



## **FERTILITY BEHAVIOUR IN BANGLADESH AND WEST BANGAL: A COMPARATIVE STUDY**

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*The Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD), established in 1993, is an innovative initiative to promote an ongoing process of dialogue between the principal partners in the decision-making and implementing process. The dialogues are designed to address important policy issues and to seek constructive solutions to these problems. The Centre has already organised a series of such major dialogues at local, regional and national levels. These dialogues have brought together ministers, opposition frontbenchers, MPs, business leaders, NGOs, donors, professionals and other functional groups in civil society within a non-confrontational environment to promote focused discussions. The expectation of the CPD is to create a national policy consciousness where members of civil society will be made aware of critical policy issues affecting their lives and will come together in support of particular policy agendas which they feel are conducive to the well being of the country. The CPD has also organised a number of South Asian bilateral and regional dialogues as well as some international dialogues.*

*In support of the dialogue process the Centre is engaged in research programmes which are both serviced by and are intended to serve as inputs for particular dialogues organised by the Centre throughout the year. Some of the major research programmes of CPD include **The Independent Review of Bangladesh's Development (IRBD), Governance and Development, Population and Sustainable Development, Trade Policy Analysis and Multilateral Trading System and Leadership Programme for the Youth**. The CPD also carries out periodic public perception surveys on policy issues and developmental concerns.*

*As was mentioned above, one of the major on going programmes of the CPD is entitled **Population and Sustainable Development**. The objective of this programme is to enhance national capacity to formulate and implement population and development policies and programmes in Bangladesh, and through close interaction with the various stakeholder groups, to promote advocacy on critical population related issues. The programme, supported by the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), is scheduled to be implemented by the CPD between 1999 and 2002. Research studies to be taken up under this programme, inter alia, such issues as population dynamics and population momentum and their implications for education and health services, the nexus between population correlates, poverty and environment, impacts of urbanisation and slummisation, migration, implications of demographic momentum, ageing and the broad spectrum of issues covering human rights. The programme also includes organisation of workshops and dialogues at division and national levels as also holding of international thematic conferences.*

*As part of CPD's publication activities, a CPD Dialogue Report series is brought out in order to widely disseminate the summary of the discussions organised by the Centre. The present report contains the highlights of the dialogue held at the Centre for Policy Dialogue on February 7, 2000 on the theme of **Fertility Behaviour in Bangladesh and West Bengal: A Comparative Study** which was organised under the aforementioned CPD-UNFPA programme on **Population and Sustainable Development**.*

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*Dialogue on*  
**Fertility Behaviour in Bangladesh and West Bengal:**  
**A Comparative Study**

**i) The Dialogue**

The theme, *Fertility Behaviour in Bangladesh and West Bengal: A Comparative Study* formed the subject of a dialogue at the Centre for Policy Dialogue on February 7, 2000. The dialogue, moderated by Professor Rehman Sobhan, Chairman, CPD, had Ms. Alaka Malwade Basu of Cornell University and Dr. Sajeda Amin of Population Council, New York, as key discussants. The discussants' presentations on the theme were based primarily on the two related papers that had previously been circulated amongst the participants of the dialogue as reading material. This dialogue report is an attempt to summarize the major findings of the two papers as well as the discussion that followed the discussants' keynote presentations. The list of the participants at the dialogue is annexed.

**ii) Keynote Presentations and Resume of Background Papers**

***Preconditions for Fertility Decline in Bengal: History, Language Identity and an Openness to Innovation***

One of the two papers that provided the basis for the dialogue was *Preconditions for Fertility Decline in Bengal: History, Language Identity and an Openness to Innovation* by Dr. Sajeda Amin of the Population Council, New York, and Ms. Alaka Malwade Basu of Cornell University. The dialogue session got underway with Ms. Basu's presentation of the hypothesis and findings of the paper in question.

The paper attempts in the broad sense to endogenize agents (policy makers and governance) of social change towards a better understanding of certain preconditions related to fertility decline. The authors contended that history and culture can combine to create an environment which is more conducive to social change in some situations than in others, a conduciveness which can then lead to significant reproductive change even in the absence of changes in the standard demand and supply factors associated with reproductive control. The use of the Bengali language is a crucial element in the spread of such conduciveness. In the view of the authors, a proper understanding of fertility decline in Bangladesh is dependent on a joint study of both Bangladesh and West Bengal. Diffusion of an ideology of openness to change and to innovative behaviour is presented as a precondition to fertility decline in the authors' model. Their notion of conduciveness would be analogous to the idea of "willingness" in this

formulation. The reference, therefore, to the diffusion of a new world-view as willingness towards change or accepting change is thus fundamental.

The hypothetical aspect of this paper is that a unique combination of historical, cultural and political factors in Greater Bengal have resulted in a unique form of Bengali *nationalism* coupled with Bengali *modernism*. On its part, Bengali modernism facilitated the transition to a *secular* society that is somewhat at odds with the general socio-economic development of the region. Such a secular, liberal outlook, on the other hand, facilitated the openness to change and to innovation whenever the opportunities for such change or innovation arose.

Amin and Basu noted that Bengali (that is, language-based) nationalism has contributed to the development in two ways. In the first place, it has increased the interaction between the two Bengals and, given the political and religious divide between the two regions, it has thus exposed each region to a wider world of ideas and behaviour than would have been possible if the language based interaction had been confined to political borders. *In the second place*, within each region, it has increased interaction between the elite and the general population in a way that is less common in areas where socio-economic differences are not attenuated by such a strong sense of cultural identity.

The authors justified the paper's concentration on the elite of the two sides of the Bengali political divide on the ground that it seemed appropriate by the standards of literature on historical as well as contemporary fertility transitions, which suggested that socio-economic groups placed in a higher category in a region were usually the first to adopt controlled fertility. Ms. Basu made a point of referring to Livi Bacci's terminology, "forerunners of fertility decline", to characterise this group. The elite of Bengal have been especially equipped to foster social change and new modes of thought and behaviour in general (either through a diffusion of ideology or through their control of policies and programs that affect the demand for children) because their own modernisation has, for cultural and historical reasons, been faster than elsewhere and because they are especially well positioned to spread their influence in the general population.

Amin and Basu made a detailed analysis of the distinguishing features of Bengali language identity. It is their well-reasoned view that a fierce sense of language identity distinguishes the Bengali speaking populations of the world; an identity that at most normal times transcends a national identity or even a religious identity.

Ms. Basu noted that although the Bengali language itself has a long history, a conscious Bengali identity appears to have developed in the Greater Bengal region only during the period of British colonialism and, many historians suggest, as a response to the colonial experience. The

Bengali language was of course the primary catalyst in the shaping of a Bengali identity and it was allegiance to the Bengali language that was emphasised in mobilising anti-British sentiments in the early stages of the desire for freedom from colonial rule. This invigorated Bengali identity and was partly absorbed in the pan-Indian nationalist endeavour but was also strong enough to continue to exist as a separate entity after the attainment of independence. In turn, such a strong identity led to the intellectual and cultural development of the Bengali region, or, more accurately, Calcutta. It was, in plain but sure terms, an intellectual and cultural growth that began with a thriving economy but was not fazed by the subsequently slow economic progress made by the region. On the other hand, the emergence of Bangladesh has been visualised as the outcome of a growing Bengali or *Bangla* identity, as distinct from the larger Muslim identity instrumental in the absorption of the eastern region of Bengal into the state of Pakistan in the late 1940s. The inseparability of the language identity from the national identity is best exemplified by the Language Movement, which began soon after 1947. Indeed, it was this assertion of a Bengali identity that facilitated the development of secularism and liberalism among the Bangladeshi intelligentsia.

Amin and Basu directed critical importance to language as a facilitator of communication as well as to language identity as a viable mode of communication. In the case of the former, a common language eases the diffusion of modern ideologies, given that such ideologies exist in the first place. In the instance of the latter, language as a primary maker of self-identification can encourage links between groups that are otherwise disparate. They emphasise that the larger and more diverse the network with which a language is shared, the greater its potential to facilitate changes in norms and behaviour. The Bengali language is shared by groups which do not necessarily share political or religious boundaries. It is associated in the minds of its speakers with a sense of identity which tends to overwhelm other forms of group identity. This has led to continuous intellectual and socio-cultural interaction between West Bengal and Bangladesh at several levels, direct and indirect, and this interaction may have overcome some of the conventional barriers to fertility decline because it has led to a greater exposure to new ideas and a greater openness to change in the two regions. All this has been helped by historical factors which gave the Bengal region a head start in modern education and in intellectual discourses, developments which helped Bengali elite modernisation. (The authors have presented a rather elaborate discussion on the development of elite modernisation in Greater Bengal.)

Amin and Basu discussed the diffusion within political boundaries in terms of “social permeability”, which implies the degree to which the ideas and behaviours of the higher socio-economic groups percolate down to the general population. In both West Bengal and Bangladesh, there has been considerable scope for interaction between urban elites and the rural population, a social fact that could be exploited to disseminate information, attitudes and ideology and to effect change in general if this were in the interests of the ruling elites. The

authors emphasised that social permeability in the two Bengals has generally been effective enough to counter the conservative forces reluctant to adapt to radical change in both regions.

As for social change that can be accelerated by such urban-rural interactions, quite apart from the demographic example of the family planning programme in Bangladesh, successful examples of mass mobilisation abound in both the Bengals. In West Bengal, the Communist Party of India (CPM), which has been in power in the state for almost a quarter century now, has been able to exploit most effectively the intimacy of the real and imagined rural-urban relationship in the state. Moreover, in both West Bengal and Bangladesh, mention must be made of the way new agricultural technology has been adopted in the rural areas, resulting in a massive growth in agricultural production despite the varying policy environments in the two regions. In fact, as Ms. Basu emphasised repeatedly in her presentation, the analysis in the paper suggests that perhaps more important than the policies themselves is the implementation of policies and the creation of an environment conducive to growth and change through the mass mobilisation that characterises the Bengal region.

In principle, this intimacy can explain the fertility decline that West Bengal has also experienced in spite of no significant official commitment to a family planning program, as well as more confidently predict that a greater official commitment to family planning program in the state may result in greater success than in some other parts of the country. As for the governmental and non-NGO success in popularising birth control in Bangladesh, the analysis suggests that it is not surprising that this process of diffusion has not been as easy to duplicate in other parts of South Asia and the Middle East, which share a common religion with Bangladesh but not a history of earlier modernisation.

On the issue of diffusion across political boundaries, Amin and Basu stressed that the elites' own attitudes to and views on change have been reinforced by the strong sense of Bengali identity which links them across political borders and thus increases the heterogeneity of their networks of interaction. At a political level, this cross-border interaction tends to fluctuate in intensity and warmth; there is often hostility to and suspicion of one another's motives. But at intellectual, cultural and emotional levels, the two Bengals share a long history of generally positive interactions.

Therefore, according to Amin and Basu, the best diffusion channels are those that are both homogenous as well as heterogeneous. The Bengal experience suggests that each kind has a different role to play. Homogenous cultural networks (a common language in this case) can facilitate the transmission of new modes of thought and behaviour. When the common language is also associated with a strong sense of loyalty to it, this ease of transmission is further facilitated because there remains an urge to make it an important means of communication

between the elites and masses of the center and the margins. At the other end, socio-economic and geographic heterogeneity in diffusion channels is important because it adds to the heterogeneity of and exposure to the new ideas that are diffused. In this respect, Bengali speaking elites are important sources of transmission of new ideas among the general population. In addition, as Ms. Basu pointed out, these groups have been doubly blessed. On the one hand, they operate against the historical background of early and intense exposure to the *modern* world; on the other, by occupying politically divergent spaces (that is, as West Bengal and Bangladesh), they continue to have interaction with and exposure to a wider religious, political and policy world than Muslim populations in other parts of the Islamic world and Hindu populations in other parts of India. The result, Basu and Amin suggest, is that the elites of Bangladesh and West Bengal display a greater degree of intellectual and ideological progress than their counterparts in other regions, a progress that has then on occasion been sought to be communicated outwards through the medium of a common language.

### ***Spatial Variation in Contraceptive Use in Bangladesh***

The second background, *Spatial Variation in Contraceptive Use in Bangladesh: Looking Beyond the Borders*, co-authored by Professor Rob Stephenson of the University of Southampton along with Dr. Amin and Ms. Basu, was presented at the session by Dr. Amin. This paper attempts to promote a more complete understanding of social change by analysing spatial patterns of contraceptive use in Bangladesh and the contiguous state of West Bengal in India.

In addition to the two categories of diffusion discussed in terms of the earlier paper, Amin, Basu and Stephenson identified a third category, namely, the direct diffusion of ideas and knowledge between the general population of West Bengal and Bangladesh, not mediated through the elites. This kind of diffusion does seem to exist and is the subject of the spatial analysis in this paper.

The authors noted that the importance of language rather than political boundaries in the onset of the fertility transition in Belgium (Lesthaeghe, 1977), for example, has been used to develop the *diffusion* theories of fertility change, in which the spread of information and of new attitudes facilitated by common language is seen as an important determinant of behavioural change. The paper attempts to acknowledge this view through an observation of the possible role of a common language in introducing some commonalities in reproductive behaviour in population groups which do not share an identical political and thus policy environment. Indeed, the very existence of boundaries seems to increase the chances of innovative behaviour, which is one way of characterising contraceptive use in a poor society. Stated in simple terms, the ability of a common language to facilitate interaction with otherwise heterogeneous groups may result in greater exposure and openness to new forms of behaviour.

The paper takes its cue from the findings of a recent analysis of the pattern of spatial variation in contraceptive use in Bangladesh by Amin, Diamond and Steele (1997), which provides an obvious geographic pattern to the spatial dispersion of low and high contraceptive districts. The analysis in question shows a higher concentration of high contraceptive rates in the northern and western border regions of the country, while a concentration of low rates appears in the southern and eastern border districts. Dr. Amin noted that to a large extent this pattern motivated the authors towards looking beyond the existing political borders of the country.

The analysis of the current use of any form of contraception was developed through the involvement of a three-level random effects logistic regression model, where individual women (level one) are nested within primary sampling units (level two) and then within districts (level three). The level three residuals allowed the identification of districts with exceptionally high use of contraception (positive outliers) or exceptionally low use of contraception (negative outliers). This method is preferred to a direct mapping of contraceptive rates as it takes into account a range of other individual, familial and macro level factors that can affect contraceptive use and vary spatially, thus acting to confound spatial variations in contraceptive use.

In Bangladesh, the study revealed, the positive outliers are towards the west while in West Bengal they are towards the east, i.e., along the shared border between the two regions. There is a striking pattern in that the positive outliers in both Bangladesh and West Bengal form a contiguous band that appears to be uninterrupted by the political borders. The negative outliers in both regions hug the non-Bengali speaking bordering states. The districts that do not differ significantly from the national average are in the middle of the region.

Thus, Dr. Amin specified, the contiguous band formed by the positive outlier districts blurs the political boundary that it encapsulates, and indicates the irrelevance of the political border as a dividing line. It also suggests a role for contagion type diffusion channels, perhaps rooted in a set of historical factors that predispose these border districts to more innovative behaviour. The negative outliers hug the non-Bengali speaking borders of Bangladesh and the state of West Bengal, suggesting that change is slowest where the opportunity for exposure to new ideas conveyed through a shared language across political boundaries is the least, also confirming the contagion thesis.

The authors explained that these spatial patterns could not be readily explained by economic or development indicators. Both positive and negative outliers incorporate districts that have historically been prone to famines, thus making any generalisation about economic vulnerability being an explanation for contraceptive use patterns untenable. Similarly, it is hard to find any association with urbanisation and the map of contraception or with levels of education to the spatial variation in contraception.



Dr. Amin noted in her presentation that the north-eastern districts of Bangladesh such as Sylhet, Brahmanbaria and Maulvibazar that are also areas of low contraceptive use have been much more conservative and resistant to the advent of NGO activity. She emphasised that this association is not necessarily causal as the same factors that make an area amenable to outside activities in women's empowerment are likely to predispose them to acceptance of family planning and health. One significant revelation was that the influence of development activities among the poor was more evident in the positive outlier districts. Respondents appeared to be better informed and more able to interact with outsiders.

In lieu of the earlier paper, Amin, Basu and Stephenson proposed that the explanation for the spatial pattern lies in the role that culture plays in demographic behaviour. In this case, Bengali being the common language on both sides of the Bangladesh-West Bengal divide confers not only a common historical and cultural identity but also facilitates the spread of ideas across two politically separated groups.

The timing of fertility change is consistent with an explanation of increasing openness and exposure to new ideas through more permeable international borders. Following the emergence of Bangladesh as an independent state, which is generally believed to be the time of fertility transition in the region, a considerable increase in cross-border activities became perceptible, beginning with the flow of refugees who had fled the war in 1971 and were now returning, and continuing with increased trade and other forms of social interaction.

The contagion type effects, which are strongest on the West Bengal side of the border, are likely to have been helped by the opening of borders that ensued after independence. Some specific causal mechanisms that have been explored are the smuggling out of contraceptive devices from Bangladesh, where they are readily available, to West Bengal and other states of India, where they are not.

Considering the historical context in which the onset of fertility decline took place, the authors noted that both the partition of India in 1947 and the liberation of Bangladesh in 1971 were associated with and followed by large-scale population movements and the introduction of new administrative regimes. Partition plays a significant role in identity politics, increasing social interaction across borders and promoting debate about social change and social identity, and, thus, may well have been the most important determinant predisposing society to an openness to change. Indeed, there are specific historical and political reasons why the Bengali ethnic identity may be particularly potent in influencing behavioural change. As Dr. Amin noted, it is not mere knowledge of common language that eases communications; it may be identification with a linguistic group that is needed to encourage interaction with other groups which share this sense of language identity as well as to develop a set of shared values and

attitudes. As the earlier paper suggests, this sense of language identity certainly exists in both Bangladesh and West Bengal.

Moreover, it is possible that in addition to exposure to a culture across the border that bases itself on a common language as the medium of dialogue, the emergence of new national and political identities resulted in more intense evaluation and scrutiny of these new ideas than they would have otherwise received. The politics of identity, especially the notion of emerging, hybrid competing identities, may have created a stronger tendency to be open to new behaviours and practices and also to develop a capacity to critically evaluate and adapt any new influences on culture and on behaviour. The authors hypothesise that the two populations, particularly when living in close proximity to the Bangladesh-West Bengal border, therefore, have a heightened capacity to evaluate and accept any new influences, such as those being offered by the family planning programme on contraception.

Briefly, the statistics and analysis of this paper suggest a historically and spatially specific argument for explaining the timing and onset of fertility decline. By explaining the analysis beyond current political borders, the authors intend to demonstrate the incompleteness of analyses, which has been restricted to present political structures and purely contemporary conditions and policies.

Dr. Amin ended her presentation through noting that while the study concentrated solely on contraception, similar arguments may be developed for any kind of new innovation adoption, for instance, agricultural innovation, which would probably show very similar patterns of adoption.

### **iii) Discussion**

Professor Rehman Sobhan, while initiating the post-presentation discussion, noted that there were basically two sets of issues to be dwelt on: one was the hypothesis about socio-cultural behaviour as presented by Ms. Basu and the other was the presentation by Dr. Amin, which then observed the fertility trend and contraceptive behaviour in order to detect whether the socio-cultural hypothesis is validated by the available statistical evidence.

#### ***The Role of Language in Fertility Decline***

Professor Barkat-e-Khuda, Director, ICDDR,B, noted that examination of the statistics of the districts bordering West Bengal and Bangladesh would reveal that these are the areas where socio-economic and socio-cultural advancement was at a much higher level compared to, for example, Chittagong and Sylhet. He agreed that language has played an important role but at the same time it could not be the major factor explaining fertility decline. Wide variation of contraceptive use and fertility levels is prevalent within Bangladesh and West Bengal, and,

therefore, language per se cannot be the dominant determinant of fertility decline, he opined. A number of socio-cultural and socio-economic changes, e.g., changes in terms of mobility of women, education levels, female employment, all have contributed to the decline in fertility trends.

### ***The Issue of Border in Explaining Fertility Behaviour***

Professor Sobhan at this point suggested that the central element of the hypothesis is cross border cultural interaction. But he emphasised that cross border cultural integration could not be stronger than intra-border integration. And therefore it would necessitate an explanation of the differentiation in performance in terms of contraceptive prevalence and fertility decline between Dhaka or Mymensingh or Comilla and the border districts. Obviously, there is much more intercourse both socially and culturally among Bangladeshi residents in these particular areas. In fact, he noted that urban regions such as Dhaka had a large migrant population encompassing all classes from all different districts. As such, it could have shown a much greater homogeneity measured in terms of contraceptive practice within the country itself as distinct from across the border unless there was a prior motivation to hypothesise something unique about the border as a variable itself. Obviously, the anchor element of the hypothesis appears to be cross-border cultural integration. Looking at the positive and negative outliers as well as the contiguous band, the question that remains is why a greater homogeneity within a nation is not explained if the border is not taken as a predetermined variable. He noted that his reading of the paper suggested that the emphasis had been placed on a shared culture. In response, Ms. Basu mentioned that the border factor accounts for heterogeneity in the hypothesis. It has been repeatedly noted that the greater the heterogeneity of the social interaction network, the greater the chances that one will be amenable to social change.

Professor Sobhan pointed out that to sustain this particular proposition, it was necessary to establish a sort of *prima causality* in terms of how the behaviour practices of the Bangladeshi people in areas close to the border impact those of people across the border. But if that impact exists then it should also operate eastward. Similarly, if the causality is close to West Bengal to Bangladesh then to corroborate the hypothesis it would necessitate an explanation for the change in causality of the border districts of West Bengal with the eastern districts of West Bengal unless significant negative causality is ascribed to being neighbours to Bihar and Orissa for their interesting and provocative social topography.

Ms. Basu, responding to this proposition, said that even if the border is kept on the periphery of the hypothesis there are different levels of cross border interaction, the impact of which cannot be ignored and which may help to explain how Bangladesh as a country is doing better than Pakistan, Uttar Pradesh, or Bihar in terms of fertility decline. However, there surely is a different level of explanation as far as variations within Bangladesh are concerned. Basu

emphasised that in Bangladesh not only fertility rate but also schooling, et cetera, have registered an impressive performance and all these certainly have to be attributed to the role of language and culture as a common facilitator. The country as a whole is exposed to outside influences and within the country the border areas are exposed more to the outside world, she added.

### ***Cause and Effect Relationship***

Professor Barkat-e-Khuda solicited some clarification from the authors as to the cause and effect relationship as presented by Professor Sobhan. Amin noted that it was problematic to think in terms of cause and effect. She clarified that the fundamental confusion lay in the fact that the hypothesis assumes that a common culture underlies social change rather than thinking in terms of culture playing the role of a facilitator in interaction with other variables of social change.

### ***Impact of Migration***

Professor Sobhan, putting forward a socio-historical proposition in terms of his personal experience of moving from Calcutta to Dhaka, noted that the social and cultural influence of Calcutta-Dhaka migration, which involved a very small percentage of population and that too at the middle class level, was virtually negligible in terms of the social and political dynamics of East Bengal and subsequently Bangladesh. Correspondingly, he also noticed that the significant migration that took place at the cultural level between East Bengal and West Bengal was not really the product of partition because the *bhadralok* of East Bengal actually had for all practical purposes become migrant long before partition, as they had physically relocated themselves to compensate against education and social advancement to Calcutta. They had already disconnected themselves from their rural base so that the impact of the *bhadralok* originating from East Bengal had already manifested itself by going back to the time of the *Bengal Renaissance* itself. Sobhan observed that, notwithstanding the border proximity, he was astonished by the surprising lack of interaction between the elite classes of the then East Bengal and West Bengal, and the lack of density in the relationship. His understanding was that there prevailed an enormous difference in the behavioural responses of the emerging middle class in Dhaka compared to a much more historically well-established and a much older middle class based in Calcutta. In fact, East Bengal had been a peasant society and the elite of East Bengal were the first generation of middle class with virtually everyone having roots in the village and having connections with relatives there. In Calcutta, on the other hand, there was an urbanized metropolitan population which had over many years disconnected itself with its rural base partly because it had disconnected itself from its base in East Bengal both prior to and after partition and also perhaps because it had a much longer continuity as a metropolitan based middle class society. Consequently, such a set of circumstances has given rise to quite conspicuous differences in variation in terms of fertility decline that is not entirely explained by the significant flow of people.

### ***Extent of Cross Border Interaction***

Dr. Aminur Khan, Section Chief (Rtd.), Population Division, United Nations, suggested the importance of measuring the depth and extent of cross border interaction between the two Bengals. The two regions of Bengal may share a common language but the only scope for interaction would be through the mass media, video or influential magazines, et cetera, he noted. But in the context of interaction among the general masses, particularly in the villages, the critical question may be how much of this interaction is carried forward by language as a common facilitator. Dr. Amin's response was that in the border districts it was quite evident that the free movement of people, legal and otherwise, across the border was very much the norm. Professor Sobhan agreed with her that cross border free movement existed, but the extent could be very insignificant.

At this point, Professor Sobhan emphasised the importance of ascertaining as to what extent economic interaction along the border impacted on social behaviour.

### ***Elaboration of Framework for Explaining Fertility Decline***

Professor Shapan Adnan, Research Director, Research Advisory Services, suggested that the framework for explaining fertility decline should be broadened both in terms of space (geographical and cultural) as well as time. He proposed that the attempt to explain fertility should represent arguments and hypothesis, which can actually shed light on this very paradoxical problem of fertility decline in Bangladesh under conditions that are not regarded as standard conditions for fertility decline. He pointed to a number of serious difficulties with the arguments that had been made in the paper. The two papers, he said, had made an attempt to provide a sociology of nationalism and national identities based on language and had at the same time provided graphics as to how the elites interacted with the masses in their own countries, he said. Professor Adnan noted that the standard mainstream explanation of fertility decline in Bangladesh posited an integral importance to family planning and contraceptive prevalence. The problem is that West Bengal has been also experiencing falling fertility rates but that is not based on the same kind of family planning programme that has been noted in Bangladesh. In West Bengal, the programme is characterised by greater significance of sterilisation that represents a different choice of technique. It is also the whole paraphernalia – the programme, the organisations, the money and aid forces behind it – that are substantially different in Bangladesh as opposed to those in West Bengal. Without any connotation to value judgement, he wondered whether the authors were employing culture in their hypotheses to strengthen the explanation of common strands between fertility decline in Bangladesh and West Bengal, especially against the backdrop of the World Bank study<sup>1</sup> which ruled out structural factors as important determinants in fertility decline.

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<sup>1</sup> The World Bank, (1994): Sajeda Amin, John Cleland, G M Kamal and James F Phillips; *The Determinants of Reproductive Change in Bangladesh; 1994*

He thought that if this kind of explanation as to how the problem was defined was valid, it was essential to provide an explanation of the *sociology of innovation*. In other words, it needed to be explained why certain societies were more receptive to change and innovation and why certain groups became leading agents of change. And then only it would be logically possible to put on par fertility decline with the growth of technological innovation in Bangladesh and West Bengal. He also called for a clarification regarding what the authors meant by mass mobilisation. If, he pointed out, it referred to the number of groups that had been formed then certainly that had nothing to do with mass mobilisation. On the other hand, if it meant how much money had been disbursed through various groups in the micro credit system, then this again perhaps had little to do with the concept of mobilisation and science of sociology. Professor Adnan suggested that the need to find a cultural explanation independent of structural ones and even independent of family planning programmes had brought the authors to the particular position where they needed to emphasise a general growth of cultural innovation.

Professor Adnan also pointed out that the fact that Bengal elites became *modern* before their South Asian counterparts elsewhere did not necessarily imply that Bengalis had greater receptivity or greater affinity to change. He opined that the papers were full of assertions of this kind that were extremely tenuous. He also said that as with the aid-funded multinational initiatives behind the contraceptive and family planning programmes, one could only see the same kind of political economy driving the NGO programmes which are pre-noted as the science of innovation. It is important to explore how much of the phenomena of fertility decline is contingent upon external aid relations as a contrast to the two permanent cultural mutations which are reflected in the intercommunication between the elites of the two Bengals and between the elites and the masses.

Adnan noted that it would be wrong to assume that all the innovation came from Calcutta as the sole centre of cultural and political innovation. In reality, innovation permeated from various parts of the country, e.g., from Chittagong, which had been a very advanced district town as far as cultural and political innovations are concerned. Ironically, Chittagong falls within the negative outlier region. He was of the opinion that establishing the arguments presented by the authors required a lot more of evidence than had been provided thus far.

Adnan suggested that if the factors of nationalism and culture had contributed significantly to fertility decline then it needed to be established that the factors that could have promoted attitudes towards fertility decline were at work in a consistent manner prior to the 1980s. Again if it is argued, as had been suggested by several of his unpublished works, that fertility decline actually began in the late 1970s rather than mid 1980s onwards, then it preceded the setting up of the family planning structure on a large scale. He noted that with regard to the timing of fertility decline somehow the effectiveness of the contribution of family planning

programme came in later than the onset of fertility decline. That, he suggested, was where the focus of the research should be. Acknowledging the role of cultural factors, Adnan suggested an elaboration of arguments provided in the papers but in a more defensible manner supported by evidence. He also proposed a re-examination of the structural changes that had taken place during this time.

### ***Bengali Identity Formation***

On the issue of *Bengali Identity* formation, Professor Adnan noted that cross-fertilisation had led to a more open, liberal and secular approach. He suggested that the formation of Bengali nationalism has fluctuated historically and over space. For instance, he pointed out that Bengalis from the *jotdar* background in East Bengal regarded themselves as Muslim to be their prime identity before partition. Later within Pakistan, faced with a bad deal, they decided to take up the Bengali identity as their own. It was not that any great secular motivation inspired by the ideals of enlightenment and modernism brought about this change as has been argued in this paper, Adnan opined. After becoming *Bengali* in 1971 and 1972, then with the change in regime the Bengalis - the leadership specifically (along with the intellectuals who follow the government), if not the masses of people - switched to *Bangladeshi nationalism*. Bangladeshi nationalism was even narrower than Bengali nationalism as the former was the intersection of Bengalis and Muslims.

### ***Influence of Economic Factors***

Ms. Simeen Mahmud, Senior Research Fellow, BIDS, said that it could be that the emphasis of the authors on the border theme was somewhat forcing them to come up with an explanation or hypotheses about the cross-border diffusion and cultural and economic interaction. She noted that there was obviously a lot of behaviour, which was affected by culture. But she believed that economic factors influenced behaviour more strikingly than did cultural ones. She suggested the similarity of behaviour of the people in the positive outlier districts, for example, could bear economic explanations as well, such as geographically similar area, the extent of river erosion, agricultural production practices, et cetera. She proposed a re-examination of these issues. Mahmud added that in both West Bengal and Bangladesh, a massive increase in food production had taken place primarily because of agricultural innovation but under notably different policy circumstances, which might help to provide some clue as to why people on both sides of the border were acting in similar ways. Mahmud also proposed an explanation for the structural changes and how they influenced economic behaviour as such.

### ***Other Issues***

Professor M. Ataharul Islam of the Department of Statistics, University of Dhaka, opined that there must be a significant amount of carry-over effect from undivided Bengal that needed to be considered in the hypothesis. He suggested that the authors might like to consult the District

Gazetteers, which provide detailed accounts of the socio-cultural background of the people in the pre-1947 period. He also pointed out that the analysis should take into account the impact of NGO activity in Bangladesh; he noted that the positive outlier districts are also marked by dominance of NGO activity, the incorporation of which into the hypothesis would make the explanation more compact. He also suggested that the authors might consider reconstructing *standard of living* index with housing conditions in order to be able to obtain a better representation of the situation. Another point Professor Islam drew attention to, was the prevalence of the phenomena of early-marriage and children-in-quick-succession in Khulna and Rajshahi divisions, areas which still have a lower population compared to other areas of Bangladesh. Therefore, drawing out a better understanding of this issue might be useful as well, he noted.

Both Ms. Mahmud and Dr. Aminur Rahman Khan, expressed the belief that it was important to consider the nature of interaction while considering cross-border influences. They also asked for a thorough exploration of the impact of NGO activities on behavioural change in the areas under consideration.

Bruce Caldwell of the Australian National University, Canberra, suggested that the impact of religion, which essentially was a cultural issue, on the women of West Bengal and Bangladesh could be investigated.

Professor Rehman Sobhan, drawing a conclusion to the dialogue, said that what basically was important was an explanation of what happened roughly between 1980 and 1992, a period in which Bangladesh in a unique way experienced dramatic growth in contraceptive prevalence and correspondingly in fertility decline. He recommended that the changes that had been taking place in the rest of India, such as in Kerala, Maharashtra or Tamil Nadu, during concurrent periods needed to be explored to validate the cultural argument. It was also noted that in India, Kerala was an obvious outlier and so it might be worthwhile to inquire into the issue of how conditions would compare with those in West Bengal.

Professor Sobhan pointed to three issues, which needed to be looked into at greater depth.

- 1) He believed that there still existed an on-going unresolved debate regarding the dynamics of rapid increase in contraceptive prevalence, specifically as to whether it was supply driven or demand driven or both. The issue needed to be conclusively resolved before bringing in the border/culture hypothesis. The issues of border effect and contiguity effect have to be examined further. Additionally, it has to be clarified what part territorial cluster has played in the whole episode of fertility decline.



- 2) The conventional economic variables, e.g., levels of landlessness, levels of poverty, degree of migration from this particular area, all needed to be brought under the purview of the analysis in order to distinguish one area from another in the context of the issue of fertility decline.
- 3) Another proposition was that it might be rewarding to consider whether Bengali nationalism really merited treatment as a distinctive variable to carry out the rest of the hypothesis simply on the basis of an implied assumption of distinctive characteristics associated with Bengali-ness.

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