requisite background and expertise;
2. those who have the know-how are much sought after by donor governments/ agencies and are often engaged by them;
3. even if they undertake socially relevant research on their own or for others, their knowledge of the situation of, or interest in, or interaction with, the poor are limited;
4. most of them undertake research as a job/earning opportunity and not because of any vision or passion;
5. since the demands for the research do not originate from the intended beneficiaries, their outputs often end up being unutilizable;
6. even where a research generates good output, at least in terms of knowledge creation, dissemination is often poor;
7. when we advertised for research proposals in the Bengali newspapers, we received a large number of them from people who did not fit the conventional definition of a researcher but were more attuned to the ground and had good ideas for research, though lacking in proper presentation or articulation. I used to call them barefoot researchers. I felt here was a fertile ground for us to sow the seeds for future researchers.

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Dream:

RIB contributes to filling some of the gaps or removing some of the deficiencies mentioned above. Towards that goal, RIB tries to do the following:

One, develop an alternative research community in Bangladesh. These include university students who do not have the opportunity or means to obtain a good background in research, and others who may not even have much formal education but are socially conscious and could be good candidates for training/capacity building as researchers. RIB undertakes an effort to identify such persons and provide them with support/opportunities to develop as researchers. As for non-university candidates, RIB seeks to establish partnership arrangements with local journalists, activists and social workers throughout Bangladesh to identify them. Through this method RIB also tries to decentralize its activities as much as possible. Thus some key efforts in RIB are devoted to capacity building and spreading RIB's contacts and activities throughout the country on a decentralized basis.

Two, RIB plays a coordinating role among the various research/developmental agencies engaged in efforts towards poverty alleviation in Bangladesh, by way of bringing them together on important issues, providing them a neutral platform, to share knowledge and ideas, to identify respective niches, to develop mutual interest in co-operation, to avoid duplication, to identify research areas, prospective researchers or candidates for training etc.

Three, RIB tries to bring government agencies engaged in policy making and implementing governmental programmes into the fold of research activities in the country or at least make them more research oriented. Government officials could themselves make demands on the research community to undertake research in areas where they see a need. RIB tries to develop a partnership relationship with them.

Four, RIB initiates more research into the causes of poverty, the socio-economic relationships that create poverty and help perpetuate them. The results are then utilized in sensitizing the public and creating mass awareness. RIB develops an advocacy mechanism through partnership with others.

Five, RIB initiates more research activities to identify areas of law which contribute to, create, and/or sustain poverty, and on needed legal support to poverty groups.

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Dream two

Background:

The traditional view of development planning relied on research support in terms of economic objectives such as growth with equity or growth alone. Human dimensions of development were largely ignored. In recent times, the philosophy of development has started focus on human development. The approach is to shift from "objectifying" people to focus on the need to recognize human dignity irrespective of economic status or class. The vision for development now being promoted centre on sustainable human development with focus on good governance and poverty alleviation. It is no longer measured only in terms of less than a dollar a day or calorie intake. The non-income dimensions of poverty encompasses such areas as education, health, nutrition and access to other public goods such as transport and communication and equality in treatment in all matters that affect the life of a citizen.

Dream:

Modes of knowledge production

RIB tries to effect a shift from the conventional modes of knowledge production in isolation of the society that is to benefit from them. These modes are generally represented by expatriate consultant-dominated reports for policy planning and programme and project development with some input from local experts. It is also exemplified by academic research.

The alternative mode which RIB seeks to support is collaborative research involving various stakeholders including non-researchers. The key researcher is seen as a participant observer rather than the influencing actor in the process. The focus is upon identifying and harmonizing the needs at the national level and those of the users to avoid conflict because national level policy needs are often dominated by political considerations which influence agenda for action.

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Addressing knowledge gaps

RIB dreams of helping create conditions that conduce to the growth of a just and equitable society with Man (includes Women) as the centerpiece and with Nature (environment) as a loving partner. This is sought to be done through reducing knowledge gaps that exist in multiple areas:

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sustainable natural resources in a situation of declining availability of land and water;

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sustainable rural and urban livelihood for the disadvantaged;

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human rights guaranteed by the Constitution and other international conventions/treaties;

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in-country capacity building of individuals, institutions and groups to translate research results into action;

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the need for demand-driven research that promote dignity of individuals and promote social cohesion;

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structure and process that impede and sustain poverty;

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usefulness of indigenous and cost-effective technology and its application.

Dream three

RIB supports the following kinds of research:

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A broader conceptualization and deeper analysis of poverty alleviation in Bangladesh. Up to now research on poverty alleviation has been quite narrowly focused, e.g. poverty estimates, whether poverty is declining by using different income/nutrition estimates, and evaluation of some targeted programs. The debates surrounding poverty have been led by economists around issues of measurements, data, and effectiveness of micro credit. After years of this narrow research RIB considers it useful to encourage research on poverty alleviation by people from other disciplines or by multi-disciplinary research teams to debate what poverty really means, its various dimensions and what poverty alleviation will entail in the Bangladesh context, i.e., what are the different actions that need to be taken. Also, under-researched is the issue of gender (or for that matter minority status due to ethnicity and religion) in poverty to which RIB gives special attention.

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Analysis of how poverty may impact on social and political behavior. Recently with resurgent interest on terrorism in the USA there has been much debate as to whether or not poverty breeds violence, terrorism, etc. RIB initiates investigation on what is really causing increase in social and political violence in Bangladesh. How would poverty alleviation fit into this debate? What is the economic basis of our social and political behavior?

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Investigation of whether and how rise in religious fundamentalism or extremist position may be related to poverty. We do not have good exploration of the links between religious fundamentalism and its programmes and with poverty and poverty alleviation. We know that religious groups also have their pro-poor programmes which may be compared with those of the non-religious NGOs. RIB initiates research in this direction.

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Synthesis of lessons learnt from the various activities of NGOs and Grameen Bank as to what worked, what were the gaps and the challenges ahead.

RIB supports the start of some initiatives to improve the quality of research in Bangladesh, particularly deeper analysis of data, looking into causalities, linking various levels and forces, etc. Right now most of the research projects report simply on raw data, without proper analysis as to what the data reveal or conceal.

RIB also initiates web-based networking with different groups interested in Bangladesh studies. go to top

Dream four

RIB recognizes Bangladesh in all its diversity. Diversities are enhanced because of the lack of a unified and single national market. Thus many issues like development, governance, indigenous technology, even nature of poverty and price or wage structures are prone to regional variation. Future research should address these variations. e.g. problems of governing khas land distribution would be different in an area ecologically threatened by shrimp cultivation, from an area subject to slash and burn agriculture or from an area where the occupation of char lands are now controlled by modern day lathials carrying AK 47s.

Economically deprived people also do not form a monolithic unit. Reasons for their deprivation as much as the nature of such deprivation may stem from factors such as ethnicity, religion, sexuality and these should be seen both as cultural constructions as well as in their historical specificity. For example violence against a certain section of the population takes place not only due to economic vulnerabilities e.g. for possession of land, wealth and other resources, but also because memories of such violence/oppression have been constituted in the individual and collective consciousness of people and communities. Thus historical research is currently not strong in the research agenda on poverty alleviation, and RIB gives special focus on this in its work.

Being a deltoid region, Bangladesh is a country continuously in flux. Not only is the land being continuously and simultaneously formed and unformed due to shifting rivers, its borders too defy rigid definition. Hence annual flooding can make farce of the attempt to construct barbed wire fences to keep out strangers as much as it can create a surrealist situation where people from East and West Bengal are forced to take shelter in a village school within Bangladeshi territory. Such porous borders are a constant source of worry for national policymakers, precisely because common people who are often smugglers and arms traffickers, celebrate them. The problem is, however, compounded by policymakers using age-old paradigms of national security and national development in an increasingly globalizing world.

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Globalization itself has brought both with it both ills and blessings. Because of globalization women in urban and semi urban areas can get two meals a day instead of the usual one or half. But also because of globalisation women and children are being abandoned by their husbands who do not have any agricultural land to plough since they are being taken over by shrimp farmers. The complexities are immense. RIB initiates an agenda with realistic activities which challenges policymakers to be more adventurous, dynamic and creative.

Dream five

The social history of Bangladesh is marked by a spirit of protest and the language of resistance. A popular urge for democracy, justice and freedom have been the key words. Many have interpreted these in a wider sense, i.e.

(1)

not only democracy because Bangalis could not access established power, but for a wider

participation in state, community and family, which would entail respect for rights and responsibilities for honouring the rights of others.

(2)

justice not only as an overturning of power to enable the oppressed to become oppressors, but a just state and society that allows space for diversity, for survival, for quality of life and for freedoms. Justice is broader than a legal disposition.

(3)

freedom entails opportunities for economic, social, political and personal choice in expressing beliefs, in promoting personal and political relations, that do not inflict controls on others, but allow space to individuals and groups.

RIB pursues these notions of democracy, justice and freedom in analyzing and examining the situation in Bangladesh. The criteria of individual and collective choice is based on human rights, and RIB engages in developing :

1.

concepts of democracy and justice as they have evolved in political rhetoric and what they mean to ordinary individuals -women, men and children of different communities (ethnic or religious/non religious).

2.

state citizen relations, from the macro to the grass roots level what in today's speak is referred to as "governance". This would mean looking at established norms of protecting knowledge amongst the powerful, (bureaucrats and others) rather than build patterns of communication to encourage participation.

3.

mechanisms for retaining control of state power at different levels. The role of political and family ideologies.

4. relations within the community need also to be analyzed in terms of the powerful/dispossessed- through mechanisms such as the shalish, or other local forms of justice, the emergence of gang culture, and countervailing forces.

5. relations within the family -the resistance to gender equality and women's rights. And women's struggles as individuals and collectively. Recording of oral histories.

6. new forms of work within globalized markets, division between contribution of workers and investors, the emergence of a neo consumerist class and the abeyance of democratic values.
7. threats to the environment from capitalistic development.

Many of these issues are the other side of the coin on poverty debates. The question of poverty cannot be addressed without looking at democracy, justice and freedom.

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Dream six

1. RIB concentrates on research with the active participation of the disadvantaged people at all stages, right from the design of the program to impact assessment.
2. RIB prepare an inventory of research done so far in this area in order to avoid possible duplication and overlaps.
3. RIB programs focus on several issues including access to productive assets, awareness and solidarity building, skill development, organisational experience, empowerment of women ethnicity and poverty, and specific product, service or technology's significant potential contribution to the quality of life of the poor.
4. RIB takes up some integrated programs embracing several of these elements and explore the effects of the synergy on the over all socio economic status of the poor and the disadvantaged.

The purpose of RIB's research is to study and identify the best ways and means for the poor to improve their status primarily by using their own knowledge and tangible resources, supplemented as necessary by externally provided inputs. RIB does not limit its activities to pure studies and considers providing assistance to sponsor concrete development as action research. RIB closely involves the people in designing and elaborating the individual program documents.

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Dream seven

### Participatory research

RIB promotes participatory research (or PR) and participatory evaluation of activities, where the people participate in groups and collective bodies as full subjects of research by themselves or in partnership with external researchers and not as objects of research<sup>13</sup>. Participatory research, often called "Participatory Action Research" (PAR), unites with people's action to advance their lives in a continuous rhythm of "reflection-action-reflection" which is, indeed, the rhythm of life itself; for it is distinctive of homo sepians, before they act, to reflect and inquire, and after action to review the experience from action for taking further action.

RIB promotes and assist PAR by bringing animators/facilitators in the service of PAR who will stimulate and assist in people's reflections and actions without dictating or dominating. It assists the people in promoting their collectively investigated systematic inquiries (research) and their



collective validation so that such inquiries can claim the status of 'science' - people's science - at par with professional science<sup>14</sup>. This is of the utmost importance not only for its value in steering people's self-action with systematic collective intellect, but also to break the assumed monopoly of elite intellect and the 'means of thinking' which is serving as a source of elite power over the people. RIB works to break this monopoly not only by stimulating and assisting participatory research but also by assisting in and facilitating the development of a network (eventually a 'school') of popular research through forums like people's seminars, conferences, journals and other publications, study tours, etc., so that "demand-led" research, including action-research, progressively attains higher quality and status both intellectually as well as in terms of the size of the popular base that it will represent. RIB sees literacy itself as integrating alphabet literacy with 'social literacy' to be sought through PR. For promoting all this the capacitation of "animator-facilitators" is one crucial function of RIB. Finally, RIB seeks to promote solidarity and mutually enriching interaction between professional science, and popular science that will be emerging from the above processes, both to aim at contributing to poverty alleviation in partnership, rather than vying, with each other.

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### Creative Bangladesh

One dreams also of a creative Bangladesh led by popular creativity that advances their lives as well as presents a proud persona of the nation to the world. Unfortunately, recorded history of the country has paid more attention to the roles of its rulers in advancing or retarding the country, and of popular struggles more of a 'protest' and 'demand' nature. Little has been systematically studied by way of creative actions of the people and of other quarters ("science for the people") to advance people's lives. But we know that such actions have always been taken. Future advancement of the people can take both inspiration as well as experience from them, refine them progressively in quality through PAR, and share them amongst themselves to build broader collective movements for popular creativity and creativity of "science for the people". RIB seeks to contribute in this area by

1.

digging out the history of popular creativity of Bangladesh and creativity of professionals/social service agencies in advancing people's self-propelled lives, by way of 'appropriate' technological and social mobilizational innovations in different economic, engineering, scientific, social and cultural sectors.

2.

preparing an inventory of current economic/social/technological/cultural innovations relevant for advancement of popular life all over the country, study their respective promises, spread the news of the promising ones, stimulate and assist people to apply them, adapt them, beat them with newer innovations.

3.

promoting people-to-people 'technical cooperation' and networking toward a total social movement to promote popular creativity for advancing people's lives in cooperation with

people-oriented professional science and technology.

4.

As a research theme hitherto neglected by all researchers, research on the human urges and conduct of the homo sapiens - creative, search for beauty, urge for love and care from and for fellow humans and nature - should contribute to a deeper understanding of our breed that will, incidentally, also uplift ourselves.

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Integrate education with advancement of popular life

Immediate post-independence Bangladesh was rich in student mobilizations to integrate with and assist in the advancement of popular life<sup>15</sup>, in the process becoming more 'educated' themselves in terms of relevance to people's development. As students are telling this dreamer, the fire is still burning and is awaiting stimulus to spread. RIB seeks to provide the needed stimulus to the extent of its means and ability.

Sharing benefits of globalization

Finally, the ordinary people can be assisted to share the benefits of globalization as producers and as consumers, to command the market by forming small producers' cooperatives for storage, marketing, purchase of inputs and consumer goods, etc., so as to eliminate the rentier middleman to retain their surplus themselves. RIB provides technical support to such activities as pilot projects and assist 'technical cooperation' among the people to spread such initiatives.

Dream eight

1.

One is pained most when one sees little children working in the streets and fields, struggling to survive somehow living subhuman lives. They do not know at all that they have the right to live with the same rights as everybody else. RIB seeks to develop a model for educating children of the poverty groups without unbearable financial burden on the parents! Ways are considered for taking help of these children within the framework of the family without violating international standards on child labour - e.g. arrangement to provide a cart to the family with the children helping their parents in their use.

2.

The number of people in our country taking literacy classes has increased, but they do not have any supporting materials. This is a very big problem for villagers. RIB dreams that newspapers are handed over to them even after a delay of one day. It seeks to develop a network through which unread or unsold newspapers could reach villagers and young children.

3.

Education has become a matter for the rich. The meritorious students in schools and colleges all come from well-off families. A principal reason for this is that our textbooks are so obscure that one needs private tutors simply to understand them, and only well off families can afford to give private tutors to their children. The greater damage from this is that this destroys the initiative of the children to pursue studies by themselves. The prospect of the government producing good books is little, and RIB seeks to develop other sources bringing out easy-to-read modern textbooks.

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4.

For science education practical classes are most important. In our country even in the best schools a farce is going on in the name of practical examinations. But it is very simple to develop a kit for practical science classes. It is possible to undertake very high level tests with totally household implements. These can be supplied to village schools at a very low cost with all details explained in workbooks. In one such push science education can be advanced substantially. RIB works actively to promote such science kits for school children.

5.

RIB is very optimistic about the youth of our country and believes that they will respond if told that all have to make some 'sacrifices', and if the labour of this sacrifice can be used to bring some changes in our schools this will be a great thing.

6.

Only 17 % of our people get gas in their houses. The rest cook using wood, and this is slowly denuding the country of trees. But we have large supply of solar energy in our country. Water can be very easily heated considerably (by putting a sheet of plastic or glass on a tumbler), and if food is cooked with just hot water instead of cold water the need for cooking fuel can be reduced considerably). RIB initiates some research in this direction and thereafter makes arrangement to take such knowledge to all.

7.

In this era of information technology (IT) it is necessary to integrate the Bengali language with IT and take this to the ordinary people. RIB supports some fundamental research to combine Bengali language with IT.

8.

Each year RIB asks people of the country to give new ideas for development of the country, and puts together the worthwhile ideas in book form each year. People can apply these ideas to do something new. Those ideas among these which have practical promise, are tested and developed into workable models.

9.

IT is so important for the future, but this is for the well-to-do only. Many middle class families have also purchased computers exhausting all their resources, but in three to four years these computers become obsolete. Our country therefore needs "mass computer centres" where the

ordinary people can use computers at nominal cost. RIB supports initiatives in this direction.  
10.

Many superstitions are prevalent in the country. RIB supports initiatives to prove to the people that they are wrong or false so that people become free from such beliefs that inhibit their advancement in life.

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### 3. Toward a RIB agenda

RIB desires to contribute to promoting (a) understanding of poverty and poverty-related structures and processes in all their dimensions, and (b) efforts of the disadvantaged people of Bangladesh to advance their lives with positive social values, with their own creativity and with non-dominating support from professionals where helpful. The principal tool of RIB will be research with participatory action research as a major component, with corresponding capacity building networking and social mobilization.

The "Programme for Poverty Research by RIB" as originally conceived while forming RIB envisages the following in the direction of RIB activities:

#### A. "Specific objectives of RIB's Research Program

1.

to promote and support research on poverty alleviation based on a notion of poverty from the point of view of basic "human" needs, including creative and social needs, and not merely the need to "subsist";

2.

to build and strengthen research capacity and initiatives of local researchers, voluntary organizations and movements, including raising their awareness towards the "human" needs of people;

3.

to develop a culture of knowledge-based approach to development and poverty alleviation built upon an interactive process of knowledge production, storage, diffusion and utilization;

4.

to promote the development of concepts, tools and methodologies to analyze and understand the structures and processes that sustain poverty and inequality;

5.

to promote dialogue and forge linkages between researchers, end-users, including the low income, disenfranchised and underprivileged groups at the grassroots, and other stake holders, including NGOs and government bodies, in the development of a research agenda for

Bangladesh and the prioritization, implementation, and evaluation of such research;  
6.

to support and generate such research which are more directly action-oriented as well as those which deal with issues of more conceptual nature;

7. to promote research which is demand-driven and follows a bottom-up process rather than a top-down approach;

8. to disseminate research findings and undertake appropriate follow-up action."

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### B. Strategy for development of RIB's research agenda

In developing its research agenda and following a "bottom-up" process (i.e. "participatory research") as envisaged above, "RIB would seek to enter into arrangements with partner organizations in the non-government sector as well as with governmental departments. RIB hopes to attract experts and knowledgeable persons in the field to participate as members of the PAC (Programme Advisory Council) or on an ad hoc basis, to help RIB identify its research agenda. Membership in the Council is expected to include individuals from key NGOs and research institutions engaged in socio-economic development of the country as well as academicians and activists. In this respect RIB also expects to play an anchor role and provide an opportunity to the relevant players in the field to co-ordinate their efforts and avoid duplication."

### Development of a Research Network in Bangladesh

"RIB could serve as a surrogate institution for network members by providing them with access to literature, peer review, quality control, and publication outlets. It could thus facilitate collegiate interaction, and broaden the members' local and international contacts, thereby acting as a knowledge broker. It could facilitate comparative research through integrated or team research efforts that are capable of generating data on a wider scale from a diverse set of circumstances, as well as address issues missed out in a single research effort. A research network would enhance realization of scale economies by undertaking several studies on a common or related research theme...It will foster specialization by permitting some members to focus on one type of research activity and transferring the results to other studies, thereby avoiding duplication of efforts."

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### Capacity Building

"Research activities in Bangladesh relating to development issues and poverty alleviation have to a large extent been externally induced. As a result most of the qualified researchers in the

country find themselves busy with consultancies or are otherwise preoccupied. There are, of course, other competent researchers whose potentials are not fully realized since institutional support to undertake research in the country is generally inadequate. There is thus a need to build, nurture and support both capacity (including awareness) building and capacity utilization. Capacity building would therefore be a main plank of RIB's efforts to promote poverty research in Bangladesh."

### C. Ideas for RIB work

Within the framework of the above general direction, specific ideas for RIB activities as envisaged in the dreams of RIB's initiators are summarized below. These ideas are not exclusive but rather indicate the general 'culture' of thinking of RIB initiators on research for poverty alleviation

#### Research on what

1.  
  
inventory of significant research on poverty and poverty alleviation done so far;
2. poverty as viewed by the people themselves; 'human' urges of people and their unfulfilment;
3. causes of poverty: economic, cultural geographical and historical, with diversities of poverty situations and causes; factors such as ethnicity, religion, sexuality as poverty-determining factors;
4. how poverty may impact on social and political behaviour; roots of growing crimes and savage violence in Bangladesh;
5.  
  
relation between poverty and rise of religious fundamentalism;
6. awareness and solidarity building, skill development, organizational experience; specific product, service or technology with significant potential contribution to the quality of life of the poor;
7. empowerment of women, relations within the family - resistance to gender equality and women's rights; women's struggles as individuals and collectively;
8. globalization and poverty - positive and negative impact of globalisation on poverty and strategies to enhance the positives; positive and negative effects of globalization on women and children;
9. threats to the environment from capitalistic development; sustainable natural resources and sustainable livelihood of the disadvantaged;
10. human rights and promotion of the dignity of individuals;
11.  
  
role of law in poverty enhancement and alleviation;
12.  
  
state-citizen relations; mechanisms for retaining control of state power at different levels; wider

participation in state, community and family; mechanisms for controlling state power at different levels with specific attention to role of political and family ideologies; local forms of justice and countervailing forces;

13. knowledge relations in society : established norms of protecting knowledge among the powerful rather than building patterns of communication to encourage participation; ways of equalizing knowledge relations;

14.

life of children of low-income groups; problem of their education;

15. history of popular creativity - technological, social mobilizational, individual problem solving, mutual care; current popular creativity;

16. ways and means for the people to improve their status primarily by using their own knowledge and other resources, supplemented as necessary by externally provided inputs.

17. science and technology in the service of people; cost-effective methods of literacy; science education; bringing science to ordinary people;

18. indigenous and cost-effective technology and its application;

19.

poverty alleviation with enhancement of social values: democracy, justice and freedom; space for diversity, for quality of life and for freedom with respect for reciprocal rights; respect for all religions and faith in a secular social framework; a society of mutual care;

20.

lessons learnt from NGO-type work on poverty alleviation.

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by whom

popular groups;

professional researchers;

various stakeholders like government agencies and NGOs;

university students; fresh graduates; local journalists; activists; social workers;

methodology

multi-disciplinary; a shift from the conventional modes of knowledge production in isolation from the society which is to benefit them: collaborative research involving various stakeholders including non-researchers; participant observation; case studies; dialogical research; participatory research; oral histories and written personal analyses and reflections; people's seminars and conferences; study tours and reporting thereon.

use

sensitization of public; advocacy; recommendations to concerned quarters; development of action research projects.

books and reports; journals and bulletins; website; newspaper columns; inventories of creative

acts and "appropriate technology"; popular reports by people - written and audio-visual; people's drama, pictorial and vocal art as popular means of disseminating research results.

### Action research

assisting people's groups take actions to advance their lives as pilot projects; assisting small producers strengthen bargaining power vis-a-vis market and raise their surplus; assisting technical cooperation and networking among people's groups; animating and mobilizing students for service to people particularly in promoting literacy, science education; assistance to people in the development and application of "appropriate technology"; action research to improve the condition of children of low-income families, especially their education; assistance to improve quality of science education for children; development of "science kits" and workbooks for practical science education; propagating cost-effective and environment-saving ways of accessing energy for low-income groups; integrating alphabet literacy with social literacy; integrating Bengali language with IT; student mobilization to integrate with and assist in the advancement of popular life integrated programs embracing several of these elements and explore the effects of the synergy on the over all socio-economic status of the poor and the disadvantaged closely involving the people in designing and elaborating the individual program documents; testing promising new ideas (see "generation of ideas").

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### Training/capacity building

for research; for animation-facilitation in participatory research; capacity building of individuals, institutions and groups to translate research results into action.

### Coordination/networking

with research/development agencies concerned with poverty alleviation;  
with relevant government agencies: seek to make them more research-minded;  
with students and youth groups;  
with people's groups/communities;

### Generation of ideas

Inviting ideas from all sections of society and testing promising ones through action research.

Join us!

Come and join RIB or be a partner, not just for a job, but with a dream to help our people



advance their lives with themselves as the main actors, and thus toward building a proud Bangladesh. Let us know of your dream toward whose realization RIB may contribute if it is possible for it to do so.

\*This conceptual section has been written by Md. Anisur Rahman.

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Foot Notes:

1 The budget and the Poor, A Study commissioned by IDPAA, Proshika and conducted by Shamunnay. The University Press Ltd, p 52).

2 "In his experiments with creating life the Creator suddenly becomes quite daring when he comes to creating human beings. He does not confine the freedom of its soul. Outwardly the species is thrown naked, armourless and weak in all respects while its soul is freed to fly. Elated by the joy of this freedom it cries out: 'I shall do the impossible!', meaning I shall not accept that what has been happening all the time will continue to happen - what does not happen will also happen" .

(Tagore, 1947 ed. pp 320-321. Present author's translation)

3 recounted in S.Tilakaratna, The Animator in Participatory Rural Development, International Labour Office, 1987, Window 1, p 4).

4 See de Silva et al, "Bhoomi Sena, A Struggle for People's Power", Development Dialogue, 1979:2.

5 Wolfgang Sachs, "Poor not Different", Paul Ekins & Manfred Neef (ed.) . Real Life Economics. Routledge 1992.

6 e.g. the blossoming of creative development actions in villages in Rangpur district and in other places in Bangladesh after liberation with a pride in one's collective identity rather than self-denigration as "poor"awaiting for poverty alleviation projects by others, See accounts reported in Md. Anisur Rahman, Je Agun Jolechhilo, Muktijuddher Chetonar Shwatosphurto Prakash, Gonoprokashoni 1997.

7 i.e. physically subsisting. It is the position of this paper that human beings do not subsist as humans with no finer pursuits. Civilization then consists of transcending a life where pressure for physical subsistence is acute. As Tagore went on to say subsequently, "All the best fruits of civilization have blossomed in leisure. Hence it is necessary to preserve leisure in one part of human civilization" (Letters from Russia, loc.cit.)

8 Abul Momen, "Isn't going to be the black age of history?" Prothom Alo 9.2.02

9 The Pakistan Democratic Party had proposed in its manifesto for the 1970 election a range of

10:1 for income disparities within the nation. This had an implicit "poverty-line" in relation to the highest income in the society.

10 Such a "poverty-line" also lends itself to international comparison of persons below or above the line specific to each country giving its income tax exception limit.

11 Organization of Rural Associations for Progress.

12 Md. Anisur Rahman, "Globalization, the Emerging New Ideology and Grassroots Action Research". Keynote address at the 5th World Congress on Action Learning, Action Research & Process Management and 9th sWorld Congress on Participatory Action Research at the University of Ballarat, Victoria, Australia, 10-13 September 2000.

13 For literature on the paradigm of participatory (action) research see the bibliographies at the end of various chapters in Fals-Borda, Orlando and Md. Anisur Rahman. Action and Knowledge, Breaking the Monopoly with Participatory Action Research, Intermediate Technology Publications, 1991, and Rahman, M.A.: People's Self-Development, Perspectives on Participatory Action Research, A Journey through Experience, Zed Books and UPL, 1993..

14 the argument has been elaborated in Rahman, M.A: keynote lecture at the World Congress of Sociology at Mexico in 1983, on "The Theory and Practice of Participatory Action Research" (published in Fals-borda, Orlando, The challenge of Social Change, Sage Studies in International Sociology Vol 32, 1985 and also in M.A.Rahman, People's Self-development, op.cit). Also in Conception of Gono Bishwabidyalay, Gonoshasthya Kendra, 1999.

15 see Rahman, Je Agun Jolechhilo ("the fire that lighted), Gono Prokashoni, 1999.