

# **People's Initiatives in Bangladesh and Insights for Poverty and Development Discourse**

**- A Tribute to Joseph Wresinski**

*- Md. Anisur Rahman*

*"It is not enough to try to remove wants; you can never remove them completely from outside; the far greater thing is to rouse the will of the people to remove their own wants."  
- Rabindranath Tagore<sup>1</sup>*

## **1. Introduction**

## **2. Glimpses of people's initiatives in Bangladesh**

**2.1 Individual Initiatives and struggles of the disadvantaged to fulfill non-economic urges**

**2.2 spontaneous collective Initiatives of the disadvantaged**

**2.3 Science in comradeship with the disadvantaged**

**2.4 Gonogobeshona in Bangladesh**

**3. Insights on the notion of poverty, the role of knowledge in overcoming poverty, and on development philosophy**

**4. On the goal of humanity and the philosophy of development**

**5. Conclusion**

**Annex: Key quotes from Joseph Wresinski on poverty and people's knowledge**

## **1. Introduction**

For decades Joseph Wresinski and the ATD Movement that he created have worked with disadvantaged people customarily referred to as “poor”<sup>2</sup>, and have made a major contribution toward developing an alternative view of

poverty and approach to poverty alleviation. Recently Research Initiatives, Bangladesh (RIB), a poverty-research supporting agency in Bangladesh with which the present author is associated, has initiated a search by 70 journalists of creative self-initiatives of disadvantaged people of this country to advance their lives outside of government or NGO programmes. RIB has also initiated processes of people's collective self-inquiry ("gonogobeshona": gono = popular; gobeshona = research) and action (People's "praxis") for advancing their lives, and with RIB's collaboration the Hunger Project, Bangladesh is also initiating such processes. These experiences fully support the viewpoint of Wresinski and the ATD Movement on the notion of poverty and of the role of people's knowledge and thinking in addressing poverty. This paper presents glimpses of some of the more illuminating cases of people's initiatives in Bangladesh obtained from RIB's search as well as of the gonogobeshona exercises in the country, and discusses how they confirm the thinking of Wresinski and of the ATD Movement, and reflects in this connection further on the poverty and development course.

## **2. Glimpses of people's initiatives in Bangladesh**

### **2.1 Individual Initiatives and struggles of the disadvantaged to fulfill non-economic urges**

Disadvantaged people have in all ages and in all countries taken initiatives, either individually or collectively, to move forward with their own thinking and initiatives without waiting for outside assistance. Most of these are more visible as aimed at economic advancement of the disadvantaged, but the urge to fulfill non-economic needs are in many cases combined with this. In a number of instances the non-economic urges reveal themselves as particularly acute motivation for individual initiatives of the disadvantaged, thus illuminating such urges sharply. A few of such instances are recounted below to illustrate the importance of non-economic human urges to which the alternative view of poverty, and Wresinski and the ATD Movement in particular, have given particular importance.

A poignant such instance is the case of Ajit Jaldas, a blind singer in Banshkhali in Chittagong, earning irregular income by singing to families and in community functions, sometimes starving with his wife and four children, but rejecting suggestions to take to begging which would bring higher earnings, because he and his wife both care more *for the dignity they enjoy as singers* (Tahmina *et al* 2006a: 101). Passion for music - composing

as well as singing - is exhibited by many others coming from low-income families in riverine rain-soaked Bangladesh. Some such vocal artists are even training free-of-charge other low-income youth with similar urges living very modest lives themselves. For instance, Ramjan Ali Sarkar of Paglapir area in Haridebpur union of Rangpur thana coming from a low-income family with his passion for singing and composing songs could not pass middle school and started a singing school, where he gives free coaching to day labourers and children of low-income peasants, providing accommodation in his own house to some of them notwithstanding his own uncertain economic condition. (Tahmina *et al* 2006a: 43).

Several instances of individual initiatives indicate the primacy of the human urge to create beauty. For example, Bappy, born of a low income carpenter family in shimakhali village, Narail district, has excelled in wooden sculpture with no space even to store his works, struggling against economic poverty but absorbed in the passion of creative art with a dream of giving an exhibition at Dhaka some day (Tahmina *et al* 2006b: 47). A number of other cases have been reported of village-based artists dreaming not of economic betterment but of giving exhibitions of their artwork. As expressed by artist Mannan of Chittagong coming from a low-income family who worked as *durwan* in the Department of Fine Arts, Chittagong University and thereafter got a job as store keeper in the Department of Graphic Art and has given a solo exhibition in Chittagong, “*the pleasure of success in artwork is greater than the pleasure of economic gains*” (Tahmina *et al* 2006b: 47).

As an example of fulfillment of one’s own frustrated dream of school education by assisting the education of other disadvantaged boys and girls, a young man in a remote village battala in chapainababganj district who could not pursue studies beyond class five as his father could not provide money to buy him books, grew up as a yoghurt seller, but started in 1969 building a library with earnings from selling yoghurt. From his library he started lending books to needy students of his village, starting with books of class six which he could not step into. Today his library has books totaling about ten thousand bought with his “own blood” as he says, and he is lending books to 100-150 students of low-income families every year through which he is fulfilling his own dream of schooling. As he said to the journalists interviewing him, “So far 62 boys educated with my books are settled in service. *When I see them I get back peace in my life.*” (Tahmina *et al* 2006a :35).

There are innumerable instances of heroic struggles of women abandoned by husbands or with husbands unable to provide them, and without ‘capability’ in the modern economist’s sense, standing up with dignity by courage, creative thinking and hard work (Tahmina *et al* 2006a: 86-95). To give one example, Raushan Ara of dinajpur district was married to a factory worker when she was in her teens. She had a child one year after marriage who died after birth with inadequate medical care. Over six years she had four children all of whom died after birth. She was then thrown out of her in-laws’ house and returned to her parents where she had a daughter. Determined to stand up in life with human values and a mission of social service, she took a job with an NGO and worked as a member of the Ansar (para-police force) also. Her in-laws then took her back and she had another child there. But her in-laws forced her to give up her job and hand over her saving of Tk. 20000/-. Then she fell sick and her in-laws again drove her away with her two children. Her father sold his last bit of meagre assets toward her medical treatment. She had become very popular working with the NGO and Ansar, and was elected a member of the Union Council in 1996. Then she created an organization of women of her area called ‘Padotika’, took training in sewing and poultry to make an independent living, and also started a small nursery. Driven away in humiliation from her husband’s home to return to her parents as a burden she is now well established in society with dignity and honour and is respected by all. (Tahmina *et al* 2006a: 86).

And there are inspiring accounts as in all countries, of indomitable courage and determination of physically challenged children and youth whom the society disrespectfully calls “disabled”, facing their special challenge of life with courage and a sense of dignity to show one’s mettle rejecting the social gaze upon them as “dis”-abled. Some are writing with legs or elbows and going to school seeking highest degrees, examples of such heroism inspiring even normal children of low-income groups to go to school. (Tahmina *et al* 2006a:99-104)

As an example of selfless service of one disadvantaged to other disadvantaged, Imam Hossain, coming from a low-income peasant family of Shariatpur in Jessore who fled from his family as his elder brothers wanted to put him to work on land rather than sending him to school, settled in a slum in Dhaka working and studying and at the same time set up a pre-school for children of extremely low-income families. He is giving them free

education and helping them in their overall development through music, drama, art-work etc. (Tahmina *et al* 2006a: 29-30). As another example of individual initiatives for the ‘other’, a 60 year old illiterate barber in *tarapur* village shibganj thana in chapainababganj district, living in a hut, has made ten kilometres of road green by planting trees on its two sides all alone out of sheer love for nature. As he said to the reporting journalist, “*My life will be fulfilled - I shall remain immortal even by dying. My history will live. For this I shall be rewarded by God.*” –. (Tahmina *et al* 2006a: 42)

## **2.2 spontaneous collective Initiatives of the disadvantaged**

Collective initiatives are a special approach of disadvantaged people to join hands for thinking together and advancing their lives against odds together. Some insightful collective initiatives of such people in Bangladesh taken spontaneously in recent years as identified in the search for creative initiatives in the RIB project are briefly presented below.

### Agrarian revolution through land redistribution

A social leader of village *Maheswarchanda* east of Kaliganj thana, Jhinaidaha district, mobilized farmers of his village to deliberate for days and days on how to improve their economic and social life. This resulted in voluntary land redistribution in 1996, with land leveling and removal of boundaries for collective farming. Agricultural extension officers joined them to advise on modern farming technology. Dramatic rise in production and earnings resulted. All round collective development initiatives in economic and social sectors followed. Villagers including the youth meet regularly to deliberate upon and review activities and progress. (Tahmina *et al* 2006a: 23-25).

### Fish Revolution in Iliotganj

An agricultural and fish farmer mobilized 52 farmers in dhanuakhola village in Iliotganj union, Comilla district in 1988, to undertake collective fishing on agricultural land that gets waterlogged in the flood season precluding agricultural farming. His slogan was “*save yourself, save others*”. The initiative paid off and spread. Today there are about 50 very profitable collective fish projects in three upazillas of Comilla, some of them quite

gigantic, one involving 350 farmers of seven villages pooling their land. (Tahmina et al 2006a: 55-56).

group fish farming by persons in acute poverty

Another enterprising group in gurguri village in Kundupukur union, Nilfamari sadar upazilla, of two unemployed young boys and six women of very low income families - one widow, one wife of a landless labourer with uncertain income, and the husbands of others not earning enough for family needs - started moving out of acute poverty without any support from outside to start with (Morol 2006 Part 2. pp 310-313). They formed a *samity* (society) and managed to take lease of two-and-a half acre low-lying land at a nominal rent for fish cultivation. With good return from fish they were able to buy eight cows and their income rose above a lac taka within a year-and-a-half. Seeing the impressive entrepreneurship of this group the upazilla fisheries office came forward in 2002 to give them a loan of 32 thousand taka free of interest repayable in five years. With this loan the samity rented a whole marsh for large scale fish cultivation, engaged labour to prepare it and bought a net and tons of fishlings and feed for them, lime, fertilizers, etc. The fortunes of the samiti members, self-managing the samity with hard work and strict discipline, have changed dramatically. Within three years the samity has also been able to repay half of the loan – an exemplary example in contrast to ‘micro-credit’ of the Grameen Bank and NGOs of appropriate credit to the very disadvantaged to liberate their latent group entrepreneurial talents in large scale production to contribute not only to augmenting their own income but also to economic growth of their village.

The Krishi Bank of Jaldhaka also initiated the formation of nine groups of low income farmers and gave them a total loan of 216000 taka and helped them with technical know-how on vegetable farming, poultry and fishery. Fortunes of these farmers have started changing dramatically. The benefit has spread to other poverty groups in the village by way of greater employment and wage of day labourers, rise of fishing-net business, and stimulation to unemployed youth to get engaged in creative ventures like poultry and biogas production with cow-dung after taking training from relevant government offices. And some farmers have started storing the products themselves and sell them outside by-passing the middlemen, coining a new term for this activity - "rakhi business" ("keep it ourselves business"), keeping the full surplus from the enterprises themselves. (Morol 2006 Part 1. *loc. cit*)

### group saving-and-loan initiatives of low-income people

There are impressive accounts of poverty groups coming out of poverty through group saving-and-loan initiatives of their own, and even without loan but with technical input from outside abound in the country. There are numerous self-initiated saving and loan societies of low-income groups in the country's villages whom either micro-credit from external sources has not reached or who themselves have not gone for such credit being unsure that they can handle it. There are, for example, "mushtichal" (fistful of rice) samitis of women of extremely low-income households whom micro-credit from external agencies do not reach - e.g. "mushtichal mohila samity" of dalanbari village, Begumganj upazilla, Noakhali district, self-managing saving investment and loan operations (Morol 2006 Part 2. pp 305-307); and similar samiti of wives of rickshawallahs, van drivers and low-income farmers in *pirgachha* village, shapara union, Gaibandha district whose members set aside two fistful of rice and one taka saving daily from which loans are given to samiti members for various small scale economic initiatives (Tahmina *et al* 2006b. pp 103-4). The fultala bazaar small businessmen's savings and loan scheme in Khulna started in 1981 with 296 members which gives productive, business as well as distress loans to its members, including rice and khoil loan *without interest* when rice price goes up, and has also a pension scheme and an educational support programme to meritorious and needy children of the members, is another particularly exemplary case (Mukta *et al.* 2006 Part 1. pp 61-76).

### Villagers build public library

Dihi union public library, started in 1977 by the local youth in sharsha Upazilla, Jessore district, is a library with a difference (Mukta *et al* 2006 pp 8-33). In addition to providing books for reading, the library also provides training to farmers in modern farming, poultry, forestation, health and family planning, the history of the country etc., and organizes eye care camps almost every year. It also manages a nursery. The library gives stipends to meritorious students of low-income families. Land for the library was contributed by an illiterate villager. It is run with contributions from villagers including low-income people who contribute 4-anna, 8 anna - whatever they can. Some grants from the government and NGOs were taken, but offers of the rich (smugglers) were refused. Now the venture is fully self-reliant. The library is run by voluntary labour of local teachers and others. Today every school of the union has a branch of this library under the

supervision of its teachers, and the library workers are involved in developing the education programmes of the schools.

And there are reports on numerous youth campaigns for social service, e.g. blood donation clubs, cross-country bicycle campaigns to create social awareness against drugs and acid-throwing on women, voluntary grave digging and garbage disposal squads, library movements, and many others, supporting Tagore's immortal song of the youth:

*we are the runners of the new youth  
we are restless, we are queer!*

....

*wherever we are summoned –  
in life, in death and in storm  
we are ready!*

(Rahman 1999: 82).

### **2.3 Science in comradeship with the Disadvantaged**

A number of people's initiatives have been sparked or assisted by 'pro-people' persons from the community of science and letters, of which a few examples are:

#### Union of science and farmers revolutionise agricultural production

Farmers of Bandobilla area of Bagharpara upazilla, Jessore district, formed "agricultural clubs" where Agricultural officers were invited to come and advice on a regular basis. The officers came regularly to the clubs, tested soils and advised on optimum cultivation practices on different kinds of soil. The result was revolutionary jump of production per acre - from less than 20 maunds per acre in 1998 to about 100 maunds by 2002. The example started spreading, and similar clubs started being formed in neighbouring areas. By now the upazilla has 22 such clubs, contributing to phenomenal rise in land productivity there. (Morol Part 1 2005: 4-7)

#### productive use of every inch of land

Agricultural Block Supervisor Md. Hamidur Rahman posted at Chuhor block in Pairabandh Union, Mithapukur Upazilla, Rangpur district, saw



landless labourers there taking rice only with chilly at the end of days of hard labour, and wondered how he could help them live better. He went from door to door to motivate and teach them productive use of every inch of land they had in and around their households by way of integrated vegetable, poultry and fish farming, and production for sale of organic compost fertilizers with homestead, water and farm wastes combined scientifically with chemicals. The initiative started in 1995 with 55 men and women, whose economic status grew rapidly. Today 1200 families are intensely involved in this 'self-reliant revolution' under direct supervision of Mr. Hamidur Rahman. Many other landless in all the villages under Chuhor farming block have followed suit, whom Mr. Rahman visits to advice. (Mukta *et al* 2005: 100-117).

### disadvantaged women move forward with improved ovens

Another example of the assistance of science for poverty alleviation through productive initiatives is the application of the technology of improved ovens in six villages in Beltia Block on the outskirts of Jamalpur city. Block Supervisor Badal Chandra Das from the Agricultural Extension office of Jamalpur learnt this technology from the Science Laboratory at Dhaka, and in 1999 motivated and trained a number of women of very low-income families in these villages to make improved ovens. Today there are 70 women's and 20 men's samities with a total membership of 1350 making this oven by visits to villagers' homes charging 100 taka only net of material cost for making each oven. The total saving accumulated in these samities taken together today is nearly 250000 taka. Members of the samities are also making further earnings by vegetable farming in their homesteads and in environment- preserving work with tree planting. (Morol 2005 Part 2: 308-309)

### The "kajoli pre-school" model

A Dhaka-based educated person who does not believe in dependence-generating help to the disadvantaged, went to the most disadvantaged families of his home village kajoli in Sripur union of Magura district. They were mostly day-labourers of uncertain income. He asked them to give their pre-school age children, one from each family, to a 'pre-school' for which he would give a room and recreation space and basic class-room materials. The children would get together there 26 days of a month to have fun and learn

in the process, under the supervision of a village girl of some education. There would be 26 children in the class, one child per family. And there was to be one condition: each day one mother would feed all the 26 children in the school.

The first reaction of the parents, who had never thought of sending their children to school, was: "we are so poor - how can we feed so many children?"

"But this will be only for one day of the 26 school days of the month, and don't you feed your children at home all the days of the month?"

"Of course - we had not thought about this - we can do this!"

This is the way this innovative pre-school model, now known throughout the country as the "kajoli pre-school model", started in 2003 (*Daily Star* 2005).

A woman or teenage girl from the locality is preferred as the 'teacher'. She must have some basic education and love for children. She is paid a salary of Tk 500 a month, the amount being generally raised from the community. Some parents themselves are contributing toward salary of the teachers even reducing their own food intake. A three-day training is given to the teacher. Physically challenged young girls are preferred as teachers as they are found to have a lot of love, affection and patience for the children. Some physically challenged girls are teaching in such schools without any remuneration, such being the fulfillment they are getting from this. Parents' Associations oversee the school management.

The children are learning in the schools with learning methods that are more fun than learning, with speed that is astonishing everybody including teachers of the local primary school where they enter the following year, most of them earning scholarships. The joy of the boy or girl whose mother treats all his/her pals to 'khitchuri' (rice and lentil cooked together) on her/his mother's day in the school on which day s/he is the "class captain", serves food to everybody and is also the physical training "director", knows no bounds - who said they are "poor" if they can thus share and give to each other!

By now the model has spread to about 150 villages far and wide in the country with guidance from RIB, volunteers from other villages coming to

learn the basics of the model and initiate it in his/her village, with villagers donating the school-room or a piece of land for the space. Requests to RIB for guidance to open such centres in other villages continue to come.<sup>3</sup>

## **2.4 gonogobeshona in Bangladesh**

The collective initiatives of disadvantaged people presented above are naturally the result of their collective thinking which, however, have been *spontaneous*, i.e. not stimulated by outsiders. A world-wide movement started in the mid- nineteen seventies by the name of “Participatory (Action) Research” (PR or PAR) has by now developed a large experience base with regard to the methodology and pedagogy for promoting people's self-research (Hall 1997; Rahman 2007). This movement has been ideologically rooted in a call for dual structural transformation for people's liberation - transformation not only of the relations of production but also in the relations of knowledge in society. (Rahman 2007). RIB's own work in ‘gonogobeshona’ has taken inspiration from experiments in 'animation' work in Sri Lanka in the late nineteen seventies to promote people’s self-research and collective action with which the present writer was associated (Tilakaratna 1985). In this approach 'animators' from outside ("action teams" as Wresinski called them) go through a workshop process of collective self-brain-storming on their task to animate and assist people's self-inquiry taking cognizance of experiences elsewhere of such initiatives. The task is, *a là* Wresinski, not to *explain* to the people but to *help them to think*. Thereafter the animators go to the disadvantaged people to animate their collective self-inquiry, with the challenge also that they should be able to withdraw after a period with the people’s groups becoming able to carry on with their self-inquiries and collective action without further needing their assistance. RIB introduced the term 'gonogobeshona' replacing the heavier term "participatory action research" or “PAR”, considering that disadvantaged people would more readily identify with this term. As mentioned earlier, with RIB's collaboration the Hunger Project, Bangladesh, has also joined since December 2004 in promoting gonogobeshona in the country.

Gonogobeshona animated in RIB projects and in the Hunger Project have important insights to offer by way of the nature of stimulation this is providing to disadvantaged groups and action this is generating among them both at the individual and at the collective levels. Highlights from some experiences of such gonogobeshona in Bangladesh are presented below.

## **gonogobeshona in debidoba bill area, dinajpur**

*"When in December last activities under [people's] research were formally started, many of the elder researchers had thought that they would receive some special kinds of assistance. Hence everyone had presented accounts in details of what they did not have. All of them had a pale appearance, many behaved like people having come to seek some favour, and none cared for their bodies and clothes. The same persons looked different when they came to the gatherings toward the last months, their behaviour had altered, and they came as clean as possible and in their best dress. On the day of presentation of the report of gonogobeshona most of them had turned up in their best attires. Most of them have a stamp of a kind of personality on their faces, and they do not speak any more without thinking. Reports have started coming that many of them are economically a little better-off now, they do not quarrel in the family any more, all members of the family do their works with devotion, etc. How did this big change in them happen in these few months? Where did they get this strength? No doubt this strength has been acquired from the practical power of the philosophy on which PAR is based." (Lenin Azad; Azad 2006: Acknowledgment of debt p 1. Translation by the present author).*

The first such 'animated' gonogobeshona in Bangladesh was undertaken in 2003 in a RIB project in the debidoba bill area, belaichandi union, parbotipur upazilla, Dinajpur district under an already existing landless and fishermen' organization, facilitated by an NGO, the Development Research Centre. The organization selected 100 extremely income-poor persons for gonogobeshona on the dimensions of their poverty and ways of overcoming them. These gonogobeshoks met regularly over a six-month period in small and large groups to deliberate on their poverty and on ways of moving forward. The causes of poverty were identified to be both social exploitation and injustice and personal weaknesses of the disadvantaged such as gambling, lack of disciplinary/planned management of family, and internal family feuds. The gonogobeshoks claimed their right to cultivate fallow land which some vested interests were also trying to usurp. They launched campaigns to publicise the results of their research and their claims to the wider community, including respected villagers who were sympathetic to

their condition and effort, and started gaining a lot of popularity and sympathy in the locality. As vested interests sought to resist their mobilization and scheduled public presentation of the final results of their gonogobeshona, more than 150 youth of well-to-do village families mobilized in their favour, and the presentation of the results of gonogobeshona was held in an atmosphere of great festivity. This has taken their struggle for land to a new level of social mobilization. While their struggle continues to this day with its ups and downs the gonogobeshoks supported by the village youth have started campaigns against local gambling networks, are developing their own saving and loan-to-the-needy programmes, campaigns against extractive village money-lenders, and also organised struggles for higher wages for farm land resulting in some rise in wages. The enthusiasm and frontline participation in the whole movement of women gonogobeshoks previously given to more docile conduct is particularly noticeable. (Azad 2006)

### **gonogobeshona in Nilfamari**

A team of external animators who worked in the above gonogobeshona project formed their own animator organization, an NGO called USS (Udayankur Sheba Shangtha), and is carrying out animation work to promote gonogobeshona in collaboration with RIB in altogether fifteen unions of Nilfamari district (Ali 2006). A study of gonogobeshona under USS in three villages in this programme in Laksmichap union (Rahman, Matiur 2006), with one female group and one male group in each village, reveals the following:

The gonogobeshona groups are meeting once a week in numbers 25/30 in each to discuss different aspects of their lives. They call this process "gobeshona", by which they understand "to think, to exercise one's brain, to discover 'the real thing', to assess the positives and negatives of something".(Rahman, Matiur 2005 :24 – translated)

One can discern clear signs of change in these "gobeshoks" - in their thinking, awareness, movements, conducts, ways of speaking and in other activities. They are much more thoughtful compared to other people in these villages. Ever since starting this gobeshona process they think before taking every action. They think how they can overcome their wants, and are absorbed in such thinking. In their gobeshona they discuss issues of education of their children and their upbringing, health questions, question

of dowry, the evils of early marriage, family wellbeing, family planning, etc. Outside the formal gobeshona session they also do, as they say, bilateral 'gobeshona' among themselves - with their husbands, with their parents, with other members of their families, about themselves, about their families, about the society.

With and through gonogobeshona the outlook of people of this locality has changed. They do not consider low income as the only reason for their poverty. They have discovered through their research that people also become poor because of lack of thinking, awareness and knowledge.

Teenage girls have also joined the elders in gonogobeshona to inquire into different aspects of their lives. As their thinking opened up they felt that they have more to contribute to their family wellbeing. They have started helping their younger siblings in their studies. As they said to the author of the study, "We shall try to see that outsiders are not needed to do what we can do." Teenage gobeshok Kalpona said on her own lack of schooling, "I wanted to study, but my parents did not send me to school as I am a girl. My mother said, "Am I not being useful to my family? Is my husband not feeding me? There is no need for you to go to school." I was deeply pained to hear this from Mother." (op cit: 30 – translated). The teenage researchers all decided that they would have to discuss this question with their parents, to convince them that girls can also do what boys can do.

### Women's empowerment

One direct result of gonogobeshona in this place has been that women have gained the strength to speak out. Gobeshok Dipali Rani Roy said, *"Earlier I used to hesitate to talk before people - after doing gobeshona I have got the courage to speak. I am cleverer now - no one can cheat me."* (op cit : 31 – translated). They have assessed through their gobeshona that they have first to improve their knowledge and wisdom so that others cannot cheat them. As they reported, they have discovered through their gobeshona that "knowledge is power". Gonogobeshok Morjina of vendipara said, *"Previously I had no wisdom, and my husband and in-laws did not give any importance to my words. Now doing gobeshona my wisdom has opened up. Now I can give advice to my husband on different matters, and my importance in the family has increased."* (op cit :31 – translated).

Stimulated by the activation of their thinking many 'gobeshok' girls are trying various activities to raise family income while previously they used to

confine themselves in the kitchen and gossip away their spare time - they are doing vegetable gardening on homestead land, have planted trees, are rearing ducks and chicken, some have purchased cows or goats, many have started knitting, some have started earning by working as housemaid in others' houses. Besides, previously they used to get lower wage for work outside, and now they refuse to work for lower pay.

Gobeshok Ramna of vendipara said, "*Previously I used to eat and sleep, now I have thinking going on in my head all the time. What is more, my shyness has disappeared once I started gobeshona. Now I am not shy, I do all kinds of work. And thus working I am reducing my wants. Now I am thinking what new work I can do. Before doing gobeshona I never thought like this. Now my thinking is advancing, and one after another ideas are arising in my mind.*" (op cit : 33 – translated)

Previously male gobeshoks used to spend much of their time gossiping in the bazaar. Now : "*Much money and time is wasted going to the bazaar. So we don't go to the bazaar unless we need to*" - said gobeshok Monju of Sarkar para, adding: "*previously we did not give any value to money; now we give it value. Now we spend with great consideration. We think a lot before spending. This thinking we never did before doing gobeshona.*" (op cit : 33 – translated).

Quarrels and reconciliation in the family: Gonogobeshoks of *laksmichap* have conceptualized quarrels as a 'hole' in the family that impedes the family's progress. They have discussed in the gobeshona groups the reasons for quarrels, the results of quarrels and how to reduce quarrels. Quarrels occur between husband and wife, between daughter-in-law and parent-in-law, between children and parents. They say, "quarrels bring no gain, so we shall not quarrel any more". Rabi of Sarkara para says, "*from after she started doing gobeshona my wife does not quarrel any more, there is a change in her manners and thinking - previously almost everyday there used to be quarrels in my family*". He added: "*previously my wife and her mother-in-law used to quarrel a lot, and there was no peace in the family. Uniting in gobeshona their patience has increased, and they now discuss together how the family can be mobilized to get rid of want. Now there is peace in the family.*" (op cit : 36 – translated).

Gonogobeshoks are now using their knowledge and thinking as a 'capital' (from which income flows), and are taking various income-raising initiatives

that they had not taken previously. Many are trying to save 10-12 taka from their daily earnings according to their capabilities. In addition to doing vegetable farming on homestead land, many are saving money and buying vans (3-wheeled cycle carriers), opening shops, rearing chicken and ducks, planting wild trees and fruit trees, and buying tins in phases for roofing their rooms saving one/two fistful of rice from daily feed waiting until they have 10/12 kg of rice to be able to roof their entire room. They have also become serious about their children's education. They work much harder than before. Although these are very small enterprises that hardly catch the eye, these are initiatives they have taken for the first time to meet their wants.

These general statements are supported by a number of case studies of the transformation of individual gobeshoks and of their families that are reported in the study.

### **gonogobeshona of 'untouchable' sweeper communities of Kushtia**

Sweeper communities in the country belong to a number of marginalized, so-called "missing communities" who are outside the mainstream development agendas. In addition to their material poverty they are socially stigmatized as "untouchable's" for the specific nature of their profession, and face social discriminations that add as obstacles to their economic betterment.<sup>4</sup> RIB initiated gonogobeshona with them which first used the method of "interactive theatre" led by a team of youth from this community previously known for their unruly conduct but who were stimulated by the idea of such drama. They called their venture "*alor shondhaney*" (in search of enlightenment).

In the interactive drama, 'draft' scenes depicting negative incidents in the community's life that ended with disastrous consequences were acted before the whole community and members of the wider society, inviting the audience to 'enlighten' the drafts by way of proposals toward change. One example of the themes was gang rape that actually happened to a minor girl of the community who had committed suicide not meeting justice from the society or the authorities against the violation, and the audience was asked to validate the theme as depicting reality. Another theme was child marriage, and the draft drama evoked a heated discussion among the audience that finally resolved into an animated acting by a 13-year old girl seeking to dissuade the young groom from taking the step of marrying an 8-year old girl. (Guhathakurata 2007).



This kind of drama-based gonogobeshona, and subsequently more regular gonogobeshona of members of the sweeper community that was also animated (Akhtaruzzaman et al 2006), have changed attitudes to life of the youth of this community from despondent anti-social conduct towards serious study and civil social conduct. The present writer had the opportunity to attend a presentation of the results of this gonogobeshona process to a civil society forum in Kushtia (Sept 8 2004), where these youth gonogobeshoks stood up one after another to express how their lives had changed from a sense of hopelessness toward a positive outlook of life; and the Senior Vice-President of the Dalit Human Rights Association, Dhaka who attended the presentation gave a lengthy speech at the end of the session saying that his Association had struggled for years to improve the condition of dalits in Bangladesh placing demands to the authorities, but had achieved nothing remotely near to what this gonogobeshona initiative had achieved in six months.

The sweeper colonies of Kushtia were visited by Professor Muinul Islam in autumn 2006 in connection of a study of RIB-supported gonogobeshona in Bangladesh that he is undertaking, more than two years after the above RIB-supported gonogobeshona project ended. The following extracts from a report by him speak for themselves:

"Members of a number of 'sweeper colonies' of Kushtia have started their collective gonogobeshona against social untouchability and ignorance using the praxis of gonogobeshona initiated among them... The project started in August 2003 and ended in July 2004. I met those gonogobeshoks in September 2006... I had feared greatly that perhaps, two years after the project ended, the enthusiasm for gonogobeshona had also ended. This is what is supposed to happen inevitably in the 'project-culture' in this country. But there was some 'new learning' waiting for me there. I saw that while gonogobeshona sessions did not take place as frequently as every week as before, 30/40 gonogobeshoks are meeting 2/3 times every month even now to discuss their problems. No animator from outside is present any more in these sessions, but 3/4 'internal animators' have in the meanwhile taken upon themselves the responsibility of guiding them.

...

"From gonogobeshona they have learnt to understand that ignorance is what has locked them in a vicious circle. Lack of jobs is not the primary problem of these communities. Even with their low incomes lack of food, clothing and housing is not their major problem. They are unable to find any workable solution of their primary problem, which is social untouchability, because of lack of the appropriate knowledge. Again, it is for lack of knowledge that they are submerged in a culture of wasteful spending rather than spending their earnings on food, clothing, education and health. Through gonogobeshona they are searching for ways of solving their problems, and are taking initiatives to develop collective unity. Progressively, forceful position against drinking is emerging. Drinking and serving wine are progressively being dropped from social and religious rites. In the schools, after a number of successful collective protests against discriminatory behaviour people of other social categories are being compelled to change their outlook. Their own households are getting progressively cleaner. They are now being served together with other customers in nearby hotels, but with the condition that they will go there as clean people. As a result of their organised gonogobeshona the municipalities of Kushtia and Kumarkhali have been forced to raise their pays and perquisites. Local government officials are treating the organised united strength of these communities with respect.

"Such positive results of gonogobeshona are certainly not to be regarded as spectacular. But it is getting clear that the level of awareness of the communities as a whole is rising every day. The development of awareness is not confined to collective protests or making demands. In a number of the sweeper colonies collective programmes starting from saving from their meagre incomes to their own 'micro-lending' programmes have also started. In a few places preparations are afoot toward larger-scale investments putting small savings together.

“This much is getting clear, that the struggle for social dignity of the harijan communities of Kushtia has started. They are seeking freedom from the curse of untouchability by breaking their own chain of ignorance. The time to boast of success has not yet come, but that the journey has started can be said without any doubt. Leadership in this gonogobeshona of the harijan community is being given by a group of young boys and girls.

"There is another reason why it cannot yet be said whether gonogobeshona can make a lasting contribution to the participatory development of these

communities. A number of NGOs have started all kinds of advocacy programmes with their own funds in this area after coming to know of these apparent successes of the effort of RIB. This is what is worrisome. The inevitable corollaries of NGO culture are 'dependence' and 'expectation of assistance.' If the expectation that funding from outside will become available gets root here also, then gonogobeshona will not get transformed into a self-propelled development."

(Translation of excerpts from Islam 2007)

### **‘untouchable’s move forward combining gonogobeshona and the ‘kajoli pre-school model’ - story of the 'rishi's of Satkhira**

Life of a number of similar “untouchable” classes have brightened up through gonogobeshona as by systematically getting together and deliberating collectively they are realizing that untouchability is not 'divinely' ordained but a human-made prejudice that can be challenged by their collective strength. They have started getting mobilized and are challenging. The following account of progress on this front is worth narrating many times over:

The “untouchable” "rishi" community in Satkhira mobilized themselves through gonogabeshona, and among other activities demanded that the local hotels serve them. The hotels yielded to their collective pressure, but marked their utensils separately to assure other customers that they would not be served in utensils used by the ‘untouchable’s. Still this was some progress – poverty alleviation/development step one. The rishi community then sought to set up a pre-school on a RIB-supported "kajoli” pre-school model that requires 26 students in a class and each parent to feed all the students in the class one day of the month (*Daily Star* 2005). Thirteen families were found with children of pre-school age. Coming to know of the vacant thirteen seats disadvantaged Muslim families approached them to send their children to this school, but wanted that their children eat separate food sent from their families and not food cooked by the rishi families. The school started in February 2006 with this arrangement, nevertheless a big step forward toward integration - poverty alleviation/development step two.

In a few months the final barrier dissolved - all the children in the pre-school are now sharing the same meals. Who can stop the 'non-touchability-conscious' child of any family to drink from the same glass with her

'untouchable' class-pal or to want to taste what is in 'that other plate'? - poverty alleviation/development step three!

(Information at RIB.)

### **Gonogobeshona in the "Hunger Project" in Bangladesh**

Currently, gonogobeshona under the Hunger Project is being carried out in eight unions of five districts<sup>5</sup>. Voluntary animators from the respective areas are playing the role of animators. There are 150 such animators working in these unions. Over 4,000 disadvantaged women and men are involved in gonogobeshana initiated in this programme.

As the co-ordinator of Hunger Project's gonogobeshona programme reports (Mahmood 2006), during the past two years, the gonogobeshoks have created over two hundred "gono shangothans" (people's organisations) in the eight unions. The leaderships of these shangothans are in the hands of the gonogobeshoks themselves. The gonogobeshoks claim that these are "our organizations": *"everything here is ours; the ideas are ours, the money is ours, the decisions are ours."*

The gono shangothans are born spontaneously, as a result either of animation work by unpaid volunteers called "ujjibaks" (stimulators) who attend a "ujjibak-training" workshop of the Hunger Project, or by exposure of representatives of disadvantaged people to the concept of gonogobeshona by attending PAR workshops being organised by RIB. Previously many organizations had been created in this region, but the leadership of the organizations was usually in the hands of comparatively well-to-do individuals with the ordinary members of the organizations never able to fully establish their ownership. As a result these organisations disintegrated over time.

As one gonogobeshok remarked, *"Now we not only move about with our physical strength, now we think together, decide, now the power of our minds is vast"*.

### **"There will be no more early marriages in Muktinagar"**

Gonogobeshoks of Muktinagar union, of whom about 90 per cent are women, (Mahmood 2005: 20) have stopped early marriages individually and as a group. Several cases have been lodged against the Kazi (marriage

registrar), the Imam and the marriage broker of Muktinagar to stop early marriages. Altogether, between 2005 and September 2006 the gonogobeshaks have stopped more than 50 early marriages in this union. If arrangements were being made for early marriage some neighbourer, or in some cases the mother of the girl herself, informs the gonogobeshoks. Usually if the neighbourers fail to persuade the parents they call in the gonogobeshoks. In the beginning when the gonogobeshoks went to stop the early marriages, parents would be irked and occasionally they even gave threats. This no longer happens. Now, if a gonogobeshok arrives, that means that that marriage has to be stopped for certain. As the gonogobeshoks are declaring, *“There will be no more early marriages in Muktinagar.”*

Gonogobeshak Momena Begum has prevented several early marriages. She told the gonogobeshok programme co-ordinator, *“Many men in my area are in favor of early marriage. Yesterday I prevented one. The bride was 12 years old and the groom was 16 years old. There was even a dowry of Taka 5000 in the wedding. I stopped them. The UP (Union Parishad) member told me, “This marriage is going to take place”. I told him, “How can you give permission? You are a man of the law. If you say one more thing in favor of this wedding, I will lodge a case against the Kazi and the marriage broker. If you oppose me, I will lodge a case against you as well”. The UP member admonished me and said, “What are you saying woman? Why are you meddling here?” I said, “The marriage broker will be paid by both sides. The Kazi will also get some money. I am a gonogobeshak, I am not here to make money. I am here to protest against injustice, to solve a problem. This marriage will not take place. Show me the documentation for the bride’s age*

An example of how a traditionally unassertive individual has become outspoken by joining gonogobeshona, is the case of gonogobeshok Momena Begum. She said, *“... if I had not become a gonogobeshok, I would have remained stupid. Let’s see who can cheat me now... That day a van driver said about me that because women were going around preventing early marriages, the life spans of men were decreasing. When I heard this I felt very angry, brother, my head just spun. I jumped down from the van and said to him, “Hey, fellow, stop this van! First you have to answer, how does the life span decrease?” When he heard my question, the driver was astonished. He had no answer to give. I said again, “If you don’t know then why do you talk? Never speak like that again. Then you will not be able to drive your van along this road anymore.”*

*"I am a gonogobeshak"* – this is how the disadvantaged people who are involved with gonogobeshona introduce themselves. I have seen that most of them feel a sense of dignity in introducing themselves thus, as they feel pride in this identity. I wanted to know from them, how did it feel to identify themselves as gonogobeshak? Gonogobeshoks Romisa Begum, Momena Begum, Ajeda, Morjina, Hafiza, Mukti, Momin, Enamul, all of them said the same thing: *"Gonogobeshana has enhanced our confidence. The respect we get from the villagers as gonogobeshoks is unthinkable"*.

As an evidence of the respect gonogobeshoks are earning from the wider society, the Director of a local NGO addressing a conference of gonogobeshoks in Muktinagar on 22 March 2006 said, *"...it is quite a departure that you are introducing yourselves as gobeshoks. Respected gobeshoks, I am extending my respect to you. I know a little bit about your strength....You are now much more aware of your rights. You are more vocal than anyone else in respect of claiming your rights. Your process of organization building and your unity are inspiring..."* .

### ***"We will No Longer Take Micro Credit"***

According to gonogobeshak Enamul Haq, *"We are using our own money for ourselves. We do not have to have our hand outstretched asking others for money. This is protecting our self-respect. No one can humiliate us anymore."* Using their own savings has increased their income, has created new self-employment. Thus the need for the gonogobeshoks to obtain micro-credit at high interest rates from NGOs has decreased. They are familiar with many stories of bankruptcy by taking loans from NGOs at high rates of interest. The gonogobeshok commented, *'We shall not take micro-credit any more'*. They even stated, *'We will stop micro-credit from operating in our area.'*<sup>6</sup>

Gonogobeshoks of Muktinagar are asserting their rights to public services which were previously denied them. As an example, as one gonogobeshok Omar Ali recounted, *" I did not get service from the government hospital even though I was a muktijoddha...But after we became a gonogobeshok they cannot derpive us any more. Last month...one of us went to get medicine for diarrhea. Without listening to him properly the doctor just asked him to take some liquid medicine from the drum. He did not take it. When he told me of this I went to the hospital with him and asked 'why have you given him medicine without hearing him properl?'. He asked me, 'are you a doctor?' I*

*told him, 'Talking like this will not do. Give proper medicine.' He asked me to get out. I returned with other gonogobeshoks and asked, 'why aren't you giving medicine...?' He got very irritated...We complained in the police station, in the district headquarters. After one day he called us and gave medicine. Not only did he give us medicine, now he comes every Friday at 10 a.m. at the three-way junction to our village and blows the horn of his Honda, and listens if someone needs treatment. For small problems he gives medicine on the spot, otherwise he asks the patient to go to the hospital. He has been totally straightened up."<sup>7</sup>*

### **Going back to post-independence days: Ad-hoc 'Gonogobeshona' for distribution of meagre relief materials**

We shall conclude this account of experiences of gonogobeshona in Bangladesh by recounting the case of an *ad-hoc* challenge to extremely distressed people to collectively deliberate upon and identify those among them who were the most deserving to obtain hopelessly inadequate relief materials during a severe flood in Bangladesh – a case of ad-hoc gonogobeshona.

During the severe flood in the country in 1974 which was followed by a serious famine condition, the present writer led a relief team of students and teachers of Dhaka University, which went to a number of villages in *Brahmanbaria* district to do relief work. Low-income people of the flood-affected villages there had been without food for days, and whatever food and other relief materials we had taken there was a drop in the ocean. I decided that distribution of such scarce relief to these starving people should be done not by us but by the people themselves. As hundreds of villagers, in the first village where we anchored our boat, rushed to us in mad scramble for relief rice, I invited them to collectively identify the most starving among them to qualify for relief. Elders pushed their children to us, pleading that they had been starving for two, three or four days. I told them that there might be some child starving for four days, and shouldn't they point at him/her first?

Slowly the villagers turned, and started vigorously arguing among themselves about who needed relief most ['gonogobeshona' in our language today]. Then some of them identified one family as the worst victim of the flood. I invited the entire crowd to debate this

proposal and inquire if there was a worse suffering family, and to recommend to us unanimously about the first family we should help. In the end we had a unanimous recommendation, and our first ration was given to that family. Then I asked for the next family we should help, and got a unanimous recommendation again. We helped only four families in that village in this way, and then said we had so little relief materials that we had to go to some other village with the rest, and asked them if they would show us which other villages we should go to where there was acute suffering. The villagers all cooperated, and we left them, most of them but the four families we had helped left starving. And the villagers all came to the shore and blessed us for our mission to help the neediest.

This experience in all its sequences was exactly repeated in three other villages.

In one village a well-to-do villager invited our whole team – about twenty – to take lunch at his house: were we not hungry and tired doing relief work like this all morning? As he kept pestering us I said finally, "*Aren't you ashamed of yourself? If you have surplus food in your house shouldn't you not be helping your fellow starving villagers rather than treating us who you know are well fed?*" The man kept quiet and followed us throughout our search in the village for starving families. When we were done and were alighting our boat he came to us and said, "*you are exceptional people – may God bless your mission.*"

In another village I called all the women to tell them we had only two *sarees* to give in their village, and asked their help in identifying whom we should give them. The first reaction from the village women who rushed at us, again, was to claim a *saree* for oneself, showing one's totally tattered *saree* through which the body showed embarrassingly. I asked if they knew of some grown up girl who could not come out even to show this because she had nothing on at all, and if so wouldn't they as her aunts recommend her for help first? The woman nearest to us who had been pleading incessantly for a *saree*, hung her head and turned and twisted the edge of her *saree* this way and that as if dialoguing with two sides of herself, and finally said, "*there are two girls in the yonder huts who have nothing on and cannot come out – you give the sarees to them, I do not want any*". The other women also hung their heads and agreed, and our job was done." (Rahman 2004b, section 4). And the job – one of distribution of extremely meagre relief materials under most acutely distressed



conditions - was done in the most humane way conceivable that could not have been achieved if the external relief team had taken it upon itself to decide on the relief recipients.

### **3. Insights on the notion of poverty, the role of knowledge in overcoming poverty, and on development philosophy**

#### **The notion of poverty**

The dominant view of poverty as inability to meet the so-called "basic needs of subsistence" has converged into a "dollar-a-day" kind of measure to facilitate international comparison. One of the very first known critics of such subsistence view of poverty was Poet-philosopher Rabindranath Tagore<sup>8</sup>. As an active crusader against poverty Father Wresinski has also challenged this view by emphasising the question of intensely humiliating social status of the 'poor', a question of *human dignity and lack of fellowship*, as a priority to be addressed. The ATD Movement has also emphasised the creative and artistic urges of humans as important needs to be addressed<sup>9</sup>, viewing poverty also as a holistic question not amenable to prioritising of fundamental human needs.<sup>10</sup> Manfred Max-Neef and his Chilean colleagues (Max-Neef 1989) have also emphasised the especially human urges for creativity, beauty love etc. to be addressed in development thinking. RIB in its vision for its own work on poverty along with the present writer, have also emphasised the creative and aesthetic urges of humans, rejecting the dominant 'basic-subsistence-needs' thinking on poverty as a "livestock view of humans" that smacks of a "cheap labour ideology" of development (Research Initiatives, Bangladesh 2003; Rahman 2004a).

The examples of people's initiatives in Bangladesh amply support the above alternative viewpoint on poverty. They illustrate, first, that even extremely low-income people trade-off at the margin higher income for social dignity that counts one as human. The conditions of many women in Bangladesh struggling not only for physical survival but also for a life of honour and dignity, the "untouchable" communities in Bangladesh, the blind singer opting to sacrifice security of food from begging for the dignity of community respect are poignant and eloquent testimonies to this. In addition to dignity as a fundamental human urge, the examples also demonstrate the

creative and aesthetic urges that distinguish the human from other known species.

The writer has been personally asked the question: “Don’t these people, economically very poor with whatever other urgent needs and urges they have, nevertheless, need food first?” Quite a puzzle, indeed, to decide which need comes first if needs must be ranked hierarchically. And this is where the failure to understand the holistic nature of the very basic human needs has occurred. As Max Neef *et al* clarified this puzzle:

“no need is, *per se*, more important than any other;....Simultaneities, complementarities and trade-offs are characteristic of the system’s behaviour. There are, however, limits to this generalization. A pre-systemic threshold must be recognized, below which the feeling of a certain deprivation may be so severe, that the urge to satisfy the given need *may paralyze* and overshadow any other impulse or alternative...But such a situation does not hold true only in the case of subsistence. It is equally relevant in the case of other needs.”

(Max Neef *et al* 1989: p 44; *italics* added).

Indeed, ask if the threshold for a starving woman offered a bowl of rice – for herself and/or for her starving infant - in exchange for her *honour*, is the rice bowl or her honour. Can it be different for different women, and even for the same woman at different times facing such intensely, very painfully, competitive choices, depending on where the ‘paralysis’ strikes her at the particular moment of choice? Or consider the case of a hapless woman divorced illegally by verbal declaration of the husband and then, even after the husband repents and calls her back, forced by vested fundamentalist interests to go through the barbaric system of “hillah” – i.e. to sleep with another temporary ‘husband’ before she can return to her original partner - can her poverty be alleviated simply by higher income without entitlement to the most basic honour and dignity as a woman? And what is the measure of the mental paralysis of the child girl being sacrificed in early marriage with her whole life’s dream destroyed, with the prospect of being physically devastated by bearing children one after another, dead or alive, without even proper medical care, and then facing divorce by husbands who seek newer, healthier, ‘preys’? Finally, for the starving ‘untouchable’ in Kushtia or Satkhira denied basic human dignity by way of being thrown out of a village hotel for belonging to the community of a particular economic profession that is even indispensable for the society – can we predict the nature of his ‘paralysis’ at that particular moment?

Or, to relax with a ‘fever’ rather than ‘paralysis’, what will be the choice of a possessed painter, between a better-paid job that will give her little time for painting, versus a lower-paid job that will give her hope she may some day give an exhibition at Dhaka? And doesn’t the riverine and rain-soaked Bangladesh, and such bewitching company of nature in any country, produce natural poets and singers who would not give up composing and singing ferrying boats in the countryside notwithstanding the low earnings from such job? An income-poor mother would and does, sacrifice calories for herself to finance her child's education, and if she were given sufficient income to buy the ‘basic needs kit’ for herself there would be constant leakages from her kit to buy her child's school books. And some mothers of the “kajoli model” pre-schools are saying that one of their motivation to send their kids to school is that this raises the status of their families, poor and slighted as they are in the community (Maqsood 2006: p 3). Women of very low-income families are joining hands to set aside a fistful of rice a day from their meagre food stock not merely for a better economic future but more basically in a search for security and self-determination in a very oppressive male-dominated culture. And finally, to give a macro example of historical moment, the independence struggle of Bangladesh as of other nations has shown people forgetting their material poverty to fight and die for national self-determination as that is where the ‘paralysis’ has struck at the final moment of reckoning.

Thus a linear approach to the question of poverty with a ‘nourishment-and-‘capability’-first and fulfillment of human urges later’ is inconsistent with human behaviour *even at extremely low levels of incomes*. What is, therefore, called for is an attack on poverty as an attack on deprivation of the opportunity for satisfaction of fundamental human urges, taking all such urges together as a comprehensive concern.

### **people's knowledge and thinking, and 'gonogobeshona'**

Completely ignored in the dominant poverty discourse is also the role of people's own knowledge and thinking as a force in overcoming their poverty and in promoting their development. Wresinski has given fundamental importance to this in his very profound and original articulation of this theme in his 1980 address to the Committee of Specialists at the UNESCO with years of work and thinking behind it. This thinking also coincides with

the ideological viewpoint of the Participatory Research movement mentioned earlier.

As illustrated in this paper, spontaneous people's collective praxis is a natural activity of disadvantaged people in response to contingencies of their lives. Experience of the 'gonogobeshona' work that RIB has initiated in Bangladesh and which the Bangladesh Hunger Project is also carrying forward to stimulate autonomous inquiries by the people themselves, fully supports Wresinski's views on the role of people's knowledge in overcoming their poverty. Disadvantaged people of Bangladesh are identifying with the term 'gonogobeshona' very readily. In fact, as the field experiences show, the term itself is giving the people a sense of status and empowerment with which they are asserting their thinking and rights vis-a-vis other quarters in relation to which they previously had a sense of inferiority

And the results speak for themselves. They show, first, that many among the disadvantaged and deprived have surrendered their thinking to either their economic masters or to the so-called educated who have appeared to be successful in their lives, or to 'fate' having become fatalists at their condition of perpetual poverty and lives of indignity. In the words of Wresinski, their thinking itself has become, as it were, "paralyzed". Secondly, processes of gonogobeshona have reactivated or stimulated the thinking of disadvantaged people given to despondency or not thinking their best. As some gonogobeshoks in Bangladesh narrate their own experience, gonogobeshona has "removed the rust from their brain", in the language of a Sri Lankan village coir yarn producer who had participated in a people's self-research process (Tilakaratna 1987: 8).

The re-activation or stimulation of people's thinking through gonogobeshona and its impact on people's lives are impressive. Gonogobeshona is stimulating both individual and collective self-thinking of the disadvantaged. As the study of gonogobeshona in Nilfamari reports, gonogobeshoks now "think before taking every action". Collective thinking is generating organizational awareness for both economic advancement and struggle for rights. The gonogobeshok groups are improving the economic management of whatever resources they themselves have, reducing wastage of money (e.g. through gambling) and time (whiling it away in the bazaar), and are initiating various new activities individually and collectively to raise their incomes. Awareness against others cheating them is rising. Many people's groups formed through gonogobeshona are initiating saving and loan

programmes even with their meagre incomes not having thought of taking such initiatives before. Organised gonogobeshona groups are undertaking pressure-group activities and are recording successes, e.g. for equal pay for women labour vis-a-vis male labour, gaining access to public services (e.g. health care) previously denied because of their low social status etc.

On the non-economic front, impressive mobilization of women is taking place against early marriage of girls. Gonogobeshona is reducing family quarrels which are giving way to reasoned discussions. Women engaged in *gonogabeshona* are coming out of their traditional inhibition to speak out in public and to do what previously was viewed as “men’s work”. Their status in the family is rising as they are contributing more to family income, and they are giving views on family issues with better articulation and reasoning than before. Overall respect for gonogobeshona groups from the wider community and from officials is rising.

A special emphasis of RIB has been to animate gonogobeshona among communities regarded by the wider society as ‘untouchable’s’, a treatment that they had for ages accepted as their fate. Such communities engaged in gonogobeshona are now engaged in organised resistance to their social exclusion with a renewed awareness of their right to social dignity, at the same time improving their own civic culture that had gone down frustrated by their social exclusion and which had reinforced the attitude of the broader society toward them. (While progress is visible, one study has given a note of caution about these communities falling into the trap of the prevailing "NGO culture" that might disorient them toward seeking dependence-creating assistance).

When the people thus get truly engaged in making their own inquiries it is found that they feel a special pride for having done 'gobeshona' themselves, and thereby directly feel an empowerment vis-a-vis others - including village leaders, local government officials, etc. - to be able to say and assert that 'we are gonogobeshoks', thus recovering their sense of self-dignity as against previous feelings of inferiority vis-a-vis the 'educated'. This is undoubtedly an important step toward improving the unequal 'knowledge relations' in the society that constitute part of the structural domination over the disadvantaged.

With all such gains, a new awareness among the disadvantaged is emerging from some of these gonogobeshona initiatives, on *the primacy of collective thinking by the disadvantaged themselves as a poverty-alleviating resource*, insofar as they can thereby manage their private economies better, find new avenues for individual and collective initiatives for further economic advancement, and understand and take strategies to confront injustices against them to which they had previously submitted. The parallel with privileged quarters of the society giving precedence to collective thinking in seminars, conferences and workshops before and to formulate action plans is immediate.

To conclude, people's knowledge and thinking are witnessed as a *dynamic force* floating like a raft as it were in an ocean against the tides of the dominant knowledge structure, sometimes floating above water, sometimes making its way forward, sometimes going under water in response to adverse structural tides, a raft that is emerging as an assertive power following processes of gonogobeshona. The Bangladesh experience unmistakably supports Wresinski's thinking that

"All human beings and groups are researchers, seeking independence through understanding themselves and their situation so that they control their destiny rather than submitting and being afraid",

and that

"every act of thinking can become an act of personal liberation".

This points to the need, in addition to its immediate role in poverty alleviation, for considering another element of human rights for all - i.e. opportunity and resources for gonogobeshona, a 'capability'-raising right by itself at par with formal schooling which is rather late in the day for most disadvantaged adults.

### **The role of outside knowledge**

As Wresinski has observed, people's knowledge needs to be developed – from the raft to a strong and stable vessel - to be able to advance against adverse tides. Formal science can help in this effort and need to come in the service of the disadvantaged, but *as a comrade and not as a master*. One of the best examples of this is the comradeship extended by Agricultural Block Officer Mr. Motiur Rahman in *chuhor* who has brought to landless extreme

poverty groups scientific knowledge for productive use of every inch of homestead land and for producing organic fertilizer which have transformed the economic fortunes of these groups. In many other villages scientific personnel are advising low-income peasants in modern farming and other technology, on their own initiative or at the invitation of the peasants. In fact, disadvantaged people have a right to access the whole world of science and technology for advancement of their economic lives as well as an input in the process of their knowledge and personality building, but *in a relation of equality and self-determination* in which the carriers of modern science and technology will not impose upon them as 'superiors' but will bring such knowledge to them for their consideration. Such relation of equality and self-determination presupposes prior activation of processes of people's own thinking and assertion thereof which are strengthened by gonogobeshona. This is the way to "help [people's] knowledge to develop" as invoked by Wresinski - by animating people's self-research and inviting scientific knowledge to hold people's hand not with a complex of superiority but in true comradeship.<sup>11</sup>

### **The final challenge of animation**

Wresinsky has given us what may be considered as the final challenge of animation, in the following words:

"We could of course imagine another type of revolution, more usual in world history, which would involve the poor organising themselves in order to seize power from the rich and put themselves in their place. But who then guarantees that the poor man, as a rich man tomorrow, would be any better than the rich man of today?..."

"The present situation of the most excluded and the necessary transformation of society in their favour must not make us forget this new risk: that the poor in their turn may seek to oppress and destroy men. ..."

"our ideal is not only to be constantly close to the poorest, but also to identify ourselves with everything within them that is truth, love and justice, ..."

A response to this challenge to the ideology of radical social change is contained in the results of the experiment in meagre relief distribution in some Bangladesh villages during the flood and famine of 1974, asking the acutely starving people to take charge of this responsibility invoking their deepest humanity, as recounted in the last account in the previous section.

#### #4. On the goal of humanity and the philosophy of development

The modern poverty discourse is a relatively recent phenomenon generated by the failure of 'development' efforts since World War II to lift the teeming masses of the world out of inhuman poverty and deprivation. The dominant poverty discourse has conceptualized poverty in purely economic terms. Even apart from the absurd 'livestock' view of poverty that is current in much of this discourse, preoccupation with economic poverty has detracted from the non-economic dimensions of poverty like denial of basic human dignity and overlooking the human urge for creative, aesthetic and intellectual pursuits, and from the comprehensive nature of the totality of these urges that cannot be ranked in order of priorities and call for a holistic view of poverty that is to be overcome. Living amidst the deprived people and with his deeply insightful observations Wresinski has been among the first intellectual-activists to challenge this dominant view of poverty, and has also been among the first to put the question of knowledge relations on the table. The Bangladesh experiences fully support this point of view.

However, irrespective of whether dominant national and international governance structures take the linear or the holistic view of poverty, it remains unlikely that poverty in most countries will be eradicated in the life time of many generations to come. Even if the relevant national and international structures willed this - and the technology is certainly there - the human task for a mass of 'cadres', who are also to be available, boggles the mind. And until this can be accomplished within a time span for which people can wait co-operatively, the question remains of fulfillment in the lives of those millions whose 'poverty' will not be eradicated in their lifetime. This is the problem that I have termed elsewhere as the problem of the "other half of the glass" (Rahman 2006) those who at any time remain in poverty with only a small statistical chance to come out of it in their lifetime i.e. those whose un-fulfillment from life remains a question that must also be addressed.

As the saying goes, "Man/woman does not live for bread alone". While everyone has a right to be well fed and well housed, one develops specific personal urges through one's very personal evolution of life whose satisfaction gives one the deepest fulfillment<sup>12</sup>. Thus, the life of the blind singer of battala village can be elevated by active community recognition of his talent that could improve his earnings as well; the village artist dreaming of giving an exhibition in Dhaka could be helped in attaining this greatest



fulfillment of his life; the yoghurt seller who could not go to school himself for lack of money to buy books built a library saving the proceeds of yoghurt sale to lend books for other needy boys and girls of his village, can be helped in thus seeking his fulfillment by generous donations of spare books by the wider society; abandoned women sacrificing their own 'basic needs' to help their children forward with school education in a life of constant terror for themselves amidst rapacious male eyes could be helped by community mobilization for protection of their honour; and the physically challenged daring to accomplish the impossible can be helped by community support and acclaim for their courage and values instead of condemning them as “disabled” and putting them in charitable institutions.

'Poverty alleviation' of the disadvantaged by way of appreciating and supporting and giving a hand to the creative and cultural pursuits, 'community caring' actions and bids to face the hard challenges of their life, of those who may not be able to cross the 'poverty line' in their lifetime but who from their own life-evolutions have set other goals for themselves in which they are seeking fulfillment, are possible at any stage of a society's development. Such support can help toward attainment of what Aristotle termed 'entelechy' or '*self-realization*' of such persons<sup>13</sup> - irrespective of progress in the satisfaction of their material needs. The need for social mobilization in this direction, to show that every person counts and deserves a hand in comradeship, right today, in his-her own bid for self-realization, as a complement to long run strategies for raising people's incomes and 'capabilities', is paramount.

In fact, great social philosophers have not asked for poverty alleviation as the goal of mankind. Tagore has viewed the human born with the urge to do the impossible<sup>14</sup>, and to him happiness comes from fulfilling one's creativity rather than from alleviation of one's poverty<sup>15</sup>. Marx has likewise wanted the 'revolution' so that the working class can create its own history. Mao ze Dong after the Chinese Revolution did not say that China would now solve its problem of poverty, but said that "China has stood up" and would, like the "foolish old man" in the ancient Chinese fable, "move the mountain". And self-realization has been achieved by people through great sacrifices participating in national liberation struggles and in social revolutions, including the independence struggle of Bangladesh, not for alleviation of personal poverty but for a much greater human cause.

### **The indivisibility of humanity**

This brings us to the final point in this tribute to Joseph Wresinski, on the *indivisibility of humanity*. A philosophy of development has been expounded by Amartya Sen, espousing the expansion of "individual freedom" as the foundational concept of development (Sen 1999). Empirically speaking, this overlooks that human beings have a mix of 'individual' and 'collective' identity developed and moulded through the evolution of one's life in the laps of family, neighbours, wider community, society, ecology, and through life's journey in collaboration with such broader entities. In the specific Bangladesh context the many examples of collective initiatives of the disadvantaged to advance their lives show that life's situations bring humans together for collective efforts that dilutes or even dissolves one's sense of individual identity, and it would be odd to ask if such initiatives are 'promoting individual freedom' and hence whether 'development is taking place'! The "*save yourself, save others*" slogan that made the fish revolution in Iliotganj comes very naturally to people suffering poverty together. And examples of 'selfless' service to community including the ecology from well-to-do and disadvantaged people alike are too many in Bangladesh as in many other countries.

Indeed, the highest ideal of humanity has been enshrined decades back in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights:

*"Everyone has duties to the community in which alone the free and full development of his personality is possible". (Article 29).*

And as Joseph Wresinski said,

*"it is not just the individual person but humanity as a whole which is indivisible, linked by one and the same destiny."*

With today's awareness the "community" or "humanity" includes the whole ecology, and let this view of the human mission be the motto of the development philosophy of humankind.

## **5. Conclusion**

Wresinski had essentially two messages for the poverty discourse. One, that poverty is a comprehensive notion of deprivations with lack of dignity as its core indicator. Two, assertion and development of people's own knowledge and thinking is a key to unlocking the door to overcoming poverty. The experiences of disadvantaged people of Bangladesh taking their own

initiatives in facing and moving through poverty fully support this point of view. The dominant poverty discourse is bypassing both these messages and is taking a narrow linear, economistic view of poverty that overlooks the essential nature of human suffering from poverty that is multi-dimensional, and is also missing an essential tool for addressing poverty, i.e. liberating the thinking power of the disadvantaged. A poverty and development discourse based on these parameters leads to questions of development philosophy, human values and one's responsibility to humanity that we have discussed.

## **Annex:**

### **Key quotes from Joseph Wresinski on poverty and people's knowledge**

#### **On poverty**

1. "The violence of contempt and indifference creates poverty, because it leads inexorably to exclusion, to the rejection of one man by another. It imprisons the poor man in a spiral of events which grinds him down and destroys him."
2. "The constant derivation of the fellowship of other men, which brightens people's lives and reassures them, condemns his mind to darkness, restricts his heart with worry, anxiety and mistrust and destroys his soul."
3. "I saw seasonal laborers also invited to a meal but seated at a different place. They came from the rudimentary lodgings lent to them only for the duration of their contract, to sit at the foot of the main table, where only soup was served, while the guests at the farmer's side were getting a full meal".
4. "For the very poor tell us over and over again that man's greatest misfortune is not to be hungry or unable to read, nor even to be without work. The greatest misfortune of all is to know that you count for nothing, to the point where even your suffering is ignored." (The Very Poor..).
5. " Extreme poverty results when the lack of basic security simultaneously affects several aspects of people's lives..." (Wreseinski, J., 1987. Grande pauvreté et Précarité Economique et sociale. rapport du Conseil Economique et Social. *Journal officiel de la République française*. Paris. Translated in *Attacking extreme Poverty* p 25).
6. "it is not acceptable to give priority to "four basic rights" (food, water, health and shelter), "understood as the necessary and essential minimum for survival that facilitates the exercise of the other rights to which all human beings are entitled." ... Human rights encompass more than the right to survival: their aim is that all human beings live in dignity."

### **On people's knowledge**

7. "I want to remind you this morning of the role, even the duty, of all those dedicated to scientific research on poverty to make a place for The Knowledge Which The Poor And The Excluded Themselves Have Of Their Condition. Beyond that, to give it pride of place because it is unique and indispensable... Finally, you should help this knowledge to develop."

8." [researchers] did not regard [people's knowledge] as autonomous components to be pursued by and for the authors themselves. Scholars quickly turned them into the object of their own research; they regarded these components as sources of information to be used for their own purposes, rather than as equally valid research projects, as supporting subjects and not objects of exploitation. They have, to some extent, subordinated these components to their own exploration as outside observers of the life of the poor and the actions undertaken with them. Thus, they have deflected a knowledge, which did not belong to them, from its own goal. More seriously, these researchers have often, unintentionally and unwittingly, upset or even paralyzed the thinking of their interlocutors."

9. "Each person thinks, knows, and strives to understand in order to achieve his or her own goal. Since their thinking is oriented to that goal, every act of thinking can become an act of personal liberation."

10. "All human beings and groups are researchers, seeking independence through understanding themselves and their situation so that they control their destiny rather than submitting and being afraid."

11. "their request is not, "Explain to us," but rather, "Help us to think." "

### **References**

ahmad, Qazi Kholiquzzaman (2007). (Ed.). *Socio-economic and Indebtedness-related Impact of Micro-credit in Bangladesh*. Action Aid, Bangladesh Unnayan Parishad and The University Press Limited. Dhaka.

Azad, Lenin. (2006). *Daridryo bimochoney gonogobeshona.227 jan gonogobeshoker pokkhey*. (Gonogobeshona toward poverty alleviation. on behalf of 227 gonogobeshoks). Research Initiatives, Bangladesh. Dhaka.

Backstrand, Gordan and Lars Ingelstam (2006). “Enough! Global Challenges and Lifestyles”. *What Next, setting the context. development dialogue* no 47. June.

Bandopadhyay, Binoy (ed.). *Rabindranather Shikshabhabna*. Bishnu Bosu and Pratibhash. Kolkata 1989.

Bandopadhyay, Chittaranjan (ed.). (1999). *Rabindra-proshongo. Anandobazaar Potrika 22 March 1932-31 December 1941*. Vol 2. Anando Publishers Private Limited. Kolkata.

Daily Star, the (2005). “When school is all about having fun”. *Daily Star weekly Magazine*. 31 December (pp 9-17).

Das Gupta, Uma (2004). *Rabindranath Tagore. A Biography*. Oxford University Press. New Delhi.

Gibran, Kahlil (1983). *The Prophet*. William Heinemann. London.

Hall, Budd L. (1997) *Reflections on the Origins of the International Participatory Research Network and the Participatory Research Group in Toronto, Canada*. Paper presented at the Midwest Research to Practice Conference in Adult Continuing Education, Michigan State University, East Lansing, Michigan, October 15-17

Kholiquzzaman Ahmad, Qazi (ed.) (2006). *Socio-economic and Indebtedness-related Impact of Micro-credit*. Bangladesh Unnayan Parishad and ActionAid Bangladesh. Dhaka. August.

Mahmud, Manik (2006). *In Search of a New Path gonogobeshona, the Experience of The Hunger Project*. Report on Gonogobeshona in the Hunger Project presented at the Conference on “Poverty, Initiatives of the Disadvantaged and Development” of the Research Initiatives, Bangladesh. Dhaka. Dec 2. (English translation by Shabnam Nadia. mimeo).

Maqsood, A.K.M. (2006). *Shamajer nijashsho shwarthey kajoli model shishu shikha bikash kendrogulor tikey thaka: ecti shamaj gabeshona*. Research Initiatives Bangladesh. Dhaka. September 12 (mimeo).

Max-Neef, Manfred, A. Elizalde and M. Hopenhayn (1989), "Human Scale Development: an Option for the Future" *Development Dialogue*, pp. 5-81.

Mitra, Rathin. "Sriniketan". Rabindranather Shikshabhabna, Bishnu Bosu and Binoy Bandopadhyay (ed.). Pratibhash, Calcutta 1989)

Morol, Shishir (2006). *Daridryo Bimochon: community parjyaye srijonshil udyog chinhito karan, tar prochar ebong proshar.* (Alleviation of Poverty: Identification of Creative Initiatives at the community Level, their dissemination and spread.). Part 1. Research Report submitted to Research Initiatives, Bangladesh.

Morol, Shishir (2006). *Daridryo Bimochon: community parjyaye srijonshil udyog chinhito karan, tar prochar ebong proshar.* (Alleviation of Poverty: Identification of Creative Initiatives at the community Level, their dissemination and spread.). Part 2. Research Report submitted to Research Initiatives, Bangladesh.

Mukta, Naimuzzaman, Priscilla Raj, Shishir Morol, Kurratul-Ain-Tahmina (2006). *Daridryo Bimochon: community parjyaye srijonshil udyog chinhito karan, tar prochar ebong proshar.* Prothom Parjyayer shomikkha Sankolon Part 1.(Alleviation of Poverty: Identification of Creative Initiatives at the community Level, Their dissemination and spread. Collection of Observations of First Phase).

Mukta, Naimuzzaman, Priscilla Raj, Shishir Morol, Kurratul-Ain-Tahmina (2006). *Daridryo Bimochon: community parjyaye srijonshil udyog chinhito karan, tar prochar ebong proshar.* Prothom Parjyayer shomikkha Sankolon Part 2.(Alleviation of Poverty: Identification of Creative Initiatives at the community Level, Their dissemination and spread. Collection of Observations of First Phase).

Rahman, Md. Anisur (1985). "The Theory and Practice of Participatory Action Research". Paper presented at the Tenth Congress of Sociology, Mexico, August 1982. Reproduced in Fals-Borda (ed): *The Challenge of Social Change*. Sage Publications. London 1985; and in Shadish & Reichard

(ed) *The Evaluation Studies Review Annual*. Vol 12. 1988. Sage Publications, London.

Rahman, Md. Anisur (1999). *Songs of Tagore. Philosophy, Selected Translations, Paintings*. Pathak Samabesh. Dhaka.

Rahman, Md. Anisur (2004a). "Globalization: The emerging ideology in the popular protests and grassroots action research". *Action Research* 2(1). March. pp 9-23.

Rahman, Md. Anisur (2004b). *Learning PAR from the School of Life*.  
[http://mail.google.com/mail/?realattid=f\\_eyywqg0b&attid=0.1&disp=vah&view=att&th=11129c7ad7f7ec43](http://mail.google.com/mail/?realattid=f_eyywqg0b&attid=0.1&disp=vah&view=att&th=11129c7ad7f7ec43)

Rahman, Md. Anisur (2005). *Bangladesh '72 -'75. Four Intense Years of Struggle for Development*.  
<http://www.anisurrahman.com/writing/2005.%20Bangladesh%20%2772-%2775.pdf>

Rahman (2006). *Insights from People's Self-initiatives in Bangladesh and the Poverty and development Discourse*. Paper presented at an international conference on "What works for the poorest? Knowledge, Policies and Practices" organized by BRAC, The Chronic Poverty Research Centre and Brooks World Poverty Institute. Dec 3-5. Dhaka: online publication  
[http://www.bracresearch.org/publications/peoples\\_self\\_initaitives.pdf](http://www.bracresearch.org/publications/peoples_self_initaitives.pdf)

Rahman, Md. Anisur (2007). "Some trends in the praxis of participatory action research". Peter Reason & Hilary Bradbury (eds.) *Handbook of Action research*. Second Edition, Sage Publications. London.

Rahman, Md. Matiur (2005). *Participatory Action Research (PAR) In Development: An Anthropological Study in Nilphamary District of Bangladesh*. Research Report in Partial Requirement of Anth. 503 of Advanced Research Methodology of the Department of Anthropology, Rajshahi University.

Research Initiatives, Bangladesh (2003). *Conception and Research Ideas of Research Initiatives, Bangladesh (RIB)*. Research Initiatives, Bangladesh. Dhaka. website: [www.rib-bangladesh.org](http://www.rib-bangladesh.org)

Sachs, Wolfgang (1992). "Poor not Different". Paul Ekins and Manfred Neef. *Real Life Economics. Understanding Wealth Creation*. Routledge. London. 161-165.

Sen, Amartya (1999). *Development as Freedom*. Oxford University Press. Oxford.

Tahmina, Kurratul Ain, Naimuzzaman Mukta, Priscilla Raj & Shishir Morol (2006a). *Daridryo Bimochon: community parjyaye srijonshil udyog chinhito karan, tar prochar ebong proshar. Prothom parjayer Shamaponi Protibedon*. (Alleviation of Poverty: Identification of Creative Initiatives at the community Level, their dissemination and spread. Final Report on First Phase). Research Report submitted to Research Initiatives, Bangladesh.

Tahmina, Kurratul Ain, Naimuzzaman Mukta, Priscilla Raj, Shishir Morol (2006b). *Daridryo Bimochon: community parjyaye srijonshil udyog chinhito karan, tar prochar ebong proshar. Prothom parjayer shamikkha sankolon, Part 2. ditio parjayer Shamaponi Protibedon(Khashra)*.(Alleviation of Poverty: Identification of Creative Initiatives at the community Level, their dissemination and spread. Draft final Report of Second Phase). Research Report submitted to Research Initiatives, Bangladesh.

Tagore, Rabindranath (1908). *Letters from Russia*. Viswavarati. Santiniketan.

Tagore, Rabindranath (1880). "Satyer Ahban" (The Call of Truth). *Kalantar. Rabindrachanaboli (Collected Works of Tagore) Vol 24*. Viswa Bharati. Kolkata.

Tilakaratna, Susanta (1985). *The Animator in Participatory Rural Development: Some Experiences in Sri Lanka*. World Employment Programme Working Paper WEP 10/WP 37, Geneva: ILO.

Tilakaratna, Susanta (1987). *The Animator in Participatory Rural Development (Concept and Practice)*. Geneva, International Labour Organization.



---

<sup>1</sup> Das gupta (2004:33)

<sup>2</sup> The author owes to some personal experiences for abandoning the term 'poor' to refer to people in poverty many of whom have sterling human qualities by which they deserve to be addressed. (Rahman 2004b, section 12). See also Sachs.(1992:161) for an experience of calling the Tepitans of Mexico "poor" to which they objected.

<sup>3</sup> For more details see

<http://mail.google.com/mail/?realattid=0.1&attid=0.1&disp=vah&view=att&th=110f4ef3d8627255>

<sup>4</sup> During a visit of the author with some other colleagues of RIB to the sweeper community of Kushtia we were told that a youth from the community managed to get an LLB degree and got a job with an NGO, only to be sacked after three months upon revelation of his community identity!

<sup>5</sup> The unions of Muktinagar, Jumarbari, Ghuridaha and Udakhali of Gaibandha, Kolkondo of Rangpur, Shardaha of Rajshahi, Aronghata of Khulna and Chakkisha of Netrokona district.

<sup>6</sup>For a study of the operation of micro-credit in Bangladesh see Ahmad (2007).

<sup>7</sup> Other examples of successful pressure-group activities of gonogobeshona groups are being reported., for example, women gonogobeshoks of Baishyopara and Dangapara in sonaray union in Nilfamari district have succeeded in getting VGP cards allocated in favour of the most needy in their areas through mobilized pressure on the Union Council Chairman against the prevailing practice of card allocation to those who can bribe the Council Members. (Ali 2006:29-30).

<sup>8</sup> *"The humanness of the human is not in merely subsisting.... Civilization consists of transcending mere subsistence."* (Tagore 1908:1)

<sup>9</sup> Tagore also said that *"creation of beauty is the highest trait of the human"* ( Bandopadhyay 1995:277)

<sup>10</sup> *Tagore cited the example of a student[in a village knitting school who had done beautiful artwork on a piece of cloth. Her teachers thought that she would be encouraged and benefited if they bought it at a good price. Hearing the proposal for its sale the girl said "I shall not sell it". Shall we slight as useless this joy of creation which is more valuable than anything else?"* (Bandopadhyay 1995:277)

<sup>11</sup> The question is germane also to decide when and how external ideas and knowledge supposed to be of value to the people are to be taken to them. What is needed is not withholding external thinking, knowledge and experience from them but to be sensitive as to when these may be introduced to them for their consideration and in what manner, so as not to alienate or overpower them with apparent 'superior' wisdom but to help them develop their own position on the concerned issues in careful self-consideration of external knowledge and thinking on the issues. This remains a rather sensitive task, on which the words of Kahlil Gibran cannot be surpassed:

“No man can reveal to you aught but that which already lies half asleep in the dawning of your knowledge.

...

If he [the teacher/animator] is indeed wise he does not bid you enter the house of his wisdom, but rather leads you to the threshold of your own mind.” (Gibran 1983: 67).

To develop the proper sensitivity on this question so as to judge the 'threshold' of the people's mind for acquainting them with relevant outside wisdom and experience is the most important challenge for the (external) animator, on which his/her success in promoting true empowerment of the disadvantaged, developing their indigenous knowledge as well as absorbing and recreating knowledge generated elsewhere, depends.

<sup>12</sup> Great insight on this question is obtained in the story of the recently filmed "King of Masks", the street performer in Sichuan in China in the nineteen thirties, with outstanding talents who in very shabby dress still enjoyed high regard as a member of an elite fraternity, and rejected an offer of a decent job in an opera troupe because it was a tradition in his family that the secrets of his art could be passed on only to an heir in the family. Nothing gave him greater fulfillment when he, finally, found a child to adopt as his heir with the help of a kindly prince. See website review of the film in [http://www.ebertfest.com/three/3king\\_rev.htm](http://www.ebertfest.com/three/3king_rev.htm) .

---

<sup>13</sup> a term that has also been used by Abraham Maslow although in the framework of conceived hierarchy of needs, and is being actively used by the "human potential" movement.  
(<http://www.answers.com/topic/entelechy> ).

<sup>14</sup> .“*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 1921.”The Call of Truth”: 320-321)

<sup>15</sup> “*the [material] poverty problem is not so important. It is the problem of unhappiness that is the great problem. Happiness may not compete with wealth..., but it is creative, therefore it has its own share of riches within itself.*” Quote from Tagore in (Mitra 1989: 106)