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**Kamal Siddiqui, Sayeda Rowshan Qadir, Sitara Alamgir, Sayeedul Huq: Social formation in Dhaka City. A study in third world urban sociology.**

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Dhaka, or Dacca as it used to be spelled, the capital of Bangladesh, has become one of the fastest growing cities of the world. After 400 years of a “chequered history” (p. 2) Dhaka gained importance only after Bangladesh won its independence in 1971. With probably six million inhabitants today (p. 2) it was the 31<sup>st</sup> largest city in the world in 1985 and is expected to occupy the 15<sup>th</sup> position by the year 2000. With a population of 900,000, it must have been one of the largest cities in the world during its golden era in the latter half of the 17th century (p. 7), but it lost its importance with the beginning of the 18th century, when the capital was shifted to Murshidabad. It further declined in the 19th century; in the first census of 1872, the population was recorded as being just below 70,000. With the first partition of Bengal, Dhaka became the provincial headquarter and the seat of the government of East Bengal for a few years, i.e. until 1911, when the division was annulled. With the creation of Pakistan in 1947 Bengal was divided again and Dhaka became the centre of the later province of East Pakistan. In the years before, and especially after, partition, most of the Hindu population fled to India, especially the members of the upper castes. In exchange, many of the Muslims, who migrated from the eastern parts of India decided for the eastern ‘wing’ of Pakistan. Feeling neglected and exploited by the western ‘wing’, the language movement for an equal treatment of Bengali with Urdu gained momentum right from the beginning, and Dhaka became the centre of the quest for a regional cultural identity and political and economic autonomy and finally independence. The civil war of 1971 ended after the Indian intervention with a total defeat of the Pakistani armed forces and the emergence of Bangladesh as an independent state with Dhaka as its capital. The uprooting of millions during the civil war and an unprecedented international relief programme for the restoration of Bangladesh’s economy centred in Dhaka, since this city was almost the only place in the country to provide some basic infrastructure. Not surprisingly, with a tremendous “push” in the impoverished countryside, Dhaka was the natural destiny of the rural exodus, especially during and after the 1974 famine; “the growth of Dhaka city has been predominantly the result of net migration, which accounted for 62.9 per cent of population growth between 1961 and 1974 and 70.5 percent between 1974 and 1981 ..., about 60 percent of Dhaka’s population growth between 1981 and 2000 is anticipated to be the result of net migration ... The push factors in connection with migration include over-population, floods and natural disasters, erosion, growing landlessness and exploitation, by the rural elites and money lenders. The pull factors are employment opportunities in the informal sector, relief activities and the statutory ration system in Dhaka city under which, until recently, foodstuffs were sold at substantially subsidised prices.” (p. 16).

It is the merit of the authors, to have gone into depth into the social structure of the city, basically through an evaluation of over 10,000 households with the help of a detailed questionnaire and structured interviews. In addition to this, selected groups were interviewed, i.e. the residents of Dhaka's city's government colonies, the “richest people” of Dhaka city, the formal sector poor, the informal sector poor, beggars, prostitutes and criminals, and, finally, the “change agents”.

Dhaka Cantonment, i.e. the military garrison of Dhaka, was not covered by the study, because it was assumed that no survey would have been possible. There was, however, no attempt made, to give any information to this vital part of the city, given its military dominance of the last two decades, on the basis of secondary sources. Maybe for similar reasons, there is almost no reference to the tens – if not hundreds – of thousands of “Biharis”, the Urdu speaking population, mainly from Bihar, who came into the country after the partition of India in 1947, who are accused to have sided with the West Pakistani troops during the “liberation war”, and who opted for Pakistan after the secession of Bangladesh, and who are still waiting for being shipped to Pakistan. Many of them live in camps in and around Dhaka. One does not expect to find any substantial manufacturing industry in a poor country like Bangladesh, and thus, just wonders, how such a large urban population can exist. The answer is a surprisingly large services sector, and a very low average living standard. 43 per cent of the household heads declared to serve in government, semi-government or autonomous corporations services, another 37 per cent were engaged in trade and commerce, 12.5 per cent had occupations involving low or intermediate skills and techniques, and 7.4 per cent had occupations involving no formal employment (p. 62 sq.).

Only 0.4 per cent said they were unemployed, but up to one million may live either directly or indirectly on rickshaw pulling (p. 267). If it comes to Dhaka, one is prepared for the worst thinkable living conditions, and, thus, I was comforted by the information that no less than 74 per cent of the household heads “had access” to all the three amenities, i.e. electricity, water and gas, and that only 4.4 per cent had access to none of them. 56 percent have “pucca”, i.e. solidly built, latrines without a flush, 10 per cent had flush system latrines, 9 per cent had “service latrines” and 17 per cent had “kachha”, i.e. not solidly built, latrines. The report, however, does not go much beyond such statistical interpretation. Those not too familiar with Dhaka and its sampling techniques are not informed, what, for example, means “having access”, especially, if we learn, that only 0.4 per cent of all households are sharing a water tap with one or more households, but 32.6 per cent have to share a “bathroom”, 35.1 per cent have to share a “latrine” and 22.2 per cent a “kitchen”.

The indepth studies of the selected groups (see above) help to get a picture, but they have to be supplemented by case studies, which, at least, are listed in the extended bibliography. I am not aware of any more detailed social survey of Dhaka, and there should be few on other cities of South Asia. The book, therefore, is highly recommended to all those working on socio-economics of Bangladesh, clearly not only to those working on urban affairs, since the study shows the many and intensive linkages between this major centre and the rural areas.