MISSING DIMENSIONS OF POVERTY: THE ISSUES OF VULNERABILITY AND INSECURITY

Atiur Rahman

I have been trying to show that 'welfare economics', as I would now regard it, is composed of a series of steps, steps by which we try to make more and more of the things which concern us into account. None of our 'optima' marks the top of that staircase. We must always be prepared to push one, if we can, a little further. Development is a great deal more than economic growth, and the success of standard development economics in capturing these broader issues in development has been relatively less.

...I think that economics is concerned with the nature of the lives that human beings lead... Surely the answer to the question 'who is a good economist?' Must be: the person who helps to contribute substantially to understanding the material influences on the nature of human life...

I Introduction

There is a apparently two contrasting views on development: the Consumerist and Creativist. According to Rahman (ibid.), the consumerist view, which belongs to liberal trend, equates development with eradication of poverty in material terms so that flow of

consumption of goods and services expands. Aggregate economic growth is the prerequisite for this increased flow of consumption. Surely, the latest fad on 'alleviation of poverty' seeks to confine its actions in the arena of selective interventions without appreciating the reality that poverty is a resultant outcome of much more complex factors including 'state' market and environment'. In contrast, creativist view emphasises 'the value of organic life with nature, standing up and moving forward in communal solidarity, in search for life and self-determination, and the primacy of human dignity'. While the former talks of poverty as the problem to be solved, the latter takes a more positive notion of 'creative engagement for collectively tackling life's challenges'. The latter views come quite nearer to Sen’s views on capabilities:

....the growth process is only a part of the development process and it is limited not only by the fact that you can have accentuation of inequality while growth is taking place, but also by the fact that growth of GNP might not give one very much of an idea of the real processes of development in terms of the expansion of the possibilities open to the population for living lives of the kind they would like to lead. One way of thinking development is as an expansion of people's freedom to lead the lives that they might aspire to lead, and this perspective of freedom, of course positive freedom rather any narrow libertarian notion of freedom ... is not very effective in the development economics literature.

Here the central concern is what a person can do. The failure of conventional economic literature in addressing this fundamental issue owes much to its lack of appreciation of what people themselves of their own deprivations and how they cope with them. During their everyday experiences of living people come across strengths and weaknesses of the society they live in. Different strata experience different levels of vulnerabilities arising out of weaknesses of the society and they also exhibit different forms of capabilities in

5. Rahman, Anisur, op cit, abstract; see also Khan, Obaidullah (1989), Creative Development, Univ. Press Ltd., Dhaka (forth coming).
7. Sen, A, op cit, p. 36; see also Sen A, (1984), ‘The Living Standard’, Oxford Economic Papers, New Series Volume 36, November, where he places the concept of positive freedom (‘to be free to do this or that’) rather than in its negative form (‘not to be interfered with’) the broader context of classical economy.
facing those vulnerabilities. Ideally development should be redefined in terms of a process where vulnerabilities of a society are reduced and capabilities increased. The issue of insecurity is also inextricably related with the above process. The question of insecurity needs to be seen in the context of institutional matrix people belong to. It refers to freedom from risk and uncertainty in the satisfaction of basic human needs and is measured by unforeseen or unavoidable fluctuations in levels of ‘satisfaction’. Besides material human need (in the consumerist sense), there are other needs too, ranging from fulfilling one’s creative potentials to a safe living with human dignity. This is possible only in a social environment where public action and people’s collective surveillance guarantee both physical and intellectual security.

The major objective of the present paper is to relate the above issues to the condition of poverty as experienced by the majority of the people in the Third World countries. The emphasis, as already indicated, will be here on the people’s own perception on these interrelated issues. The paper though not exactly empirical in nature will try to abstract heavily from the everyday experiences of the rural poor in Bangladesh.

The paper itself is divided into five sections. Following the brief introduction, an attempt is made to highlight the limitation of the concept of poverty based on income measure in Section II. Section III deals with sources of vulnerability and insecurity in the context of condition of poverty. Section IV gives an overview of creative development which might ensure a less vulnerable and more secure socio-economic environment for the poor. Finally Section V concludes the paper.

II Limitations of the income-based concept of poverty

Contemporary developing societies are only partly monetized. Members of household unit engage themselves both in cash-earning and cost-saving activities. A great varieties of activities do not generate flow of cash. For example, much of the domestic work of female members, exploitation of ecological reserves for fuel consumption, raising children, repairing a house, generating supplementary food items (e.g. catching fish, collecting green leaves and

vegetables from the road side or open water bodies) are some examples of cost-saving activities. If a member did not engage herself/himself in any of these cost-saving activities, the household had to pay cash to get it from the market. But such a saving of cost does never get reflected in income or expenditure accounting of the household. These are mostly invisible activities. The cash-earning activities, mostly mediated through the market, are socially visible. No doubt, the contribution of women who do most of these cost-saving activities is not well represented in the income accounting system. Income, therefore cannot capture the whole range of activities which members of a household engage themselves for survival. So a cut-off line based on cash income may not reflect the true poverty line. Indeed, a true measure of poverty should also reflect whether the scope for cost-saving activities in a society is narrowing or not.

Besides, income is not also a stable measure of poverty. The amount of income alone may not capture the vulnerability of a household. A household earns from a number of sources e. g. agricultural, wage, entrepreneurial, remittances etc. Unless the source is specified, the income alone may not reflect the poverty situation of the household. For example, a household which is primarily dependent on remittance and if the inflow of that remittance is not regular, there is a likelihood of experiences of seasonal deprivations despite total annual income remaining constant. Similarly, a household dependent on wage income is qualitatively different from one dependent on self-employment. The control over the income is stronger in the latter than the former. And this has different implications on the experience of poverty by the two households. There are other weaknesses of income measure of poverty as well. The income figures normally derived through one-shot survey method cannot reflect the reality for the following reasons:

(i) respondents may not report correctly other members’ income;
(ii) even if all members are interviewed, it is not possible to recollect the year long income of the household;
(iii) extrapolation of a recent period’s income for the whole year may not be representative as it cannot capture occasional disinvestment, sudden loss of income due to disaster or crisis, remittances etc.

Also there is imputational problem. Public goods and services, the services rendered by durable assets (e.g. housing), the self-provisioning goods may not be very easily imputed in monetary terms. It is extremely difficult to assign preset values to these items. The income figures so generated become less effective in ascertaining the impoverishment of a group of people in comparison with the other.

The limitations of income measure call for an extremely cautious use of this single indicator of poverty. They underscore the need for broadening the empirical focus on the actual experience of poverty and gradually move away from the single indicator. The need for constructing multiple indicators reflecting the everyday experience of living can hardly be overexaggerated. Given this felt need, we embark on some new dimensions of poverty in the following section. These are vulnerability and insecurity which a group or sub-group may face in their day to day living. Although it is very difficult to quantify these dimensions, inclusion of them in one form or the other may vastly improve the conceptual weaknesses of poverty.

III Vulnerability and Insecurity

The existing literature on poverty while provides detailed empirical indications on its trend, does not exactly throw enough light on who constitute the poor and why they are so vulnerable. The situation in the ground is indeed disastrous and merits differential treatment in contrast to the present day blanket analysis of poverty. Despite their apparent similarities, the poor in most Third World countries are quite heterogeneous. Not all poor experience similar vulnerabilities. As suggested by Lipton\(^\text{11}\) there is acute differentiation among the poor themselves. There are 'moderately poor' and 'ultra-poor'. Acute malnourishment (e.g. per day calorie intake of less than 1600 k. cal.) may be one indicator of ultra poor. According to one estimate more than 30% of the population of Bangladesh are ultra poor.\(^\text{12}\) The problem of ultra poor is much more poignant and severe. This is exemplified by the situation of women and children. They experience poverty

---

differently. The life expectancy of women in Bangladesh, their access to education and other public resources, their mortality rates, earnings etc. clearly indicate their subordinated and vulnerable situation (see tables 1 and 2). Their position becomes even more poignant when compared with the situation of women in a developed country. The situation of children is equally bad. In Bangladesh, by the age of four, three quarters of children are physically stunted and suffering from anaemia. Less than 20% of the children born in a particular year get the opportunities of growing into healthy, physically fit and fully productive citizens. Women remain persistently malnourished. “Eating last and often least is only one of the many hardships, they share in common whether they are rich or poor, Hindu or Muslim...”. Adult women’s calorie intake is 29% less than that of the males; for female children under 5, some 16% less and for females 5-14, about 11% less. Female children have almost three times the rate of malnutrition as males and a 45% higher mortality rate among the severely malnourished.

A sudden natural disaster, like the flood of 1988 further accentuates the hardships of the hardcore poor. Following the above disaster in Bangladesh, high incidence of diarrhoea, measles related disease of the children and high rates of infant mortality were reported.

The poverty indicators like nutrition and health, housing and fuel, earnings and assets, access to public resources, though provide considerable signals about the deprivations of the hardcore poor, are not enough unless one can discern the sources of vulnerabilities hidden within these physical measures in addition to social and motivational arenas like the level of institutionalisation, social networking, shock absorption capacities of the society, crisis coping spirit and methods, fighting spirit, access to information and development of countervailing power etc. These are again intimately connected with the nature of physical security both at the individual

Table 1. Women's status in highest and lowest ranked countries

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Population</th>
<th>Area</th>
<th>Female life expectancy</th>
<th>One in 167 girls dies before her fifth birthday</th>
<th>One in 53 15-year olds will not survive her childbearing years</th>
<th>Fewer than one percent of 15-19 year old women have already been married.</th>
<th>Women bear one to two children on average</th>
<th>Over three fourths of married women use contraception.</th>
<th>Virtually all school-aged girls are in school</th>
<th>Female University enrollment is 37 percent of women aged 20-24.</th>
<th>About half the secondary school teachers are women.</th>
<th>Three out of five women are in the paid labour force</th>
<th>Two out of five women are professionals</th>
<th>Women live an average of seven years longer than men.</th>
<th>Women and men have similar literacy rates.</th>
<th>About half of the paid workforce is female.</th>
<th>In 1988 women held 113 seats in Sweden's 349 member parliament.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>In Sweden</strong></td>
<td>(Population: 8.4 million, Area: 173,730 square miles)</td>
<td>Female life expectancy is 81 years</td>
<td>One in 167 girls dies before her fifth birthday</td>
<td>One in 53 15-year olds will not survive her childbearing years. (One percent of these deaths relate to pregnancy and childbirth)</td>
<td>Fewer than one percent of 15-19 year old women have already been married.</td>
<td>Women bear one to two children on average</td>
<td>Over three fourths of married women use contraception.</td>
<td>Virtually all school-aged girls are in school</td>
<td>Female University enrollment is 37 percent of women aged 20-24.</td>
<td>About half the secondary school teachers are women.</td>
<td>Three out of five women are in the paid labour force</td>
<td>Two out of five women are professionals</td>
<td>Women live an average of seven years longer than men.</td>
<td>Women and men have similar literacy rates.</td>
<td>About half of the paid workforce is female.</td>
<td>In 1988 women held 113 seats in Sweden's 349 member parliament.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>In Bangladesh</strong></td>
<td>(Population: 109.5 million, Area: 55,598 square miles)</td>
<td>Female life expectancy is 49 years.</td>
<td>One in five girls dies before her fifth birthday</td>
<td>One in six 15-year olds will not survive her childbearing years. (About one-third of these deaths relate to pregnancy and childbirth).</td>
<td>Almost 70 percent of 15-19 year old women have already been married.</td>
<td>Women bear five to six children on average</td>
<td>One fourth of married women use contraception.</td>
<td>One in three school-aged girls is in school</td>
<td>Female University enrollment is less than two percent of women aged 20-24.</td>
<td>One in 10 secondary school teachers is a woman.</td>
<td>One in 15 women is in the paid labour force.</td>
<td>Only 3 out of 1,000 women are professionals.</td>
<td>Women live an average of two years less than men.</td>
<td>Some 24 percent more women are illiterate than men</td>
<td>Only 14 percent of the paid workforce is female.</td>
<td>In 1981 women held four seats in Bangladesh's 302 member parliament, out of 30 reserved for them.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. Estimate of life expectancy at birth

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>National</td>
<td>45.8</td>
<td>46.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1974 Urban</td>
<td>45.9</td>
<td>49.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1974 Rural</td>
<td>45.1</td>
<td>46.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National</td>
<td>55.3</td>
<td>54.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1981 Urban</td>
<td>59.8</td>
<td>60.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1981 Rural</td>
<td>54.9</td>
<td>53.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National</td>
<td>55.7</td>
<td>54.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1985 Urban</td>
<td>59.9</td>
<td>60.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1985 Rural</td>
<td>55.3</td>
<td>54.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Table 3. Infant mortality per thousand live births by sex and residence

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>National</td>
<td>113.4</td>
<td>109.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1981 Urban</td>
<td>105.2</td>
<td>93.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1981 Rural</td>
<td>114.1</td>
<td>110.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National</td>
<td>113.2</td>
<td>104.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1985 Urban</td>
<td>109.4</td>
<td>87.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1985 Rural</td>
<td>114.7</td>
<td>111.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


...and community level. Physical security and self-respect are also human needs (see chart-I). The nature of the state and its actions are equally relevant here.

3.1 Sources of vulnerabilities

3.1.1 Physical:

The physical vulnerabilities can be spatial, material and occupational.
3.1.1.1 Spatial:

People can be vulnerable because of their geographical locations. If they are forced to live in river banks which are prone to erosion and flooding, if their homes are built in flood plains, in cyclone prone areas or in mountain ranges prone to mudslides or in drought prone regions, they are likely to be victims of natural hazards and hence impoverishment.
3.1.1.2 Material:
The possession of or access to resources like land, other assets (which are collateral generating or easily transferable into exchange entitlements), livestock, physical infrastructure like the type of housing, roads, transports, availability of capital, physical environment, ecological reserves like social forestry, open water bodies, common grazing grounds is very significant in determining the vulnerability of a group in terms of their survival strategy. This has important bearing on the condition of poverty.

3.1.1.3 Occupational:
The occupational differentiation, level of their skills, the demographic status of the households can mean a lot in explaining the vulnerabilities of a group. Suppose a household has two earning members. They earn only wages. In the situation of a sudden flood or drought they can hardly get wage employment. Compare this with a household with two earning members, one of whom is self-employed. Even though the total income of the household may be halved during a disaster because of drying out of source of wage employment for one member, the household can still subsist out of income from self-employment of the other member. The family may also fall back on the working capital of the self-employed temporarily for subsistence. They may also generate some short-term credit as they have an enterprise to show to creditors. In other words, an occupational diversification is negatively correlated with vulnerabilities. A diversification of occupations in a household ensures stability of income throughout the year which may not be possible in a household dependent on a single source of income.
Similarly household demography has an important role to play in the process of impoverishment. Age and sex composition of the household, structure of the household, lifecycle stage and sex of household’s head are important considerations in determining household’s own resource base or in getting an access to other resources. For example, absence of male earning members in a household, the incidence of female-headed households (because of desertion, death of male member) or the presence of female supported households (because of illness, unemployment or old age of male members, who still take decisions) are indicators of a poverty stricken situation.

3.1.2 Social:

The formal or informal social structures or systems through which people get things done and reproduce their everyday living including mechanisms like decision-making, establishing leadership, organising social and economic activities can be quite important in determining the extent of vulnerabilities.

Social and organizational vulnerabilities are obvious when there is prejudice, or conflict, within a society. Divisions according to race, religion, ethnicity, language, class or caste can weaken the social fabric to such an extent that people are more vulnerable to crisis. The most devastating result of social vulnerability is war. Millions in today’s world suffer social disruptions as refugees. 17

The social vulnerabilities can arise because of:

(a) Isolation

People get ontological security if they can come together. The social network which people traditionally belonged to are gradually crumbling down because of pressure of modernisation and penetration of state and other external agencies. While they are abandoning their old networks, are not, however, getting adequate coverage from the modern ones. The net

17. Anderson and Woodrow, op cit, p. 5.
result has been a kind of isolation, which can increase vulnerabilities. No doubt, even an economist like Hirschman identifies isolation as a bigger hurdle than capital and emphasises the virtue of cooperation.

As an economist I had expected that the need to mobilize a minimal amount of capital would be at the root of at least some of the cooperative, worker managed enterprises. It turned out that a more fundamental need is, once again, some experience dispelling isolation and mutual distrust.\textsuperscript{18}

(b) Lack of information and countervailing power:

The poor are deliberately kept in the dark as the information network is usually assymetrical in most Third World societies. Only a few who are rich and powerful and near to the administration can get access into information.\textsuperscript{19} Also the information disseminated may not always ensure interests of the poor. Wherever, the media has been relatively free and countervailing power has been developed, serious crisis of hunger and famine has been averted.

India's success in famine prevention has had much less to do with any agricultural transformation that may or may not have occured than with the systematic use of public intervention in regenerating entitlements that are lost through drought or floods. The mechanics of it includes emergency employment in public works as well as use of public stocks of food. The "triggering mechanism" of such a system depends greatly on the media as well as the plural nature of adversal politics which keeps the government--at the central and at the state level--on their toes.\textsuperscript{20}

Lack of democratisation, press freedom, plural politics, mobilisation at the grass roots have led to a number of famines in Ethiopia, Somalia and a number of other Third World countries. In the absence of these democratic tools, people in general and the weaker sections in particular become more vulnerable to poverty.


Low level of institutionalisation:

In a society where democracy (not populism) is not in practice at all levels of a society, the personalised arrangement rather than institutionalised system gets increasingly predominant. The state becomes clientelist and the power elites do not care for accountability of any kind. ‘God Fathers’, touts emerge as new power bases of an unrepresentative regime. Every deal has to be negotiated with a group of intermediaries who form the new breed of power brokers. A dumb press cannot unveil these everyday ‘bofors’ because of its own vested interests and lack of staying power. A kind of ‘Marcos Syndrome’ looms large. Even a genuine rich entrepreneur feels vulnerable in such a ‘personalised system’. Development then converges with growth of some conglomerates, some business groups, some families or some persons who are near to the power. One can then very well imagine the vulnerabilities of the poor and the weak who hardly can organize themselves as a group. But an enterprising organizer can, however, reap benefits out of low-institutionalized system by either blackmailing or mussle flexing.

This syndrome may be true in most Third World societies which lack established tradition of democratisation, freedom of press and accountability.

3.1.3 Motivational:

The perception of a community about itself and its ability to deal effectively with vulnerabilities arising out of physical and social environment has important bearing on the dimensions of poverty. People’s ideology, beliefs and motivations are important elements in the analytical framework on vulnerability. Strengths or weaknesses in this sphere can make a significant difference in a society’s ability to improve its material base or social institutions in the context of condition of poverty.

‘A community is psychologically or motivationally vulnerable when people feel victimised, fatalistic or dependent’.21

People are less vulnerable if they share a common purpose, a feeling of empowerment, or an awareness that they are agents of their own lives and futures. This is only possible in a society where

public actions are more broad based, not engaged in 'disorganizing' 'intimidating', and 'selectivity'.

One can easily relate the above notions of vulnerabilities to the issue of insecurity which is so vital for development.

3.2 Insecurity:

While security from hunger, malnutrition health hazards etc. may be important on their own right, freedom from risk and uncertainty can be equally important in the realm of experiences of poverty. The issue of personal security and its relation with the condition of poverty has not been adequately addressed by the social scientists. Only recently some scholars have started considering this as a major issue.22

The issue of insecurity has to be seen in the light of the vulnerability to violence and harassment.

In the rural context, both the intense competition for dwindling resources among the very poor as well as the maintenance of the existing power structures result in random as well as systematic intimidation, harassment, violence and murder, of which it is the relatively powerless that are most often victims.23

Threats to personal security can be:

(a) Class based e.g. poverty feuds, police harassment, false litigation etc.

(b) Gender based e.g. Verbal and physical intimidation of women for domestic subordination to males; attack of females to humiliate males of an opposing factions in property or political feuds; attack on women for dowry and share of their inherited land and assets lying with their kins; forcing women to undertake activities outside their domestic arena etc.

(c) Institution based: Marriage is still seen as the ultimate source of personal and social security. But desertion or divorce by the male members can expose the women concerned to insecurity of wide magnitude.

(d) Force based: Homestead is the anchor of a household. If a household can be evicted from the ancestral homestead, the...


members become rootless and faceless. Many families have been uprooted by force for grabbing their homestead land and exposed to utter insecurity. Only option left for the household is to migrate permanently from the locality either to another village or a slum in the city margins leaving behind all the traditional social networks. Women and children suffer most in such a situation.

These are some forms of violence and they can be related to condition of poverty in so far as it is associated in such a society with relative powerlessness. Indeed, the poor are least able to protect themselves from such threatening situations. In some cases, the poor surrender their autonomy and self-respect to a local ‘Godfather’ just for their physical survival and become a party to the vertical patron-client network.

There are other facets of violence as well. The status quo itself can be the source of violence. The violence of status quo again may be structural and non-structural.24

Structural violence may originate from unfair wages, usurious moneylending, unfavourable terms of share-cropping, tutelage, bonded labour, child labour, free services, untouchability, etc. The non-structural violence includes: (1) lawful violence i.e. the authorised use of force by state agents to maintain law and order; (2) unlawful violence by state agents; (3) unlawful violence by powerful private individuals and groups against the rural poor and (4) violence by the rural poor in self-defence.

The last form of violence is, in fact, quite rare in the absence of organized entity of the poor. Also violence is perpetually imposed on them by the power elites. The local power elites survive on their own. They form an integral part of the larger state structures. And there is of course, a historical root to the development of this nexus.

Rahman, H Z (1986) has eloquently dealt with this issue in his Ph. D. thesis. He finds that as a consequence of colonial rule, the property rights in land lost their localised, customary basis and their proof and guarantee became vested in colonial state power. However, these proof and guarantee were never unequivocal. There

were fundamental ambivalences with regard to proof and guarantee the roots of which belonged to: 25

(1) Pathology of judicial processes fundamentally at odds with local customs.

(2) Absence of a definite record of rights.

(3) Wide scope for criminal law strengthening punitive and extortionate potential of magistracy and police over civil life.

(4) General weakness of the judicial authority itself.

Net result of these ambivalences has been the development of situation where the judicial and police institutions of the colonial state only imposed themselves parasitically on the landbased society as necessary arenas of manoeuvering by parties in conflict. Thus a structural tension was pushed into a civil society so that the stability of the individual right became crucially dependent on the holder’s political capacity to manoeuvre both within the local arena and within the institutions of the state.

As a result power and property became inextricably linked in a structural nexus. The state apparatus parasitically fed on an indeterminate property-power nexus within the civil society. Since land rights were not automatically guaranteed, the effectivity of property relations depended to a large extent on the individualised mobilisation of power. Such rights became vulnerable at the individual level. Power and participation in power structure became sin qua non for effective and stable property rights, though continuously exposed to challenges. Thus a structural dynamic of instability and insecurity was injected into the civil society which did not necessarily supersede with the changes in flags.

The tension continues and base of insecurity, as we have already noted, has only broadened. Those who cannot mobilise power at the individual level with the mediation of the state are gradually forced to forego their property rights and joining the ranks of the disadvantaged.

The fall along the impoverishment slide cannot, of course, be reversed at the individual level. The greatest need as, Hirschman has already articulated, is to remove isolation and bring people together.

IV Creative Development:

The downward slide will perhaps continue in most Third World societies, if the poor continue to fail in the mobilisation of their most important resource available to them: i. e. their organisational strength. One of them may be very weak. But five of them coming together can be an exercise in strength gathering. people's collective search for life, breaking the monopoly of knowledge and forming horizontal networks among people of homogeneous interests can be most suitable alternative paradigm of development for them.26

The local power holders and the state as a whole will obviously not be sympathetic to such a process of empowerment of the poor.

Inspite of attempts by the rural elite to subvert such organisations (of the poor) for their own ends, successful resistance by formally or informally constituted groups of men and women from poor and landless households offer the possibility that in future countervailing power structures will emerge to curb the influence of currently entrenched vested interest groups. The level of participation in such networks must constitute an integral focus in any attempt to understand the process by which poverty is reproduced, transmitted or broken out of.27

People's Perception

What the poor perceive on the condition and causality of poverty? We have some fragmentary results from a perception survey conducted in 1986. The survey was conducted on 90 respondents, 27 of whom were landless.28 We can share the perception of these rural poor with regards to the nature of the state, the strengths and weaknesses of alternative paradigm:

i) 23 out of 27 landless respondents perceived that the military is still in power in Bangladesh.

ii) None of them responded positively to the proposition that the present government or the like is 'neutral' and looks after the interests of all classes.

iii) 13 of them perceived that this government only cares for the interests of the rich.

26. Rahman, A, op cit, has elaborated on some elements of this alternative development.
28. Rahman, Atiur (1988b), 'Power as perceived by the rural People (in Bangla), in Samaj Nirikhayan, No. 29, Dhaka University, August.
iv) Only 22% of them felt that election can ensure representative govt.

v) 92% of them felt that present system of governance cannot ensure the return of elected representatives who will look after the interests of the poor.

vi) Even when they could vote, one-third of them said that they could never vote on their own choice. They were always dictated by their 'patrons'.

vii) Only 10 out of 27 landless respondents perceived that the society is divided in class lines. In contrast about half of the rich respondents said that they were not happy with the behaviour of the wage labourers whom they normally employ.

viii) Sixty per cent of the landless respondents felt that the existing power structure was a fetter to an effective development.

Given these perceptions of the poor it is possible to argue that development strategy pursued so far has not been beneficial to the disadvantaged. Neither the existing state structure can ensure a situation where poor will be able to participate in the development process as perceived by them. On the contrary the poor are living in continuously threatening situations.

The findings may be equally applicable to most other Third World societies.

V. Conclusion:

There are serious limitations in the existing development economics literature which poses poverty as a problem to be solved without going deep into its roots as perceived by the victims of impoverishment. This is indeed a consumerist view, which tends to look into the problem essentially from the growth perspective. In contrast the problem of poverty deserves to be seen from the point of view of the poor. According to this paradigm, income is not the best measure of poverty. It only tells you about some of the trends of poverty, but does not bring into focus the condition of the poor. A focus on the issues of vulnerability and insecurity is perhaps more broadbased approach to understand why poverty originates and reproduces. Vulnerabilities can be physical and motivational. In each case, the powerless ones become victims. The hardcore among them suffers even more. So there is a need for focusing of differentiation even among the poor. The dimension of physical insecurity
originating from the violence and structural tension perpetuated by the state deserves to be integrated into the analysis of poverty. The poor themselves are well aware of the structural constraints imposed on them. They are, therefore, not optimistic about 'alleviation' of their poverty through the existing system of governance.

The greatest need is, therefore, to break the isolation of the poor and help them come together in social networks. Organizational ability is perhaps their greatest resource. They can reassert only if they can be brought into horizontal social networks/organisation in greater numbers. Only through such a process they can reduce their vulnerabilities and increase their capabilities to ensure whatever they want to do. The quality of life which the poor perceive can be ensured only if they can take control over the chances and environment. This has much to do with what Marx described as 'replacing the domination of circumstances and chance over individuals by the domination of individuals over chance and circumstances'.