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## School exclusion as social exclusion: the practices and effects of a conditional cash transfer programme for the poor in Bangladesh

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### What is Chronic Poverty?

The distinguishing feature of chronic poverty is extended duration in absolute poverty.

Therefore, chronically poor people always, or usually, live below a poverty line, which is normally defined in terms of a money indicator (e.g. consumption, income, etc.), but could also be defined in terms of wider or subjective aspects of deprivation.

This is different from the transitorily poor, who move in and out of poverty, or only occasionally fall below the poverty line.

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## Abstract

Policies to expand basic schooling in Bangladesh have generally fit well with popular desires and preferences for upward mobility through education. But as Bangladeshi society becomes increasingly educated, the sizeable minority persistently excluded from school are experiencing new processes of adverse incorporation and social exclusion: economic opportunity, social and political participation and citizen engagement with the state increasingly depend on the acquisition of formal schooling. This paper explores the efforts of government to interrupt the intergenerational transmission of poverty. It focuses on the practices and effects of the Primary Education Stipend Programme, a conditional cash transfer designed to attract the rural poor into school. It documents how the objects of policy – rural poor children and parents - are ‘seen’ by the state, and the sightings of the state they in turn receive. It also analyses the tools and technologies of the intervention, focusing on its targeting practices. It concludes that the failure of the programme to significantly increase educational access among the rural poor reflects how the tools and techniques of the intervention encode and recreate class and social distinctions, as well as administrative views on child labour and children’s rights that are sympathetic to poor parents. These distinctions and views shape implementation on the ground, so that the programme is in practice only weakly disciplinary in its efforts to educate the rural poor.

**Keywords:** education, conditional cash transfers, adverse incorporation, social exclusion, citizens, Bangladesh, inter-generational transmission of poverty

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## 1 The popular 'will to improve', or Rafiqul nearly goes to space

No story captures the glittering prospect of education in contemporary Bangladesh as well as that of Rafiqul. As recounted by children in Kushtia in 2008, Rafiqul was from a modest background, the son of a betel farmer. He had always been interested in science. One day, a newspaper carried news of an essay competition organised by the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) of the United States, for children from poor families. The prize was to be a trip to space! To everyone's amazement, Rafiqul's essay won first prize, making him so famous he was even interviewed on television. The schools he attended also became famous and he achieved a golden A+ (a rare achievement) at secondary school. Unfortunately, Rafiqul could not claim his prize of a trip to space as he was refused an American visa. But he remains a role model for schoolchildren in Kushtia.<sup>1</sup>

Rafiqul's story celebrates popular beliefs about the possibilities of education in Bangladesh: with success at school, not even the sky is the limit! The promise of education is rich with the prospect of social mobility, material wellbeing, social inclusion and status; it is a faith widely subscribed to in contemporary Bangladesh. And this popular 'will to improve' nestles comfortably against national policy objectives about the improvement of the population (Li, 2007). The government that came to power with an overwhelming mandate in January 2009 did so on a platform of educational access: the Bangladeshi state has not needed to coerce people into wanting education, although mass campaigns about the desirability of education have helped persuade people of its importance. The themes of this paper centre on this fit between popular preference and public policy in relation to projects of citizen formation.

Basic education policy is an example of how the Bangladeshi state has sought to interrupt the intergenerational transmission of poverty through 'educating desires and configuring habits, aspirations and beliefs' (Li, 2007: 5). This paper aims for an analysis of basic education policy that is richer in political insights than is usual in programme evaluation. It borrows from the body of governmental approaches for its analytical strategy, assessing education interventions as deliberate efforts 'to shape human conduct by calculated means' (ibid). This strategy involves attention to the practices and effects of a particular intervention designed to expand access to primary education among the rural poor, that of the Primary Education Stipend Programme (PESP). It looks at how the objects of policy are 'seen' by the state, the sightings of the state they in turn receive (Corbridge *et al.*, 2005) and the tools and technologies involved in efforts to shape conduct by educating desires. It recognises that

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<sup>1</sup> This story emerged during a participatory school mapping exercise with children and youth in Kumarkhali, Kushtia, as part of a study of school choice in Bangladesh undertaken for the Department for International Development (DFID) Bangladesh.

tools for governing the population are intrinsic to how they are seen and problematised (Miller and Rose, 2008). The analysis attempts to show that what is problematised and elegantly 'rendered technical' with neatly corresponding solutions to hand is, on closer inspection, messy with politics and difference, such that the desired 'improvements' may not occur. It looks, in other words, at what creates the gap between the design of interventions and their implementation, and the implications of this for citizenship formation among the poor.

The next section explores how exclusion from education is creating new routes to and patterns of adverse incorporation and social exclusion. It argues that the success of educational expansion – most children, including girls and the poor, now receive at least some primary schooling – has had the perverse effect of creating a new educational underclass: whereas formal schooling was once the preserve of a privileged few, an increasing proportion of young Bangladeshis now have some experience of school. For the significant minority that do not, education exclusion is layered on top of income poverty and other forms of economic, social, political and spatial disadvantage.

Educational exclusion is associated with persistent poverty and with practices of child labour. While the deployment of children in paid work is a common household survival strategy that provides a route out of income poverty in the short term, it also incorporates children into the economy on adverse conditions, the effects of which endure into adulthood (Ali, 2006). The social and political consequences of school exclusion are less often considered. In Bangladesh, as in other contexts where mass basic education has been generally achieved, the experience of formal education endows social status. It also aims to turn people into citizens by teaching the modes of engaging with the state – as well as the literacy that negotiating state procedures increasingly requires. As more and more people have the experience of formal institutions, those who lack such schooling are likely to be increasingly excluded within a country where the state expects its citizens to present themselves to it in particular ways (see Corbridge *et al.*, 2005).

Given the mass popularity of education as a route to social mobility and its significance for economic, social and political inclusion, one question that persistently arises is, why do some groups apparently avoid being primed for 'improvement' in this way? The main body of the paper, Section 3, explores why school exclusion remains significantly the condition of the chronically poor, using the example of a national conditional cash transfer scheme formally intended to reward the 40 percent poorest rural children for school attainment. The paper analyses the practices and effects of this massive project, looking at how the intended beneficiaries are 'seen' by the central state and at the very different vision of it in turn from within rural communities. It looks also at how the state aims to assign, signal and reward particular forms of citizenship for different categories of people; at how this is practiced; and what this means for the rural poor and their hopes of school.

Section 4 concludes with some discussion of the contribution of a political and governmental analysis to the evaluation of interventions on chronic poverty. It also reflects on the implications of the analysis for basic education policy in Bangladesh, and for discussions of gender, age and citizenship.

## 2 Education exclusion and the poor: new routes to adverse incorporation and social exclusion in Bangladesh

### 2.1 Patterns of educational exclusion

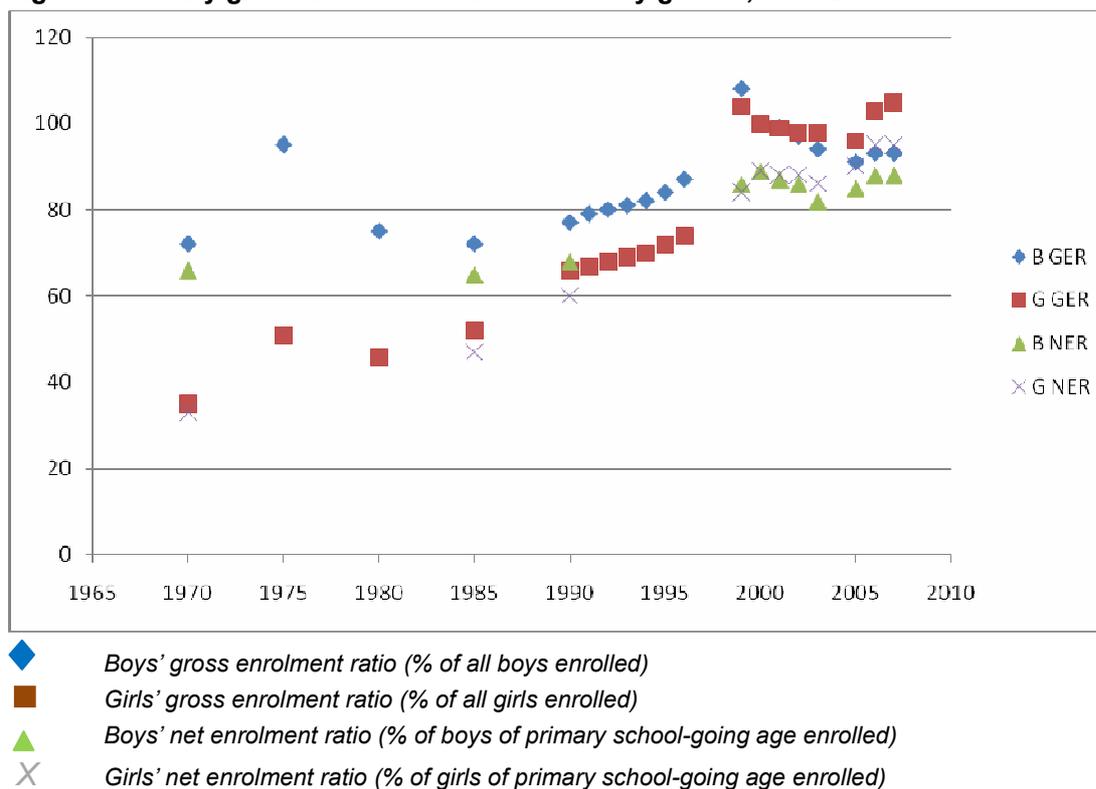
Most Bangladeshi children now attend at least some primary school. This is a remarkable change in this poor, patriarchal country, where at independence in 1971 only one-third of girls and two-thirds of boys were in primary school (see Figure 1). These gains suggest a massive centralised effort and a high degree of political commitment to mass educational expansion, although this has been imperfectly implemented in practice. For the present argument, what is most significant about these gains is that those who have not succeeded in gaining access to education now face a double disadvantage: they are still lacking education but now have also effectively dropped a rung or more on the national social ladder, as the rest of educated society moved up.<sup>2</sup>

So who has been left behind? Recent estimates indicate that some 8.5 million children of primary and secondary school age are out of school, 40 percent of them at primary level. One-fifth of children aged 6-10 are currently out of school, more than two-thirds of them from poor households, and with one-third of out-of-school children located in Dhaka division, the wealthiest area in the country (Al-Samarrai, 2008a; 2008b). Religious and ethnic minority status, remote location or insecure tenure and the complex of social and economic factors associated with extreme poverty all contribute to the likelihood of school exclusion (Ahmed *et al.*, 2007; Al-Samarrai, 2008b; BRAC/SCUK, 2005; Cameron, 2008).<sup>3</sup> Among the poorest, school exclusion appears to be increasingly concentrated among boys: in 2000, 1 percent more school-aged girls were in school; by 2005, this difference had widened to an 11 percentage point difference. At secondary, the gap widened from 9 to 13 percent over the same period (Al-Samarrai, 2008b).

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<sup>2</sup> On the politics of policies of educational expansion, see (Hossain, 2006; Hossain, *et al.*, 2002).

<sup>3</sup> An evaluation of a BRAC (Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee) programme that provides assets and other support to ultra-poor households found that, despite positive economic impact, the programme had achieved no impact on the net enrolment rate of children in ultra-poor households (Ahmed *et al.*, 2008).

**Figure 1 Primary gross and net enrolment rates by gender, 1970-2007**

Sources: 1970-96: UNESCO statistics. 1999-2003: UNESCO data online. 2005-7: DPE Baseline survey 2005, School Survey 2007, PEDP II, Dhaka: Directorate of Primary Education (2005, 2006, 2007)

## 2.2 Educational exclusion as a route to adverse incorporation and social exclusion

Exclusion from school has identifiable economic, social and political impacts, all of which can be associated with processes of adverse incorporation and social exclusion as processes that cause and underpin chronic poverty (Hickey and du Toit, 2007). The most readily identifiable of these is child labour. The most common reason children, particularly boys, withdraw from or fail to attend school is entry into paid work. Deployment of child labour usually means direct and immediate economic benefits and could, therefore, be seen as a means of inclusion within processes of economic development. For the very poorest households, entering children into paid work may be a strategy *out* of the worst forms of deprivation into more moderate poverty, which is why child labour is often associated with moderate rather than extreme income poverty in Bangladesh. The benefits of early entry into child labour may also include helping poor families establish patronage relationships with employers, which may offer some economic security, as well as prospects for learning and skills development through apprenticeships (Tariquzzaman and Hossain, 2009).

However, while entry into child labour may entail greater inclusion into economic processes and a route out of income poverty in the short term, this is unlikely to signal movement out of

chronic poverty, as early entry into paid work also incorporates children into labour markets on adverse and unfavourable terms. Practices of child labour in Bangladesh are a classic instance of Wood's 'Faustian bargain', involving early incorporation into the economy on terms that guarantee a minimal but immediate return and the prospects of security (2003). This includes hazardous, physically demanding, demeaning and low-paid forms of work, such as waste processing, rickshaw pulling and domestic labour. Labour markets remain segmented by age, with roles and activities that adults are unwilling to undertake because of their low status and/or remuneration continue to be earmarked for children (see Ali, 2006; BRAC/SCUK, 2005; Delap, 2001; Tariquzzaman and Hossain, 2009).

Children who manage to gain some education are better placed to access more attractive economic opportunities, and to move out of poverty. New data confirm that education levels are positively associated with household spending, wages and agricultural productivity (Asadullah, 2005; Asadullah and Rahman, 2005; World Bank, 2008a), and that the economic returns from education rise with the level of education (World Bank, 2008a). Studies of movement out of poverty have shown that household investments in education were important (Sen, 2003; Sen and Hulme, 2006). One study of social mobility in 1990s Bangladesh concluded that education was critical to upward mobility:

[T]he 'snakes' which led to the decline into poverty among those who started above the poverty line also served to trap those who were already poor in their poverty ... It was thus the factors which weakened their human resource base which explained why poor household remained poor during the course of our study period. (Kabeer, 2004: 36).

Kabeer brings this point to life in an account of household livelihood strategies that neatly captures the decline in benefits and quality of basic education in the 1990s:

'Over time we have been able to add to our holdings with our earnings from the cows and now we own 120 decimals. My husband ... earns a bit of money registering land (amin-giri), because he has some education. He has only Class 5 education but it is as good as the Matric people get these days' (in Kabeer, 2004: 27).

The difference between school exclusion now and a generation ago is that school exclusion then meant probably remaining among the poor, but in a context in which most poor people were similarly stagnating. In 2009, after a period of rapid educational expansion, to be the parent of an out-of-school child is a marker of distinct disadvantage, placing your children on the bottom rung of a social system in which your neighbours may have risen.

Education may have been particularly prominent as a workable route to upward social mobility because Bangladeshi society has to date lacked many of the rigid social distinctions that feature elsewhere in South Asia. Bangladeshi society is intensely, minutely hierarchical, but not widely divided by caste, ethnic or regional differences of social or political significance; for historical reasons, Bangladeshi politics are marked by an unusual degree of

reluctance to politicise social difference. In keeping with an ideology of nationalist affinity across social categories is a meritocratic ideal of educational attainment as the basis for social distinction, which has meant that education is an increasingly important marker of social distinction in this otherwise comparatively unsegmented society (Hossain, 2005).

### 2.3 School as a site for seeing and being seen by the state

The experience of school – as distinct from the learning implied by ‘education’ – also appears to be valued for how it signals new status and teaches new modes of social behaviour, and these matter greatly for access to the state. From the perspectives of poor parents and their children, school matters partly because qualifications are needed for desirable jobs, and partly because it teaches familiarity with the forms of life beyond the close personal familiarity of village relations. The experience of school is expected to bring with it a knowledge of formal manners which permits inclusion within the existing society, as well as access to government offices and officials.

One explanation of why school is important in Bangladesh is the need ‘to learn how to speak’ and behave, including with people of that powerful class. This could be a literal matter of learning the right language: men in Chittagong explained that a factor in school choice was the need to attend schools where children would learn to speak ‘proper’ Bangla – the language of the state – rather than the distinctive *Chatgai* dialect. Educated spoken Bangla (*shadhu bhasha*) is indeed distinct from everyday language (*chalito bhasha*), in terms of clarity of diction, refinement, subtlety of vocabulary and respect for social distinction. The passport to a politer world implied by education is transformative, but as was found in north India,

not founded solely or even primarily on [a] conception of its transformative potential in the economic sphere – as a precursor to a ‘good job’ – but on its ability to generate embodied capacities of comportment, feeling and speech (Jeffrey, *et al.*, 2008: 76).

Many among the frontline bureaucracy that I have encountered appear to value mass education for similar reasons: unschooled, the people are perceived as close to ungovernable. In eastern India, Corbridge *et al.* also identify concerns that dealing with the rural population exposes state officials to the rudeness and crudities of peasant society (2005). Of course, in both Bangladesh and parts of India, ungovernability has often meant more than just the jarring effect of rural life coming up against official systems, and has included insurgencies as well as more fleeting forms of resistance. While bureaucracies no doubt have other concerns, there are reasons why education adequate to raise awareness about the need for improvement (through immunisation, fertility control, sanitation) could help the bureaucracy in its implementation of these projects.

The project of mass education has been popular among the national elite, those in positions of bureaucratic, social, political and economic power, because of how this fits with their understanding of the causes and manifestations of poverty. In elite discourses, lack of education is a critical obstacle to positive change in the behaviours and attitudes of the poor, preventing them from making use of public services or opportunities that came their way, such as health, sanitation or education (Hossain, 2005). Many expect the discipline of the school will prime the poor to receive other programmes of 'improvement' (Li, 2007), positioning them for participation in this labour-rich, capital-poor economy.

With this objective of being primed for 'improvement' in sight, the gains from the project of mass education appear to have been significant. A generation is now growing to adulthood for most of whom the experience of timetables, rules and examinations will have been the norm; government systems and practices that assume literacy and familiarity with state procedures may now be operational for the average citizen. From the perspective of bureaucrats tasked with recording, listing and documenting the lives and doings of the population, many more should now be able to engage appropriately with the state than was the case at any time in the past.

This is of particular importance because the expansionary thrust of social policy since the 1990s has meant the Bangladesh state does more now to shape its citizens through health, education and other social services than it has at any time in the past. A vast range of efforts, some from the private sector, encourage Bangladeshis to control their fertility, delay their marriage, breastfeed infants, immunise children, value their girls and boys equally, defecate safely, wash hands with soap, send their children to school, eat nutritious food; the list goes on. The need to measure the progress of new social policies has entailed efforts to count and measure the population. Moves to universalise marriage, birth and voter certification since the 1990s are of interest in this context because their success depends on the extent to which people can be convinced that it is in their interests to register their intimate domestic matters with the state, and the implicit assumption of competency in the official language of 'proper' written Bangla. A campaign to register marriages was introduced in the 1990s, and some 85 percent of marriages of women and girls aged 15-24 are now registered (World Bank, 2008b). Birth certification was also being introduced through the 2000s, and is increasingly required for school entrance. New voter lists with ID cards have also been produced, and were used in what has been described as the cleanest general election in Bangladeshi history, in December 2008. Official modes of personal identification have taken on a crucial importance in commercial and official transactions, and are increasingly required to open a bank account or a business, or to buy key services – even a SIM card.

All of this contributes to the sense that the new educational underclass sketched above is likely to experience a form of exclusion from core state services of identification, both because those who supply such services will increasingly expect a capacity to interact on their terms, but also because they will know less about and value less the services supplied.

The costs of not acquiring official certification may be apparent only when they are needed most urgently, at which point they may become costly to acquire. State identification tools are popular with many poor people (see also Chatterjee, 2004). There is a clamour to 'get on the list' because of the access that this offers to official forms of basic relief and welfare, including during crises. But these tools also accord recognition to their holder, which is valued in its own right as a central element of citizenship in varied contexts (Kabeer, 2005).

It is as seekers of education for their children, and for the children as students themselves, that Bangladeshis come most often and directly in contact with the state, in the form of school teachers and officials. It is for this reason that it is interesting to note that the relative social status of teachers has declined recently in rural society, as a result of rising levels of education more widely and their involvement in the distribution of the state primary education stipend (FMRP, 2007). This is likely to have altered the balance of rural social power in the relationship between poor parents and students and teachers. We look next at the visions of citizenship that are encoded in the rules, practices and effects of the Primary Education Stipend Programme.

### **3 The government of mass basic education: the Primary Education Stipend Programme**

Bangladesh has been treated as a development success story for its expansion of educational access to the poor and girls during the 1990s and 2000s. Education policy during this period featured a massive expansion involving school construction, recruitment of teachers, particularly women, expansion of the education administration and food and cash incentive schemes. The expansion of the public system was mirrored, and arguably spurred, by a similarly rapid expansion of non-governmental organisation (NGO) schools (Hossain, 2006). The project of educational expansion enjoyed strong political commitment across successive governments, partly because the education curriculum was a battleground on which struggles between the two major centrist political parties over the content of national identity – their major distinguishing features – were staged. The excellence of national education curricula as a vehicle for the transmission of national identity arguably contributed to the expansionary impetus, by providing strong incentives for each incoming regime to ramp up its efforts at mass education (Hossain, Subrahmanian and Kabeer, 2002). Educational expansion has been popular, responding to wide demand for schools and formal education in a context of moderate but sustained economic growth and poverty reduction. But the success of expansion has been balanced – or undermined – by the failure to reform the governance of the system. This failure has been used to explain the serious problems of education quality (CGS, 2006) and, more recently, persistent educational inequalities (Al-Samarrai, 2009).

The Primary Education Stipend Programme (PESP) is one of the cash transfer schemes that have been a widely cited feature of Bangladesh's successful expansion. This is despite the fact that it was actually introduced at the end of the period of increases in enrolment, and does not, as will be seen below, appear to have been significantly more important for the poor than for the non-poor. It was established in 2002 to replace an earlier Food for Education scheme. The stated objectives of the stipend programme are to increase enrolment and completion rates, establish equity in financial assistance for students and improve the overall quality of primary education (DPE, 2002).

The PESP operates in all rural areas, and the selection process is delegated to school managing committees (SMCs) with oversight from education officials. To be eligible for a payment, selected students must score at least 40 percent in annual examinations, and payments are calculated on the basis of the number of months the student attends more than 85 percent of the time. Payments are made from banks directly to cardholding mothers on an assigned day, based on lists prepared by schools and sent up to the administration and then on to the bank. This means that mothers are held responsible for ensuring their children attend and perform to the required minimum level, in the characteristic mode of conditional cash transfers (Bradshaw, 2008; Molyneux, 2006).

Primary stipend payments represent a substantial subsidy to primary education; for poor households they cover the direct costs of schooling and help offset the opportunity costs associated with school (Al-Samarrai, 2007). In 2005, nearly 5 million students participated in the PESP (DPE, 2006), and the programme absorbed some 19 percent of public spending on primary education.

### **3.1 Tools and practices of targeting and selection**

The programme targets 40 percent of rural students attending eligible primary schools. Urban and non-registered schools such as NGO schools and some madrassahs are ineligible, so from the outset many poor children are excluded. Beneficiaries are supposed to be selected from the poorest among students with at least one predefined poverty attribute, defined in (one translation of) the project pro-forma as female-headed households, households of day labourers, households of insolvent professionals and households with less than 0.5 acres of land (DPE, 2002).

While it is widely believed that the stipend programme supports the 40 percent poorest to attend school, the stipends are actually targeted to the 40 percent poorest in each eligible rural school. Poor areas do not get a greater share than rich areas, so children from wealthy families may be legitimately included if they live in rich areas where there are few poor children, whereas children from poor households can be legitimately excluded if they live in

poor areas where there are many. This geographical universalism reflects strong political pressures to spread the benefits evenly across constituencies, to be used as patronage.<sup>4</sup>

As there is no attempt to target the programme by area, selection processes within communities tend to be particularly important determinants of how successfully the programme reaches the poor. However, Ahmed and Sharmeen (2004) found 15 percent of beneficiary households met none of the eligibility conditions, while 60 percent of households who were not benefiting did (also Al-Samarrai, 2007). Superficially, this is a straightforward case of elite capture of resources intended for powerless poor children. Certainly this is part of the explanation: teachers reported that social and political pressure often biased selection in favour of children from relatively wealthy and influential families (Ahmed and Sharmeen, 2004). Payments to be selected or receive the stipend itself are also reported.

However, there may be more to this diversion of resources to the relatively affluent than simple greed. The programme tools and techniques for identifying beneficiaries fail to correct for middleclass bias (as distinct from corruption) in how the local state implements the programme.<sup>5</sup> Two creative interpretations of the programme goals and target group by those tasked with its implementation create a situation in which it is entirely legitimate, within how the programme is conceived by local officials, to exclude poor students. First, education officials at the frontline appear to see the programme as supporting 'meritorious' students who struggle to cover their education costs. These may be among the poor, but poverty does not appear to be the most important characteristic of 'deserving' students. The archetypal 'meritorious' student is almost by definition from the 'middleclass poor' (*madhyabitta gorib*) (FMRP, 2007). These are households that need help with the costs of education (stationery, private tuition and clothes), but whose children are also more likely to attend school regularly and to study hard than those of the poor.

Selection committees explicitly trade off merit (desert) against poverty (need) when selecting beneficiaries. The incentives of schools are to do so: a head teacher admitted pre-excluding the poorest students because they were unlikely to meet attendance and performance criteria, on the grounds that it was better to select someone who would not ultimately lose their entitlement (FMRP, 2007). This logic emerges out of programme rules that students are paid on the basis of their attendance record, and can lose their eligibility altogether if they perform poorly on annual exams. Ahmed and Sharmeen (2004) also found reports that teachers selected 'meritorious' students from affluent households in order to maintain school eligibility for the stipend project. A teacher explained the tension within programme goals: 'it's a problem: the poor are not meritorious'. Another contrasted merit and poverty as eligibility

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<sup>4</sup> This is the case with other safety net programmes in Bangladesh (see Hossain, 2007).

<sup>5</sup> Here I am following Goetz and Jenkins (2005) argument on capture and bias in public service delivery to the poor.

criteria, pointing out that 'it used to be about merit, but now those who have 40 decimals of land cannot get it' (FMRP, 2007). Of SMC chairmen interviewed in one survey, 60 percent reported selecting 'talented students' to participate in the programme (FMRP, 2006). Again, the incentives of schools are indeed to select the more able as opposed to the poor.

If education officials feel the programme is about supporting diligent, intelligent children from the 'middleclass poor', they are enabled by ambiguities in the eligibility criteria. Ahmed and Sharmeen (2004) found a high proportion of non-poor households met the eligibility criteria. As we have seen, one English version of these criteria describes poor households, defined as female-headed households, households of day labourers, households of insolvent professionals and households with less than 0.5 acres of land (DPE, 2002). Another rendering replaces 'insolvent professionals' with 'households that earn their living from low-income professions (such as fishing, pottery, weaving, blacksmithing and cobbling)' (Ahmed and Sharmeen, 2004: 4, drawing on evaluation reports by Karen Tietjen).

In their English sense and, I believe, in their Bangla sense, 'insolvent professionals' are distinct from 'artisans' or low-income professionals. The former suggests respectable middleclass people experiencing downward mobility, the latter a group of the hardcore excluded, often including religious and cultural minority groups, and bearing remnants of an older structure of caste, such as weavers, potters and fishermen. Interpreted as the first, there is no conflict with programme goals. In relation to educational merit, 'the poor' here are merely being defined in a way that resonates with middleclass anxieties about class and status: they are the otherwise respectable, probably educated moderate or above poor group, who are struggling with the costs of maintaining their social position, including educating their children.<sup>6</sup> The struggle among the respectable poor to maintain their social position appears to elicit considerable sympathy among middleclass people – including frontline state officials, who are among its members.

### 3.2 How the state sees children in poor households

State actors tend to be reasonably well informed about the conditions faced by the poor struggling to educate their children; they also appear sympathetic towards the plight of poor parents who send their children into work (BRAC/SCUK, 2005; Tariquzzaman and Hossain, 2009).<sup>7</sup> There tends to be an intuitive understanding of child labour as caused by poverty: poor parents are forced to send their children to work to ensure household survival. Such an

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<sup>6</sup> Nelson (2003) argues that there are good reasons why broad-based programmes as opposed to interventions targeted narrowly at the poor tend to attract more enduring political support, including their capacity to appeal to the relatively more politically influential middle strata.

<sup>7</sup> Blanchet's (1996) study of childhood in Bangladesh is critical of the widely held notion that employers of children are sympathetic to their family's poverty, suggesting that this is a simple matter of self-justification among a class which benefits from children's cheap and docile labour.

understanding of child labour as unproblematically caused by poverty is, however, faulty on at least two counts: first, it ignores the rapid expansion and diversification of employment options for children that have accompanied economic growth. Rather than being pushed into work, children may be increasingly drawn in by new and possibly more attractive economic opportunities for children than was the case in the past (Tariquzzaman and Hossain, 2009). Second, acceptance that poor children will enter work also ignores the fact that low returns from poor quality education – which is all the poor can afford – inhibit school attendance.

The point to underline here is the generally forgiving or accepting nature of state and other elite attitudes towards child labour. There may be relevance for present-day Bangladesh in the arguments Myron Weiner (1990) made about 1980s India: social acceptance of children's work, particularly the accepting perceptions of policy elites and the middleclass, help explain the persistence of mass, routinised forms of child labour. In Bangladesh, this acceptance helps to explain why signals from the state against child labour have been weak: there have neither been strong policies against nor successful campaigns around the negative consequences and unacceptability of child labour.

Against this backdrop, the PESP is understood as attempting to help poorer households overcome the need to send children to work: it is not seen nor does it appear to be experienced as 'disciplinary'. To get into the programme, it helps to be from among the 'meritorious' poor – a group more middleclass than poor in its values and behaviours. But for those in the programme, conditions are lightly applied, so that the disciplining effects of the programme have been muted compared with its welfarist transfer element (see Al-Samarrai, 2009). Poor parents are coaxed or coached rather than coerced to fulfil their responsibilities towards the state by getting their children to attend school. The lightness of the conditionality of the programme with respect to poor parent-citizens reflects sympathy with respect to poor parents' efforts to educate their children. While this is not amenable to hard proof, it is notable that school authorities have typically been complicit in forgiving lapses in meeting conditions so that children can continue to receive payments: a 2005 study found that attendance figures had been adjusted for one-third of eligible stipend holders, while some 7 percent continued to receive payments, despite having failed their annual examination (FMRP, 2006).

Given feminist interest in the disciplining effects on women of conditional cash transfers, it is significant that the gender of the parent who is supposed to receive the cash largely passes without comment. Dhaka-based officials tend to talk up this feature of the programme, but it attracts little attention on the ground. It is not clear why this should be the case, when in other countries directing resources to women through conditional schemes has attracted much attention. Two possibilities suggest themselves. First, there is nothing new about cash resources to benefit households going to women in Bangladesh: microcredit broke new ground on this terrain two decades ago. Second, resources that enter households through

women do not necessarily empower them.<sup>8</sup> it seems likely that women's 'empowerment' through the stipend programme as citizens with parental rights and responsibilities does not in fact involve any radical shift in gendered household relations.<sup>9</sup>

How the state 'sees' poor children is also strongly gendered. Whereas donors and the international community have emphasised girls' education and rights, boys' education and rights as workers have enjoyed less attention. While girls' education has been promoted on maternalist grounds of their roles as mothers and caregivers, there is a latent sense that education is less worthwhile for poor boys, in a context of high levels of unemployment among educated youth and concerns about political militancy. Early entry into work seems to be viewed as absorbing and channelling some of the frustrations and tensions of poor young men in directions of which society approves (Tariquzzaman and Hossain, 2009).

### 3.3 Child rights and proto-citizenship

These understandings of child labour are rooted in a model of household poverty in which household interests are treated as unitary, with strong parallels with gender and the burial of women's interests (see White, 2002a). The state's view of children in poor households does not entertain the possibility that children's interests in attending school might not be identical with those of the unitary household (Kabeer, 2000). Yet poor children have agency, perhaps more, within the constraints of poverty, than their wealthier counterparts. Many poorer children take a lead role in their own schooling decisions, including decisions to quit, and conflicts across generations feature in many accounts of school dropout (BRAC/SCUK, 2005; Tariquzzaman and Kaiser, 2008).

While signs of intergenerational conflict over schooling decisions suggest awareness among children of their separate interests, this is not matched by a perception in Bangladeshi society or public policy of children as citizens in their own right (nor is Bangladeshi society alone in this). Yet parental rights as set out in Bangladeshi culture remain almost total. The common expression 'the flesh is yours but the bones are mine' used to grant teachers permission to discipline children specifies parental control of the most absolute kind.<sup>10</sup> It is hardly controversial to suggest that ideas about child rights are new or alien to Bangladeshi society. Sarah White's interviews with actors involved in child rights work in Bangladesh highlighted the distance discourses of child rights would have to travel to be meaningful: 'We

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<sup>8</sup> For example, Goetz and Sen Gupta (1996).

<sup>9</sup> Feminist analyses of conditional cash transfer programmes have been critical of their disciplinary strategies and impacts, particularly the extent to which they tend to reinforce a particular model of motherhood (see Bradshaw, 2008; Molyneux, 2006).

<sup>10</sup> I am grateful to Lamia Rashid of Save the Children UK (SCUK) for explaining this to me.

can talk about child rights, but who will listen?’ and ‘Never mind child rights, human rights is a question in Bangladesh!’ (2002b: 729).

The absence of a concept of child rights within education policy in general is borne out by official policy statements on the purposes of education. Produced under an Awami League government, which credibly claims leadership of the national liberation struggle, this statement emphasises creating ‘awareness in the learners to protect the independence, sovereignty and integrity of Bangladesh’, transmitting nationalist, secular, social, moral and democratic values. Other objectives are creating ‘pragmatic, productive and creative’ citizens for socioeconomic transformation and greater efficiency as ‘manpower’ to participate in globalisation (Government of Bangladesh, 2000: 15). Notable for its absence is any emphasis on the emancipation of individuals or reference to human rights (Unterhalter, Ross and Alam, 2003). Children’s rights to education are circumscribed within their rights – and responsibilities – to be educated as future citizens.

There are valid concerns that a universalist understanding of child rights can have contradictory effects for children (Blanchet, 1996; White, 2002b). Particular concerns include treating children as separate from their relationships and prioritising culture over poverty and class as the key factor shaping children’s rights. Kabeer (2000) points out that a society which cannot provide minimal social protection for its citizens cannot realistically or morally insist its children attend school rather than work, even if to do so is a matter of children’s rights and interests. In her study of child rights in Bangladesh, White notes that:

Increasingly the core difficulties facing disadvantaged children are attributed to the absence of child rights in Bengali culture and their solution sought in raising ‘child rights awareness’. Instead of political economy this renders culture, ideology or attitudes the key issue. The problems of disadvantaged children are thus attributed not to their exploitation as poor, but to their non-recognition as children (2002b: 726).

While it may be true that child rights activists place childhood rather than poverty at the centre of their understanding of the obstacles to child rights, it is very much the poverty of the household that is at the centre of the PESP. Indeed, it is common enough to hear state actors, particularly those outside the education system, describe the programme as an income transfer to poor families, accepting that is lightly conditional on school attendance. In the absence of a meaningful working conception of child rights that fits with Bangladeshi realities, children are at best seen as proto-citizens, meriting state attention to the extent that they are future adults. At the point of the schooling decision, however, children’s rights to school weigh less than their poor parents’ rights to children’s labour for the household as a whole – and indeed their own rights to sacrifice their schooling to support the household of which they are a member.

### 3.4 The effects of the stipend programme

Technically, the stipend programme should be regarded as a failure (Al-Samarrai, 2009). Some 46 percent of stipend resources go to the non-poor, and some two-thirds of ultra-poor children are excluded. The programme is no more than moderately pro-poor: 54 percent of all resources go to poor children, a group that make up around 50 percent of the primary school-aged population (Al-Samarrai, 2007). All of this is consistent with evidence that ultra-poor children are more likely to struggle to meet the attainment and attendance criteria (see Ahmed *et al.*, 2008). And while the national scale of the stipend programme makes it difficult to isolate its impacts from larger reform processes, changes in enrolment and attainment in school since the introduction of the programme suggest less than impressive impacts. The stipend programme appears actually to have coincided with a decline in total enrolments at primary, particularly among boys, as well as growing demand for schools outside the formal government and recognised system. As noted above, 60 percent of out-of-school children are from poor households; an increasing proportion of these have been boys, and a gender gap of 11 percentage points in enrolment had opened up between the poorest boys and girls by 2005. The gap in completion rates between the non-poor and the poor who do attend school narrowed in the first half of the 2000s, but a large gap remains: only 6 or 7 percent of the poor aged 16-25 have completed secondary education, compared with 21-35 percent of the non-poor (Al-Samarrai, 2008b). In terms of gains in participation in education, the secondary girls' scholarship has been identified as one factor driving demand for girls' primary schooling. Gains for boys (for whom no secondary scholarship was available) have been slower than for girls during the lifetime of the stipend programme.

The unintended effects of the stipend programme have included giving poor citizens, including children, new sightings of the state. Poor parents appear to have become more interested in school accountability since the introduction of the programme. Although many poor parents cannot be expected to have a thorough understanding of what goes on in schools if they have never attended one, there is an understandably clearer incentive to ask questions about what goes on in schools when cash resources to which they are entitled are at stake. Education officials, teachers and parents all appear to have felt that parents had become more aware about the purposes of the programme (FMRP, 2007; also Ahmed and Sharmeen, 2004).

A second unintended consequence of the stipend programme has been its contribution to the decline in teacher status within rural society. Teachers' status has probably been declining for a number of years, as the spread of education meant teachers were losing their monopoly on education. The 'feminisation' of the teaching force is also likely to have lowered its status. Respect and trust of school teachers remain relatively high, but have declined partly because of suspicions about their handling of resources intended for poor children, and their part in the dirty local politics of beneficiary selection (FMRP, 2007). The implication of this is an increase in the relative power of poor parents, in a context in which social

relations play a bigger role in public sector accountability than formal mechanisms. The stipend programme may thus inadvertently strengthen the position of poor parents with respect to school authorities, by giving them a new perspective on teachers.

The stipend programme also introduces children to interaction with the state. The nature of this experience is cause for concern, as there are incentives to attempt to cheat the system, and to do so with the sanction of the school authorities (Al-Samarrai, 2009 gives a detailed account of the incentives and systems in place that weaken programme conditionality). We know this because many stipend payments are made even when attendance and attainment criteria are not met. As noted above, attendance figures and exam performance are widely improved on so that students can continue to receive their stipend. This misreporting by schools amounts to approximately one-fifth of all government stipend spending. The stipend is not only failing to 'discipline' children into school attendance and improved performance, it is also teaching them the lesson that it is possible and acceptable to local authorities to cheat in order to access public resources.

## 4 Conclusion

School exclusion in Bangladesh has become a new route to social exclusion through its denial of economic opportunity, social and political participation and the basic tools for citizen engagement with the state. Those who are excluded from school are now a minority, albeit a sizeable one; the partial success of educational expansion has meant that Bangladeshi society is changing from one in which most people are unschooled so that the few are special, to one in which most people will soon have at least basic schooling, so that those who lack even that learning find themselves at the bottom of the social, economic and political pile.

Departing from conventional programme and policy evaluation in its use of a 'governmental' analytical lens, the paper looked at how the tools and techniques of policy intervention encode and recreate class and social distinctions. The theory of child labour that informs the programme excludes consideration of reasons other than basic survival that might lead to the rejection of school. And children are 'seen' by the state as at best proto-citizens: their rights as children weigh far less than their parents' rights to determine how their time is occupied. This reflects an acceptance of child labour derived from sympathy towards poor parents. Sympathy helps to justify why the conditionality of the stipend programme is so lightly applied: rather than being coerced, parents are coached or coaxed into sending their children to school. All of this is in line with the good fit between the popular desire for education and the state's 'will to improve' the population.

Three broader points emerge from this analysis. The first is the intrinsic significance of class, in its fullest sense of economic position as well as social values and status, in the

government of basic education. It is hardly new to point out that educational strategies, whether governmental or popular, are centrally about the pursuit or defence of class position and social distinction (Jeffrey, *et al.*, 2005). But it is remarkable quite how critical class proves to be to understanding how the stipend programme is enacted. There may be something about the unusual flatness of Bangladeshi society that means that schooling is of special salience to the creation and reproduction of social difference. It seems that efforts to prevent the inheritance of poverty through education programmes are achieving something, but there is a need to be more attuned to how these play out through the ideas about class and social groups that are the objects of policy. Sarah White's reminder that a focus on children's rights can divert attention from how their class shapes their access to school takes on particular significance here.

A second point to emerge is that the state is a different animal looked at closely. An easy explanation of why these policies are subverted on the ground could be 'elite capture'. But the picture here is a complicated mix – Li's 'witches brew of situated processes and relations' (2007: 271). The intentions of state officials do not emerge as narrowly venal, not least because their own incentives are at times aligned and at others at odds with the goal of schooling the poor. They are not always bent on 'capture', and sometimes they act sympathetically. There are echoes of Li's analysis of struggles between farmers and the state in Central Sulawesi, in Indonesia: the state is not necessarily vicious, nor are citizens always virtuous (2007: 190). The analysis here helps to humanise the frontline state to shed light on the familiar problem of the gap between policy and its implementation.

Third, the processes of change discussed here have overturned gender hierarchies in the pursuit of basic education. There are more girls than boys in school, a difference that is greater among the poor; teachers are increasingly women; many resources for education are channelled through women (primary stipend) and girls (secondary scholarship). Girls also make up nearly half of madrassah students, and most NGO school pupils. It is proving easier for the state to school its girls than its boys.

The account given here suggests that this was public policy running up against the limits of the state's consensus with its citizens. For many of the poor, school remains optional and difficult under conditions of episodic household crisis. Under those conditions and with its weakly conditional terms, the stipend programme seems unlikely to significantly improve poor children's prospects of basic education.

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