

Note from the Editor

Crystallization of Classes in Bangladesh

How do we know, in any society, who belongs to what class, assuming, of course, that there are classes and class differences among the members of the society? Sociologists, since Karl Marx, have been grappling with this question in one way or the other. Stratification, the study of society with the assumption that there are strata, visible or not, in all societies, and people can be placed in these strata based on this or that category, largely in terms of social class, status and power, finally gave in to a broader concept of social inequality to analyse society in all its variations including gender, age, ethnicity etc. All such facets of inequality are the living truths for any member of a society who has to deal with them in some workable way so that social relations become possible in a society. While any one of these categories may gain prominence in a society at any given time, class has remained the most significant of these among the sociologists, although since the demise of the Soviet Union studies of class lost much of its importance and remain confined to the text books. However, in recent years, studies of class, albeit the middle class only, has resurfaced with a vengeance from a quarter who despised such studies earlier, the economists and the World Bank in particular, and as I point out in one of my previous studies¹, with some ulterior motives. So the question becomes pertinent again, as to how do we know who belongs to what class?

The economists and the World Bank have a very straight forward answer, disregarding all the sociological studies, to look at the purse. In a bid to understand what happens when one graduates from poverty, the World Bank and the economists proposed an income of more than \$2 per person per day, the more can be anything from, \$6, \$11, to \$50 or even \$100, as middle class “income” all over the world. A few, to bring in qualitative measures, proposed the ownership of electronic gadgets and some even proposed the ownership of a car. And the World Bank has found half the world population as belonging to that middle class!

Naïve, to say the least, as these measures sound, the sociologists must face this vulgarization of the concept of class, the middle class in particular, and come up with better understanding of the concept. After all, we don't put our hands in someone's pocket before we shake those hands in introduction. We do, however, use numerous signs and symbols, largely intuitively, to identify the person, his or her standing in the society before we shake hands, have a cup of tea, go to a ball game with, invite the person to my house or give my daughter in marriage (remember the “social distance” measures?). Only in the last instance we may ask the groom's income, that too, very tactfully. So that as we go about our

¹ “Beware, the Middle Class is being Hijacked by the World Bank!” *Bangladesh e-Journal of Sociology*. Volume 11 Number 2, July 2014. Pages 7-28.

social functions on a day to day basis we do so on the assumption that we mostly know the other person's social position, what class the person belongs to. We just know. We have to!

I say "mostly" because we do not know for certain whether the income is between \$2 and \$6 or \$2 and \$100, nor is it necessary for most social dealings. We do have more or less a clear notion of the other person's position based on any number of factors or the summation of factors like occupation, education, family environment, inheritance, upbringing, cultural association or social network, manners, social values, and even the ways of speaking, dressing and holding the fork and we often do so "instantly". On hind sight we may have to change or revise our estimation of the other person, but that first moment of meeting is often our best clue. We may get an estimate of the income or wealth of the person even by looks but *never* actually ask. Thus, class is "visible", we can literally see the "class" of the other person, we do not have to ask. Nor do we have to become an economist or even a sociologist to do that. Every one in every class based society *has to know* the class of the other person so as to go about in society.

Perhaps, and in spite of the economists and the World Bank, I am stating the obvious. We do, as a matter of fact, on a daily basis, make an estimation of the other person in terms of his or her social location, class, just on the basis of "looks"! Of course, looks can be deceptive but just think how many times you have been "correct", we could not have done otherwise.

Now, think about a group of people belonging to the same class, how would they look? I came face to face with the question when I visited Kolkata, in India, for the first time during the early 1990s. I noted something extraordinary among the populace but I could not quite put my finger to it. Then in 2006 while visiting Kolkata again with a sociologist colleague from the University of Dhaka, I had a better opportunity to go about the city and get to know the people more closely and that uneasy feeling of not knowing resurfaced in me until my colleague, a great sociologist in his own right and the Associate Editor of this journal, Professor S. Aminul Islam, put the whole thing in limelight with just one question. He asked me, "Have you noticed that the people here *all look alike*"? I knew immediately what was bothering me and I also knew why.

Class situation, as in the Weberian sense, is given rise to by the "market situation", which fosters a particular "life-style" and to simplify, people following a similar life-style belong to a particular "social class"¹. Each social class, thus, has its own ways of acting and thinking. The culture, social contacts, residences, education and occupation etc. tend to be similar in nature. Extending this logic further, we may argue that over the years this similarity in life-style will translate into the similarity in "looks". As a person of a middle class is identifiable by his or her looks, so would be the others of that class and as a consequence people of similar life-style will tend to look similar, "look alike". However, this is not to invoke the "cultural stereo types", just that following a particular life-style, behaving in particular manners, going to similar social gatherings, celebrating similar cultural events or even wearing similar

¹ Weber, Max. 1964. *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization*. New York: the Free Press. (The original essay in *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*, New York, Bedminster Press, 1968.)

dresses, living in similar residence, eating similar food etc. will give rise to a similarity in disposition, personality and outlook over time. This similarity will be noticeable to others. Studies of photos of couples living together for a long time tend to show similarities in their looks, in spite of their gender differences.

Hence these people of Kolkata, who over the generations have lived a particular life-style, possibly with little social mobility, tend to look similar, if not identical. As you might know, by far, the majority of the people living in Kolkata are Bengalis, including those who moved there from Bangladesh since 1947 partition. The city lost much of its grandeur of the colonial capital city and settled as a provincial metropolis losing much of its industries and commerce to other states of India and the city became the residence of largely middle class to lower middle class wage earners. Over the years, indeed, many generations, this middle to lower middle class “life-style” consolidated in the city giving rise to the predominant middle class culture of the city and indeed the “middle class look” of its people. Hence, they looked alike to us, the outsiders.

As we debated the issue, the obvious question that came up was, why then the residents Dhaka city, populated almost entirely by Bengalis, does not display this similarity? Indeed, the absence of such similarities among the people of Dhaka the Capital of Bangladesh further substantiates the point. Dhaka City, unlike Kolkata, has been in constant flux since 1947, and particularly since independence in 1971. The population of the city began to grow rapidly from over two hundred thousand after it became the capital of East Pakistan in 1947 and later of Bangladesh in 1971. But a major change in the population structure began in the 1990s, which saw a redoubling of the population in about 20 years and reached 12 million. This has occurred in the middle of tremendous change of the economy and social and political lives. Ever newer groups of people settled in the city during this period. So that the majority of the city population during this time (2006) were “fresh” from the villages all across the country. The population was diverse in terms of their economic pursuits and life-styles. The classes, in the city as well as the country in general, were in “transition” to say the least. Consolidation of any one social group into a particular class was yet to happen. People belonged to this or that occupation, income, wealth, social or cultural categories, it would be difficult to identify particular “classes” among this melee. This variability was a far cry from the similarity noted in Kolkata, so no look-alikes.

As I noted elsewhere¹, Bangladesh did not have much of an upper class while the best part of the newly forming “urban educated middle class” of the 1960s, due largely to their education, found comfortable living options in the Western countries like the USA and Canada by the 1980s, and later in Australia and elsewhere in Europe and migrated. So that there was a clear vacuum of upper classes in the county but was soon being filled up by the new political elites and their favored groups and individuals, including some of the remaining old middle class, each ruling group - the military, urban based political parties and parties with rural roots - patronized a newer set of individuals some of whom were a part of the

¹ [Note from the Editor: Middle Class in Bangladesh.](#) *Bangladesh e-Journal of Sociology.* Volume 14 Number 1, January 2017. Pages 4-15.

ruling parties or were blessed by them. However, the consolidation of classes got repeatedly challenged with the recurring change in political fortunes as fresher set of population got to accumulate power, wealth and social position. This gave rise to numerous occupational and income categories with varying degrees of economic, social and political power but not clear cut classes. The diverse groups of people of Dhaka followed diverse ethnic, religious, cultural and social linkages. Indeed, people found it convenient to identify themselves more in terms of their “district” of origin, almost verging on “tribalism”, than any other categories, not even close enough to form class identities or following a similar life-style, and, of course, no similar “looks”. Which only proved our point.

That was in 2006. However, recently, only a few weeks ago, I had an occasion to visit a “food-court” in what is known as a “rich” neighbourhood of Dhaka City, where most of the today’s moneyed people live. The food-court seats about 300 diners at a time and is serviced by over 20 food stalls representing international and ethnic tastes. As I waited for a “take-out” order, I passed my time looking at the people, as all sociologists do in their spare time; men, women, old, young, children, teenagers, their dresses, their eating styles, over-hearing bits of their conversation, their way of speaking, largely in English, a foreign language, some hopped tables while others greeted newcomers warmly. The whole scene was one of cordial festivity. Then suddenly I had a *déjà vu* moment, I had seen this before. They “all look alike”!

Perhaps, not quite so. But they did look very similar in their behaviour, in their style of movement, in their dress ups, even in their hair styles. It is definitely “getting there”. The similarity in their life-style, indeed, their “looks” was uncanny. Similarity in life-style translates into similarity of social class, so that this group of people is consolidating into an identifiable social class, with a visible life-style. Hence, class formation in this part of the city is definitely moving towards consolidation, at least the upper class, which is crystallizing into one solid block.

Over the last forty years or so, the missing upper class has been forming anew. An increasing number of people with blessings from the successive ruling parties are amassing a lot of wealth, including “black” money. The ones who make it to the top of the hierarchy during the rule of one party “manages” to retain some or most of the privileges during the next regime too, even when in opposition. Therefore, those few middle class families who took advantage of the upper class vacuum after the formation of Bangladesh and began making their fortunes, often because of politics, got joined by increasingly newer groups and individuals from the lower classes and have all consolidated by now in a sizable number of millionaires, if not billionaires (there definitely are billionaires among them if “black money” can be counted). Though no serious statistics are available, sample studies point to the top 10% of the income earners with an average per capita annual income of US \$11,791¹ in Dhaka earning over 55% of the

¹ Rahman, H.Z. 2016: *Bangladesh 2016: Politics, Governance and Middle Income Aspirations Realities and Challenges - An Empirical Study*. Power and Participation Research Centre With support from UNDP. This appears to be a conservative estimate and looks at the reported income only. More importantly this survey does not take into consideration the vast amount of property owned by the top 10% of income earners.

total income (for the whole of Bangladesh, the average per capita annual income is estimated by the study at US \$359 only).

The upper class, living in this neighbourhood, where a three bedroom apartment costs over half a million US dollars and an acre of land is valued at more than US \$70 million is perhaps the top 1-2% of the population and is far richer, who lead a life vastly different from the rest of the population. Like in other societies, they are the owners of the industries and commerce, owners of much of the real-state within and outside this neighbourhood, visit foreign countries regularly, some even own property in other countries and often stay there for considerable amounts of time, send the children to English-medium schools, and universities, often to countries like USA, Canada, Australia etc., are familiar with other cultures, music, movies, dress styles, congregate in social occasions like weddings, birthdays and in clubs and eateries (as the “food-court”) and coffee shops, mostly within this “upper class” neighbourhood. They are forging a “life-style” of their own.

Perhaps, they have not consolidated so much as to be easily noticeable, and are constantly being replenished by ever newer groups and individuals to their ranks, rags to riches is a common story, but the process of crystallization of this rather “small” upper class is well on its way. This is definitely in contrast with other classes¹, particularly the middle class in Bangladesh, which, as I noted in one of my earlier quoted essay, is also in the process of forming with at least three different strands but still very fluid. Yet, certain amount of crystallization is also noticeable in their “life-style” and as such their looks. During my teaching at both “private” and “public” universities, this difference in life-style among the students was “noticeable”. Students, at a certain private university with extremely high tuition, hence, students likely to be of the “upper class”, appeared much different in their behaviour, social and cultural attendance, food habits, dresses etc. compared to the students of presumably middle to lower class students in the public university, where state covered near total cost of studies. They looked different too!

As is obvious, I have based this study largely on my personal observations, taking liberty of the Weberian theory of social class, that life-style, over time, can lead to not only similar attitude and behaviour patterns, but these may easily identify an individual or a group, class, of people and to even become visible as a category, look similar to each other, so as to “look alike” even as a class. Social interaction largely depends on such identification of the “other” person or groups in society, done intuitively and routinely by the insiders but may also be visible to the outsider (as is also often reported of the other categories such as ethnicity, religion etc.) In Bangladesh the classes are in the “formative phase” and very little is available by way of hard data. However, when we look at the life-style of a group of people, a certain amount of crystallization of that life-style is noticeable, raising the possibility of recognising the group as a “class”, in this case an “upper class”.

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¹ Rahman (2016) reports an average per capita annual income of the middle 50% income earners as US \$1436 and US \$ 555 for the bottom 40%.