

**Past, present and future: child labour and the inter -  
generational transmission of poverty**

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**Introduction**

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**Introduction: demographic transition and shifting inter-generational contracts**

In a background paper for the DRC on Chronic Poverty, Hulme et al.(2001) draw attention to 'extended duration' as the defining feature of chronic poverty. They suggest that inter-generationally transmitted (IGT) poverty provides the tightest possible fit with this definition because it implies poverty extended over at least

two generations within the same family or community, suggesting a certain degree of intractability. Much of the literature on IGT poverty focuses on the transmission of human capital deficits across generations and more particularly, on the failure of parents to invest in children's human capital. Clearly, the transmission of poverty across generations can also occur through the transmission of a variety of other deficits: the transmission of debt, for instance, as in the case of bonded labourers, or the failure to transmit financial and material capital and so on. However, in poorer economies, where poor people characteristically rely on the sale of their labour power to meet survival needs, the failure to invest in the 'human capital' of children would appear to have a particular relevance to IGT poverty.

The aim of this paper is to explore in greater detail the failure to invest in children's education as an aspect of the inter-generational transmission of poverty. It draws on research that we have been conducting as a part of the IDS Social Policy Programme on educational exclusion in South Asia. The research was organised around the idea of the 'quantity-quality' transition, the process by which families move from large numbers of children with low investments of resources per child to smaller numbers of children with higher resource investments, particularly investments in education, per child (Montgomery et al., 1999). Historical evidence suggests that large-scale declines in fertility rarely take place till there has been a decline in mortality (Dyson) while a recent overview of evidence suggests that this demographic transition appears to have been accompanied in many parts of the world by rising levels of education (Montgomery et al. 1999; Kabeer, 1996).

A paper written at the outset of our project drew on some of this literature to provide a stylised account of some of the shifts in the nature of relationships between parents and children, conceptualised in terms of implicit intergenerational contracts within the family, which appeared to underpin observed examples of the 'quantity quality' transition (Kabeer, 2001). This included an 'affective transition', the greater willingness on the part of parents to invest emotionally in each individual child as initial, primarily 'exogenous', declines in mortality increase the likelihood that he or she will survive beyond the first precarious years of life (Shorter, 1975; Stone, 1977; Scheper-Hughes, 1992). A second shift related to the kind of personal agency that parents feel able to exercise in relation to family reproductive strategy as more effective means for assuring both child survival and birth control become available to them (Cleland and Wilson, 1987). This has variously been described as part of a larger transition from 'accommodation' to 'intervention' (Epstein) or 'from fatalism to a sense of control of destiny' (Cleland and Wilson, 1987). As Montgomery (1999) points out, it is not that a sense of agency is absent in high-mortality, pre-transitional societies, but that the scope for strictly personal agency is much more limited (p. 20).

A decline in mortality is likely to lead to fertility decline at the very minimum because it reduces the 'insurance motivation' for having children, in other words, having enough children to ensure that a certain number (sometimes of the preferred sex) will survive to adulthood. In addition, other socio-economic changes which accompany declining mortality may further strengthen the desire for fertility control by increasing the costs of large families and reducing the benefits. The availability of effective means of birth control acts to hasten the speed of fertility decline both because, as it has been argued, it brings the

fertility decision-making within the 'calculus of conscious choice' (Cleland and Wilson, 1987) and because it makes attempts to reduce family size more effective.

Finally, as child survival becomes increasingly assured, as parents begin to take an active role in how many children they have rather than leaving it to fate or divine will, 'a different form of decision-making is permitted to emerge, one that involves forward-looking strategies that play out over longer time horizons' (Montgomery, 1999 p. 12). The transition in time horizons permits the consideration of new forms of investments in children which might not previously have featured as an option open to parents. Particularly for those close to the margins of survival, education exemplifies an investment which entails considerable risk. It requires families to sacrifice current consumption in favour of possible future returns. In an uncertain world, it represents a statement of faith about the future: about what the future will bring, about which children will survive to take advantage of it and about their willingness to fulfil their obligations to the generation that made the sacrifice. Smaller family sizes make such investments more affordable. The 'quantity-quality' transition has thus been described as transition from family-building by fate to family-building by design (Lloyd and Ivanov, 1988).

There is, as Montgomery points out, nothing automatic or self-propelling about these transitions. It may be a generation or more before declines in mortality give rise to declines in fertility and a further delay before levels of investment in children's education rise. And as Lloyd (1994) and Desai (1992) point out, context matters for the pace of these transitions: 'in the most basic sense, some level of development is required before family size can have an impact on child investment. In an environment without schools or clinics, parents have few

ways to materially influence their children's health or schooling, whether their resources are spread among many or few'.

Parents' assessments of potential returns to investments in health or education will partly depend on the quality of health and educational services available and partly on likely opportunities in the labour market (Lloyd, 1994, p.9). Statistical analysis across developing countries suggests that the negative relationship between family size and educational attainment is more likely to occur and to be statistically significant in urban than rural settings and in the more developed countries of Latin America and South-east Asia than in South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa.

### **The quantity-quality transition in South Asia**

Turning to the South Asian context, declines in mortality and fertility have been observed across much of the subcontinent as part and parcel of larger social and economic changes, including the spread of the cash economy, the productivity gains of the Green Revolution, increased ease of communications and transport, the growing importance of the media and, the proliferation of contract-based relationships in place of previous personalised patron-client ones. All of these have directly or indirectly increased the value attached to the acquisition of basic levels of numeracy, literacy and knowledge and help to explain the gradual but consistent rise in education in much of the region.

However, the pace of change has not been uneven within the region, either geographically or socially, suggesting that different kinds of inter-generational contracts are likely to exist within different locations or, within a particular location, for different groups (Kabeer, 2001; 2003). An overview of the state-

level studies in the Indian context suggests the existence of 'vicious' and 'virtuous' cycles in certain states between pace of demographic transition, levels of child labour and gender differentials in education, on the one hand, and state social and educational policy, rates of economic growth, labour productivity and levels of physical and social infrastructural development. Within different states, the demand for education appeared to be lowest in areas where poverty is endemic and where economic opportunities which require some minimum level of literacy to be realised are largely absent. A similar pattern was observed for Bangladesh.

Household level data also highlights the significance of poverty in explaining patterns of educational failure and child labour. However, it is also clear from the available evidence that household poverty does not constitute an insurmountable barrier to sending children to school. Rather, the relationship between household poverty and children's education within particular contexts is differentiated by a variety of factors, including the age, gender, number of siblings and birth order of children, stage of household life cycle, parental education as well as the severity and duration of deprivation. Data from Bangladesh, for instance, suggests that, despite declines in poverty over the past decade or so, the bottom 30-40% of the population below the poverty line display the characteristics of 'chronic poverty': their conditions have been slower to respond to improvements in overall standards of living.

That this group is likely to have different priorities from those closer to the poverty line, and operate with a different understanding of inter-generational contracts, is partly supported by evidence from a nationally representative survey of children. This found that a fifth of children had never been enrolled in school, that this proportion had remained constant in the last 4-5 years and

that while many of the children of the poor *did* go to school, the majority of children in this persistently excluded group were from 'hard-core poor' households (Mahmud and Sen, 1998). PRA explorations in rural Bangladesh suggests that this finding may reflect the differing priorities of poor and very poor households. The latter considered three meals a day, adequate housing and basic health care to be their most pressing needs; the former specified good concrete housing, a much more comprehensive health care services and education as their priorities (Hamid, 1998). Thus, one of the things which distinguished the poor from the very poor was the apparent relevance of education as an option in their lives (see Leach and Booth, 1999, and Kasente, 1999 for similar evidence from the African context).

The analysis in this paper takes such findings as its point of departure. It is based on the hypothesis that in a region where there has been a rising demand for education in response to a variety of socio-economic changes, understanding that factors which give rise to child labour and educational exclusion can contribute to our understanding of chronic poverty by throwing light on past and present poverty and perhaps future poverty as well. The main body of the paper focuses on 'present poverty' , seeking to explain child labour among the present generation of school-going children. However, the paper concludes by exploring the childhoods of the parents of working children and hence on past poverty, and by considering the implications of the analysis for future poverty.

### **Description of the data and some preliminary findings**

The paper draws on information collected in the course of fieldwork in Dhaka and Calcutta through a variety of different methods including surveys of around 600 households in bustee locations in each of the two cities in 2001-2002

together in-depth interviews with a sub-sample of parents, focus group interviews as well as discussions with teachers and other key respondents carried out subsequently. In each city, we relied on assistance of an NGO working with children from poor households to help us identify study locations and map out our sample universe. CINI-ASHA, which works to get hard-to-reach children into school, helped us in Calcutta and Aparajeyo, which provides a day care centre for the children of working mothers, helped us in Dhaka.

Two low-income wards were selected in Calcutta but they included three distinct bastee neighbourhoods. Darapara is centrally located and is close to Park Circus, a middle class Muslim area, and hence to a middle class Muslim market. It is inhabited by a mixture of migrants. Many are Muslims who migrated several years ago from Bihar and are mainly Hindi or Urdu speaking. The other neighbourhood is located in East Calcutta and regarded as a fringe area inhabited by poor Muslims and scheduled caste Hindu households. The larger area is called Dhobiatala and has been mainly settled by Muslim migrants who came from the poorest districts of West Bengal (24 Parganas, Howrah, Sunderbans), from other poor states such as Bihar and UP and from Bangladesh. CINI-ASHA has been working here since 1992 when communal riots broke out in the area in the wake of the destruction of Babri Masjid. However, it includes a distinct bastee called Suarmari which is predominantly occupied by Scheduled Caste households who migrated from Bihar many generations ago (Shahu, Rana). The area is named after the traditional occupation of the SC households that lived there, pig-slaughter and related activities. Many still continue in this line of work.

Two bastee locations were selected in Dhaka. Pallabi, on privately owned land, was the older, more settled and better off of the two. However, it has been



identified by an ILO study as reporting a large concentration of child labourers. The Agargaon bastee was an illegal squatter colony. Land had been bought by the Government of East Pakistan from private landowners to build offices but lain unused. It had been occupied and settled after independence by influential people in the locality using a combination of violence, bribery and political connections. While the inhabitants of the two bastees came from different districts of Bangladesh, there was considerable uniformity in terms of religion (Islam) ethnicity and language (Bengali) compared to the Calcutta bastees. .

Analysis of household survey data in the two locations provided preliminary insights into patterns of education and work among children in the two locations. Cross-tabulations show, first of all, that the current generation of children (aged 5-15) have higher levels of education than the previous generation of children (the 16-49 age group) and the generation before (50+) (see Tables 1.1 and 1.2). This is true for both locations. In other words, it confirms that levels of education have been rising even among the poor. Education levels among school going children do not vary in any systematic way between Dhaka and Calcutta.

Secondly, however, it shows that, among children of school-going age, there is a large disparity between the number of children who had ever been to school and those who were currently at school. The reasons for this emerged out of our interviews with parents. In particular, it became clear that sending children to school or work is not a single discrete decision-making event nor is it a mutually exclusive one. In a few cases, children's absence from school represents 'non-decision-making' on the part of parents who have never considered education to be a feasible option for their households. For others, children's education was an over-riding priority. For most, however, it was an on-going process of decision-making, one that had to be negotiated with children and to be constantly revisited in

the light of the changing circumstances of the household. Consequently, the children in our sample were positioned along a continuum with 'hard core child labour', those who had never been to school and had been working full time from an early age at one end and children who had been attending school on a regular and full-time basis since they were old enough at the other. The majority of children, however, were in between these two extremes and included children who had been enrolled in school but had dropped out temporarily or permanently; children who were combining work and school; and children who were going to school but only intermittently.

It was usual, therefore, to find children in these different categories within the same household. Disparities within the household took different forms. Birth order was a factor. In some cases, older children were at school because they had started schooling at a stage of the household life cycle when dependency ratios had been lower. In other cases, it was younger children who went to school because household circumstances had improved over time. Disparities also reflected actual or perceived differences in the aptitudes or dispositions of individual children.

In addition, of course, the disparities also related to gender and this is the third point that comes out of our cross-tabulations. However, contrary to what might be expected in a part of the world with a long history of gender discrimination in favour of boys, the gender disparities evident in the table favored girls rather than boys. In other words, and particularly in Calcutta, more girls than boys had ever been in school and more girls than boys were currently in school. The disparity was less marked in Dhaka, but nevertheless was tilted in favour of girls. In terms of work status, more boys worked than girls in the Calcutta locations. In Dhaka, however, a somewhat higher percentage of girls in the 5-15 age group worked than boys, again a departure from past patterns.

The use of probit analysis to establish the likelihood of children going to school or work<sup>1</sup> suggested the following findings for the two locations:

In Calcutta, the likelihood of children working was higher in larger households, in female-headed households, in households where the head and spouse had lower levels of education, households in debt and households which relied on selling labour to earn a living. Membership of an organisation increased the likelihood of children going to school: these included women's groups, youth clubs and political parties. Muslim children were more likely to be working than Hindu children; scheduled caste children were more likely to be working than other castes. However, children from Suarmari were most likely to be working while children from Dhobiatala were least likely.

In Dhaka, the likelihood of children working was once again higher in larger households, in households that had recently migrated to Dhaka<sup>2</sup>, in households where the head and spouse had lower levels of education and in households which relied on selling labour for a living. Female headship was significantly associated with child labour in the Dhaka context in earlier stages of the analysis but had to be dropped from fuller specifications of the model because of multicollinearity. Bastee location did not have much effect.

In the rest of this paper, we will draw on some of our qualitative material to try and work out what these quantitative findings mean and to explore aspects of child

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<sup>1</sup> 'What tomorrow might bring: child labour and educational exclusion in urban West Bengal and Bangladesh' Naila Kabeer and Simeen Mahmud 2001. Working paper.

labour and out-of-school children which have not been captured by the quantitative analysis. The discussion is grouped under four broad headings: household vulnerability; marginalised identities; endemic insecurity; and the culture of exclusion. This section of the analysis will help to illuminate certain aspects of current poverty. We will also draw on the same material to explore what it can tell us about yesterday's poor and then raise some questions about future poverty.

### **Vulnerable livelihoods: surviving the present**

The first set of factors which emerged out of our study can be discussed under the rubric of 'vulnerability'. We use the concept to describe the conditions and concerns of individuals and households who were at constant risk of sliding into greater poverty from positions which, in our study locations, were already characterised by high levels of deprivation. Such households combined precariousness of livelihoods and uncertainty of income flows with the absence of assets - material, human or social - to fall back in times of crisis. Households which relied on the sale of unskilled labour exemplified this category and it was not difficult to understand why they reported high levels of working children.

Returns to their labour efforts were meager and uncertain. They earned on weekly or daily basis or, as in the case of a husband and wife in Dhaka who worked in a brickfield, on a brick by brick basis: they were paid 35 takas for every hundred bricks so that their earnings varied by the number of bricks they managed to break between them and the number of days they managed to find work. In such households, no single member earned a sufficient income to feed the entire family. Instead they assembled their livelihoods from a variety of different sources involving different members of the family. Even so, they rarely had savings and

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<sup>2</sup> Years of migration did not prove significant in Calcutta possibly because there were very few new

were more likely to report debt. They ate out of what they earned, borrowing or going hungry, if their earnings fell short. In some cases, food was literally purchased on a day by day basis when the breadwinner came home with the money.

Chambers (1989) suggests that vulnerability has an 'external' side which relates to the risks, shocks and threats to which a household or individual is subject and an 'internal' side, the means available to it to cope without damaging loss. This was borne out by our interviews where a recurring theme was the frequency of crises which households experienced, their responses to crisis and the repercussions of crisis. The examples of shocks, threats and risks which were reported by our respondents are not necessarily unique to poor people - though some are likely to occur more frequently in the lives of the poor: occupation-related ill-health, accidents at work or failures of businesses. However, it was the 'internal' aspect, which made every crisis a threat to household well-being. Such households rarely had an extended family network to whom they could look to for help in such times since most of their kin were too poor themselves. If they were fortunate, they were able to construct their own coping mechanisms. Some relied on credit from grocery shops to tide them over a crisis while others borrowed from moneylenders. Other relied on the patronage of employers. This latter strategy was particularly the case with domestic servants, many of whom sought to establish relations of trust with households for whom they had worked for a number of years.

However, these strategies were not always reliable and not all of them were available to those who were known to earn on an irregular basis. Consequently, family illness, the death of a breadwinner, dowry demands, accidents, theft, business failures and any of the other numerous risks that could befall any household were frequently associated with the decline of already poor households

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migrants in our sample: the data showed very little variation.

into greater debt and destitution. They were also associated with the withdrawal of children from school to help out at home as mothers started working or increased the hours they spend at work. And in many other cases, they were associated with children being sent out to work. As the quote below suggests, for a family that is struggling to keep its head above water, education is unlikely to feature among the various concerns with which they are pre-occupied.

Md. N. Islam Pallabi: I don't know anything about government free schools, and I have no interest to know. My head is so full of so many troubles – how my family can survive and how we can continue. Really, I have no space in my mind to think of schooling for my son, whether it is free or not. Now I am in debt of 12,000 taka. I owe 1,000 taka to the local shop owner, I owe 1,000 taka to a money lender – he charges 200 taka per month interest until I can pay off the full amount. The other 10,000 taka I owe to a rickshaw salesman. I entered an agreement with this man whereby I pay 50 taka per day until I have paid him the full 10,000 taka, he doesn't charge interest for delayed payment. From the moment I took the rickshaw from him, the rickshaw was mine. But for the last five days I have not been able to pay any money. I need 2kg rice per day and the house rent is 500 taka, I haven't been able to pay this for the last three months.

The female-headed households in our sample emerged as a result of crisis. In some cases, the illness, disability or death of the male breadwinner left women to fend for themselves and their children through their own efforts. More often, and with the same results, they emerged because of desertion or divorce. Khan (2000) talks about 'serial monogamy' to describe the marital behavior of men in his study of a Dhaka baste. The instability of marriage patterns suggested by our research is not fully captured by this description: men left their wives, remarried, returned for a while, left again.

As we noted earlier, female headship was associated in both cities with a higher likelihood of children working and a lower likelihood of children going to school. The association was stronger in Calcutta. In fact, the incidence of female-headed

households was higher in Calcutta than in Dhaka (15% compared to 12%). In Calcutta, it was higher among Hindus than Muslim households, mainly because of the much higher incidence among scheduled caste households: 32% of the 85 scheduled caste households in our sample were female-headed. Suarmari thus reported the highest incidence of female heads of the three bastees.

Some female-headed households had emerged when a husband fell ill or died leaving a wife to look after young children largely on her own. The uncertainties associated with irregular income flows were compounded for female-headed households because they tended to rely on a single adult breadwinner whose gender confined them to a far more limited set of income earning opportunities than a male household head from the equivalent caste, class or religion. In a number of cases, the event or process by which women became de facto or de jure households was also the event or process which led to children dropping out of school as family circumstances became increasingly more difficult. However, where female headship reflected the breakdown of marriage to an unreliable male provider, an alcoholic or gambler, it was often associated with hard core child labour, children who had never been to school and had started to work from an early age.

Income poverty was one obvious reason why children were less likely to go to school in female headed households. Time poverty was another. When a mother had to go out to work all day, she had little time to investigate educational options, even if she could have afforded the expense, and little time to monitor whether a child was attending school or not. She was also likely to depend on at least one child to take responsibility for domestic chores or to look after other younger children.

There is one other factor which was common to households that relied on vulnerable livelihoods, regardless of the gender of their heads. Our interviews

with both parents and children suggest that while it was usually the parents' decision to send the child to school or to work, and that in many cases, children regretted having to leave school, it was not unusual for children themselves to make the decision to drop out of school or to start work. Such a response on the part of children in such households is understandable. They do not have the protected childhoods of middle class children. They are exposed to the harsh realities of life in the bastee. They see the hardships of their family, the struggles of their parents and they know what it costs feed them and what it costs to send them to school.

The households we have described in this section lived the 'hand-to-mouth' existence imposed by earning on a day to day basis. It led them to discount forms of expenditure the benefits of which were not unclear, both in terms of what they were as well as when they might materialise. Vulnerability thus had an objective face, the actual probability of risks and threats that households face and the actual resources they had to fall back on, as well as a subjective one, a particular state of mind. People were not just averse to taking risks, they simply had 'no space in their minds' (as N. Islam put it) to think about the future when the present was crowded with demands. Their accounts also suggest that, unlike the trade-offs of the rich between different aspects of well-being, the trade offs of vulnerable households relate to different aspects of deprivation:

I have enough brains to know it is good to send the children to school, but what can I do? Can anyone study in an empty stomach? Will they first eat and survive or will they first go to school and study?

My father passed away four years ago. Although I know that it is my duty to provide food for my parents, I was unable to do so. I think that is the reason my father died. I feel I failed him. My other brothers also did not provide any



food to our parents. My mother is a beggar now. For a man who cannot even provide his mother with food, tell me, how can he provide school fees for children?

### **Marginalised identities**

A second set of factors which operated against children's educational attainment relates to social exclusion. I am using the concept here to refer to the interlocking of forms of disadvantage reflecting economic factors, 'resource' based disadvantage, as well as to social identity, the issue of 'recognition' (Fraser). The greater diversity of the Calcutta bastees in terms of caste, religion and ethnicity made the issue of exclusion much more starkly visible in our research<sup>3</sup>.

Consequently, the main examples to illustrate this aspect of educational failure will draw primarily on the research from Calcutta.

Caste clearly influenced time horizons because many scheduled caste members experienced the precariousness of livelihoods and vulnerability to risk described above. But more strongly than other sections of the poor, caste circumscribed social horizons, the kind of future that parents could imagine for their children. Although the left government in West Bengal has gone a long way to addressing the more overt discriminations associated with caste, it has not eradicated them. It was evident, for instance, in the fact that scheduled caste households were consigned to particular areas and that these were on the fringes of the city. It was also evident in persistence of certain occupations among this group, occupations which were despised by members of higher castes. Not only did large numbers of scheduled caste household members work as sweepers or in the rearing, slaughter and sale of pigs and pig meat, both occupations deemed polluting, but very often,

entire households worked in the same two occupations. In addition, and along with poor Muslims, there was also a high incidence of scheduled caste members working in leather-related activities.

It is not difficult to see how the cultural assignment of stigmatized groups to stigmatized occupations might serve to compress the life chances that members of such groups envisage for themselves and for their children. In some cases, it appeared to take a form of 'non-decision-making', an indifference to education. Here is one scheduled caste woman responding to questions about education levels in her family:

I have not been to school ever. There is no reason behind that. My husband also never went to school.....I never sent my elder daughter to school. I was afraid she would mix with boys and girls and learn bad things. My younger daughter Kali never went to school as she wakes up at 10'o'clock in the morning. She actually does the household work like dusting etc. I never sent them to school even in their childhood since it was their play time.

In other cases, there was ambivalence. In the case of Rashu M. , for instance, none of her daughters had been to school so far. She had not ruled it out but she remained ambivalent. On the one hand, she felt it would give them a better chance in life: "We are from the lower caste, we are neither very wise nor intelligent. We do not know anything how to get on in life and we always get cheated". On the other hand, however, she is not sure whether it was worth the expense and effort given that there was no guarantee it would bring any returns:

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<sup>3</sup> There are, of course, extreme forms of social exclusion in Bangladesh but they were not captured within our bastee sample.

My husband studied up to class nine but he is still unable to get a job. What is the use of his studies and spending all the time and money on his books? Yes, I want my children to study and live well. But there is no use if they study and do not get any work.

Lakhi B. was less ambivalent in her view that education was a pointless sacrifice for families like hers. Her father sold pig meat to shops on behalf of his employer who reared the pigs, her mother worked as a cleaner in people's homes. Neither had been educated and nor was Lakhi B.. Her husband worked in a shop that sold pig meat while she herself worked as a domestic in a private home. She had five sons, none of whom had completed more than a year or two of schooling.

Maybe it would have helped if the boys had studied but look what happened to my brother? He knows how to read and write and can sign his name. But the poor fellow does not have any work. Despite being educated what is he doing now? He is working in a rubber unit that makes hawain chappals. He cuts the straps for a pittance, so I am asking you, what's the use of all those years in school? You will hear the same story everywhere in this slum. For a few days people here get work, Rs 30 -40 a day and then no work. Even those who own houses have to work and they are worse off than us. At least we eat rice and salt regularly, but those people's lives are so uncertain.

However, there was one aspect of occupational options available to scheduled caste groups which differentiated them from poor Muslim, the other significant socially excluded group in our Calcutta sample. This was in relation to government policy. In recognition of their historical disadvantage, the Indian government adopted a policy of positive discrimination towards scheduled castes, reserving a percentage of jobs for their members in the public sector. In some cases, reservations policy had helped to translate the hereditary

disadvantage of certain scheduled caste households into a form of security. Many of those working as sweepers in Suarmari worked for the Calcutta municipal corporation. They enjoyed a degree of job security (although privatisation is beginning to undermine this), particularly as the job could be passed on to another family member. However, it was not just sweeping for the municipality that was reserved for scheduled castes, but other posts in the lower echelons of government. The possibility of obtaining government employment, and the security it brought with it, may have acted as an incentive for at least some scheduled caste families to educate children.

This was not a possibility open to Muslims. A comparison of the occupational distribution of scheduled caste household heads and Muslim household heads illustrates the point. Of the 83 scheduled caste household heads for whom we had information on occupations (2 missing values), 17% worked for the government, either in government service or as municipal sweepers. By contrast, less than 1% of Muslim household heads worked for the government in any capacity. Clearly this is not the only reason for the extremely low levels of education among Muslims in Calcutta, but it is likely to have been a contributory factor, symbolic of the marginal status assigned to Muslims in a predominantly Hindu society, their lack of recognition by the state.

It was certainly explicitly addressed by at least one of our Muslim respondents. Rafique S. was a 48 year old Bihari Muslim living in Dhobiatala. He had studied till class 5 while his wife had no education at all. He worked as a hawker taking a bus at 4 am every morning to buy stocks of athar and sindoor from Brabourne Road, the main trading centre, and returning home at 7 or 8. On a good day, he earned around 30 to 50 rupees a day on a good day. He had four sons, aged 20, 16, 14 and 8 and a daughter aged 12. One son was married and lived elsewhere.

The others are all working and have been since the age of 10 or 12. Their daughter, who is 12, is currently in Class 2. Asked about education, Rafique said:

What is the point of studying? Will our children get any work? We are Muslims. Lalloo Yadav in Bihar will only give jobs to the chamars and to his kin. For the Muslims, there is nothing, no work, no food. I know many Muslims who have studied till B. Commerce. What are they doing? Nothing. They are unemployed. So it is better for our children to work and learn some skills.

Like the scheduled castes, Muslims in these bastees occupy distinct niches in the labour market. Like the scheduled castes, many are found working in the leather-related activities avoided by caste Hindus. Darapara, for instance, was named after its traditional industry - making drums (dara) which involved working with leather. Occupations remain based on leather but have now diversified into shoes, slippers and so on. However, exclusion was also associated with other more illicit niches in the labour market. As a number of informants pointed out, many households in Darapara in particular had an 'underground number 2' occupation along with the official 'number 1' occupations that they admitted to: smuggling, drugs, extortion, intimidation. These were all activities which did not require any educational qualifications but which offered much higher returns than most of the licit occupations open to excluded groups in general. .

This meant that many of the households in our sample earned more than they admitted to. The research team members commented on obvious signs of affluence in some of the bastee households they visited: colour TVs, usually with illegal cable connections for which rent is paid to local muscle men, 'la opala' crockery sets and the food being cooked which required ingredients that were usually beyond the means of the poor. The difference between the incomes they reported and the relative affluence of their life-styles was explained in terms of borrowing.

As far as female economic activities are concerned, labour force participation rates tended to be lower among Muslim women in the Calcutta bastees than for women from scheduled caste Hindu community. Both groups of women face restricted work options but to some extent, Muslim women are disadvantaged in the same way as men from the community in not having access to any protected forms of employment. Muslim women share with SC women the status of 'untouchable' as far as many Hindu families were concerned so that while they permitted them to work as domestics, washing clothes and sweeping floors, they would not be permitted to cook or to clean dishes. However, it is likely that the more important reason for lower female labour force participation in the Muslim community relates to the efforts of its members to adhere to cultural norms of purdah, a key marker of Muslim identity, and one that may take on greater significance for an excluded minority. It is worth noting that labour force participation rates among women aged 16-49 appears to be higher in the Dhaka bastees than among women in the same age group in the Calcutta bastees. It is likely that labour force participation among Muslim women is even lower and may be a further factor in explaining higher levels of child labour within the community. This can be inferred from some of their interviews, although it needs to be corroborated by other evidence:

I have never gone out to work. My son told that there is no need to go for work now as they have already managed to overcome the most difficult days. Our worst days have passed without me working. As they are working now, we can manage better than earlier and it's their duty to not to let me go out to work. They don't want people laughing at them because they have forced their mother out to work.

Finally, identity also operated through language to discourage educational attainment in the case of Bihari Muslims, who spoke Hindi and Urdu. While many

expressed the willingness to send children to school if they could learn in Urdu or Hindi, Bengali was the dominant medium of instruction. Interviews with teachers confirmed that there were simply not enough teachers versed in these languages to meet the demand (Nambissan, forthcoming).

### **The relevance of context: endemic insecurity**

Our earlier discussion of 'vulnerability' as a factor in explaining children's absence or irregular presence at school focused largely on idiosyncratic forms of risk, risks that were particular to an individual or a household. The riots of 1992 represents an example of 'co-variate' risk, threats to lives and livelihoods which affected a group of households simultaneously. A number of Muslim households we spoke to spoke of their homes being burnt and their possessions looted during that period. For some, the ramifications were long-lasting. One father whose business had been flourishing before the riots and who made plans to send his children to a 'good' school outside the bastee had lost his business when the factory he dealt with was burnt down during the riots. As his wife told us, he had never been the same after the riots: 'When the factory existed, my husband had a lot of dreams. But the riots came and everything changed. Once the money went, so did our dreams'.

However, the riots were an episodic form of co-variate risk, a one-off event, even if they can be said to reflect deeper tensions within the community of a kind that is experienced by the Hindu minority in Bangladesh. Such tensions were one strand in a different class of co-variate risk which was evident in the bastees. This is co-variate risk which is endemic rather than episodic, and reflects the operation of the same institutional forces that gave rise to the spatial concentrations of poverty and social exclusion within bustee neighbourhoods in the two cities. The description that Wood and Salway (2000) provide of urban slums in Dhaka offer an

accurate depiction of the contexts in which the parents we interviewed made, or failed to make, decisions about their children's future.

Such bustees tend to be located in more precarious sites: fragile embankments, garbage dumps, low-lying and flood-prone areas. A open railway track in Suarmari had been the site of many accidents, some ending in injury, some in death, and was a source of constant anxiety for mothers with very young children. It explained why some did not go out to work as long as their children were young and why others selected schools for their children on the basis of whether they were on 'this' side of the tracks. The density of settlement increased the risk of disease spreading and reduced safe play areas for children. There were fire risks connected to materials used for housing and cooking facilities. All of these factors were relevant in our slum locations and formed the backdrop against which parents struggled to bring up children.

However, it was the nature of relationships which prevailed in the slums which were of greatest relevance in explaining children's absence or irregular attendance at school and the failure of many to complete even primary levels of education. Violence, threats, intimidation, extortion, crime and illegality appeared to be part and parcel of the social fabric of life in urban slums in both cities. Some believed that the burning of Dobiatala houses in the 1992 riots had been instigated by land sharks who wanted the slums cleared in order to take over the land for high rise buildings. On-going attempts to clear slums around the canal areas were reported by some of the respondents and here too there were suggestions of arson: 'best to have a fire and then the slum-dwellers can be rehabilitated elsewhere'.

However, a greater source of insecurity was associated with criminality in the slums. Darapara, for instance, used to be the base from which some of the most



notorious criminals used to operate in the 1970s: Hath Kata Bablu, Motha Firoze and Chota Rajen, names that had struck terror in the hearts of Calcutta's inhabitants, had all lived in Darapara. While the area had been cleaned up considerably since those days, Darapara and Dhobipata were both described by their residents as have strong criminal elements. 'Anti-social' activities included drug-dealing (mainly grass), but others were involved in 'supari-killing' and goodami (throwing bombs). Of Darapara, one of its residents said:

'This is a No. 2 bastee. There is gambling, there is selling of heroin and ganja, there is smuggling, where are the good people here? Who will give us work? Don't you understand the fact that people take Rs 20 as interest for money lent means there is no work and they have to earn money this way only? There is lot of money floating around, but its all No 2 money. There is no work and no prestige. Lots of wealth, no dignity. I pay for the room and for the electricity and then I pay donations, whether it is the CPM or TNC whoever comes and demands we have to pay up.

Criminality also flourished in the Dhaka bastees. Khan (2000) lists theft, drug-selling, gambling, professional begging and prostitution as the main examples of 'anti-social' activities in the bastee which he studied. However, the absence, or rather the dysfunctional presence of the state in the Dhaka context, produced a very different kind, and a much greater degree, of insecurity than was reported in the Calcutta research. The very development of the numerous legal and illegal bastee settlements that have sprung up all over the city with growing rural-urban migration flows is bound up with power relationships which operate through overtly violent processes. Powerful members of the local elite originally took over unused government land and began building on them. Land and housing were subsequently sold or rented out to incoming migrants through a network of mastaans who extract various forms of rent from slum dwellers: for their homes, for access to piped water and electricity through illegal connections, for maintaining their livelihoods in

the bastees (see Khan for a detailed analysis of the role of mastaans in Dhaka bastees). The mastaans are, in turn, linked up to local political figures on whose behalf they mobilise votes and whose interests they represent. There is constant conflict within the bastees as different groups struggle for control. The use of firearms and bombs are a common phenomenon.

The insecurity engendered by form of social structure is exacerbated by the fact that as far as successive governments are concerned, most bastees are illegal and should not exist. Not only has no attempt been made to provide these neighbourhoods with any civic amenities at all but demolitions of bastees are conducted periodically through a variety of violent methods. Indeed, by the time our study was completed, the Agargaon bastees had been demolished and its inhabitants had disappeared. Thus accounts of life in the city by bastees dwellers features accounts of threats from a variety of different sources:

Rokeya moved to Dhaka with her mother and siblings and initially stayed with a relative in a bustee near the University. She then married and went to live with her husband in Katabagan bustee. However, the bustee was destroyed by the police because students involved in political protests had taken shelter with bustee inhabitants. They were informed by 'Harun' and 'Shahjahan', leaders in Balur Madh bustee in Pallabi that there was a place available. They paid 210 takas to occupy the place and built a jhupri with bamboo and tin. She recalls being threatened by gangs of young men wearing black tea shirts who threatened to cut them into pieces and throw their bodies into the black water. About eight years ago, a number of huts in their bustee was burnt down by bombs thrown by local gangs. They fled but came back after a few days and rebuilt their hut. They find they are constantly having to pay something to bustee mastaans in the form of chanda, water and electricity bills, contributions to the Al-Amin Distress Fund and so on: 'there are many ways we have to pay but we do not understand the reason. We just pay.'

Over the past decade, politics has become increasingly more confrontational at the national level and there has been an associated rise in strikes, curfews and political violence. During these periods of turbulence, work is brought to a halt for many,

schools are closed, teachers refuse to attend and parents leave with their children for the village. However, as one teacher pointed out, even in periods of low-level conflict, children are nervous about coming to school. If children are away from school for a long time, they often find it hard to adjust again and are prone to dropping out altogether.

I do not allow them to go outside when firing and violence takes place. Severe fighting took place a few days ago, full of bombs and gunfire. I stayed in the house with my child keeping the door shut. His father did not come home that night. When my son goes to school, I do not let him go alone. I accompany him. I am afraid for myself too while walking in the street. Yesterday I was passing through this way and heard the bombs blasting. When I feel very insecure, we move away somewhere, leaving this area.

For the children of these bastees, the terrorism of mastaans and the equally violent 'counter-terrorism' of the police were facts of everyday life. Asked during a focus group discussion what they wanted to be when they grew up, some of the children gave the conventional answers (doctors) but an unusual number wanted to be police officers. Rupa, a 10 year old girl who had dropped out of school and was sewing garments for the local market, said: 'I don't like to go to Bonuful school because the area is bad and there is bombing and fighting by terrorists. I would like to study but not to go to that school. If there was another school, I would get admitted but other schools are too far away....I want to study more so I can become a big police officer..so that I can arrest terrorists because they murder, they kill people. I want to stop it.' It appeared from her response, and from the other responses during the focus group discussion, that the children of the bastees had learnt the facts of political life in Bangladesh very early:

'You know there are many drug addicts in this baste and the police take bribes from them. The rich men, the fat men are the addicts but the police do not arrest them because they take bribes from them. So we want to be police and arrest the

addicts. Terrorists beat and murder the good people. But the police do not arrest them, they arrest the good people'.

Given the violence of their environment, parents live in fear for the physical safety of all their children, but they had additional anxieties for their daughters which related to sexual threats. An attempted rape at 3 o'clock in the afternoon close to where our interview was taking place brought home how real these fears were. An old man had entered a neighbouring house to rape a 12 year old girl who had been left on her own while her mother went out to work. The neighbours heard her screaming and came to her rescue. The men of the area paraded the old man through the neighbourhood to shame him. Our respondent said: You see, now you understand why we are so afraid for our daughters. But if that man had political connections, could anyone have done anything?

Such incidents formed the everyday background against which parents struggled to work out how best to bring up their children and they clearly impinged on the decisions they made. For many mothers, it meant that schools had to be located very close to the house: 'When the violence starts, I can call my children from school. Miscreants come and throw bombs. And we have to take shelter somewhere else'. However, this meant that some children did not go to school because there was no school nearby. For mothers who had to leave home every day in order to work, the issue of *safety*, rather than education or income, was the primary consideration that determined whether they took a child to work with them, sent their children to school or to work. Many of the parents we interviewed expressed their preference for longer school hours: they wanted to be able to leave their children in the school all day, knowing that they would be safe. Alternatively, for others, work in local garment factories offered another safe option for adolescent daughters.

Mina Begum (Agargaon): - My daughter was eager to study but you know the environment of the basti. I have to be in the shop all day, and sometimes go out to buy goods for shop. I could not manage to take proper care of my daughter. I felt insecure, as she remained alone in the house. Rather I feel safe now after she had joined the garments. She leaves at 8am and comes home at 8pm. So the whole day she remains out of this insecure environment. At night I sleep with her in this shop. Still the mastans in the basti often bang on the door of the shop. I really get afraid. So I have planned to arrange her marriage in the village. I do not want to keep her here. You will not find any mature girl staying throughout the day in the basti. It is such an insecure place for the adolescent girls.

### **The relevant of context: a culture of exclusion**

A final set of factors which contributed to poor levels of educational attainment in the bastees also related to the wider context of bustee life rather than to the characteristics of individuals or households. It related to the 'culture' of bustee life, the norms, values, aspirations, beliefs and associated practices which made up the way things were done, including the way that childhood and adolescence was interpreted and experienced by children themselves. If the insecurity of the bustee environment fed parents' fears about external threats to their children, the culture of bustee life fed into their fears about the threat that children presented to themselves.

While many aspects of this culture fitted with Lewis's description of the 'culture of poverty', it was not poverty per se that explained these aspects since they were not to be found in rural poverty. Rather, a great deal of this bustee culture can be traced to the fact that many of their inhabitants had no hope of entering the mainstream life of their society either economically or socially. It was a culture produced by exclusion in the context of economic deprivation rather than deprivation per se. The ways in which people in the bastees have coped with their

exclusion have had a powerful influence on their environment. Thus, gambling, drugs, smuggling, alcohol, extortion and so on were not simply sources of livelihoods for the baste population, an impersonal set of market transactions, they also gave rise to a way of life with its own rules, norms and ways of belonging. Young men spent their time hanging around on the streets, often as part of gangs, selling, consuming and participating in these activities. And both girls and boys wanted to earn in order to have money to pay for forms of consumption associated with femininity and masculinity amongst their peers: bangles, lipstick, clothes were mentioned most frequently in relation to girls and films, gambling, drugs and cigarettes in relation to boys.

The discipline of children in such an environment was experienced as a major problem by many parents. It was an obvious problem for female-headed households where mothers had to go out to work and did not have the time necessary to exercise control over their children's activities. However, even in male headed households, women found themselves having to deal with their children very much on their own. Most men were out of the home for most of the day engaged in various kinds of licit and illicit activities; others were away from the home for days, weeks or months at a time. They regarded it as part of women's duties to take care of the children, while they earned the household income. However, women found it extremely difficult to exercise discipline, particularly over sons, without male authority to back them up. Moreover, the adult males that their sons did come in contact with were very often involved in the illicit activities which they wanted their sons protected from. As one mother in Darapara pointed out, children who grew up there had no positive adult role models to emulate: 'No child from here will ever do well in life'.

The 'environment' consequently featured as a factor in the accounts of a number of parents seeking to explain the difficulties of educating children. As the testimony below from a father in Darapara suggests, for parents who had failed to persuade their children to go to school or, in this case, to work, they took consolation in the fact that at least, their children were not drug-addicts and criminals:

Fayem, Darapara: This basti is not at all conducive for studies. One can not concentrate on books in such a bad environment. This area is not good for girls either. We always have to be very alert regarding our daughter. If I give her a little freedom, she will be out of control. I think if the eldest child is good, other children will also be good. But, my eldest son is not good enough to lead by example. The younger children generally tend to follow their elder sibling. But I think the real culprit in our case is the environment as well. Everything has gone wrong for me and my family in this area. I cannot leave this place because I don't have enough money to rent a house in other bastis. I am sure if we are not in this environment the story of our lives would have been different. Thankfully, my three sons do not have any kind of addiction so far. They just do not want to go to work. They may be lethargic and lazy but they do not have a bad reputation for being involved in anti-social activities. I have made it clear to them that I would not tolerate any such activities from them and will not live with a bad name in the locality. I always try to keep an eye on my sons wherever they go. There is a huge chance of going them going the wrong way at this particular age.

Rehana.: This neighbourhood is *ganda*. I would like to live elsewhere it is very dirty here. There are fights and brawls throughout the day, it has vitiated the atmosphere. Though it is a safe neighbourhood for my children, it is not a good place for them to grow up in. All the foulest *galis* (abuses) are used the *galis* that disrespect elders, including the mother. My children will learn all the *ganda* things. That is why I don't allow my children go out, they will be spoilt.

The testimony highlights another factor. We noted earlier the fears that parents had about the threats presented to their daughters' chastity by local mastaans. Here we see that they also feared the threats that their daughters might present to themselves, the possibility that they would be led astray and compromise their reputations. It was believed by some parents that girls became 'siani' , or aware,

more quickly in slum neighbourhoods and the best option was to marry them off before or as soon as they reached puberty

Marjina (Suarmari): Girls in our families generally do not listen to their parents, do children these days listen to their parents? To keep our prestige we need to marry them off fast before they can get into trouble, you know what I mean... They choose their own mate or get pregnant and bring shame into the whole family. The times are bad and the basti is very bad. That is why I got my daughters married off as soon as I could.

However, girls were generally seen as easier to control than boys. One young male informant from Darapara told us:

Young boys are very bad in this neighbourhood, they get into all the wrong deals and trouble, no body wants to study. Boys think all they have to do is to work. Girls are better, they listen to their parents and are obedient unlike boys who don't care about anybody, don't respect anybody and refuse to be under control.

In the Dhaka slums, parents also expressed their despair about the influence of the environment on with unruly sons. As a mother in Pallabi told us,

My older son did not study, he was addicted to running around the neighbourhood. The environment is not good, that is the reason. Children are being spoiled here. When we lived in another bastee, he would address me with the highest respect. That same boy now talks to be in very abusive language, his behaviour has worsened. But to live in a decent environment costs money. Children are not learning here. So I have sent him to work rather than beating him. I was beating him every day because of his abusive language and his irresponsible behaviour. I locked him in the room, but he would not study. I have beaten him till I have cut him. I can't beat him now or he wont be able to work tomorrow. But he came home at 12 last night because he went to a jatra, he did not tell us.

The violence also occurred in the opposite direction. Our research team met one woman who was reluctant to talk to them but they were told by the neighbouring



children that her sons were violent towards her, forcing her to give them money to go and gamble. Her husband pulled a rickshaw for a living and took no notice of the children. Her girls washed vegetables for a shop nearby earning 12 takas a day and some vegetables.

What these findings suggest is, that just as some children exercised agency in giving up school in order to assist their parents in the struggle for survival, some children simply dropped out of school because they viewed education as largely irrelevant or because they wanted to start earning money. As Sabir from Dhobiatala who was working in an electric motor factory told us:

'I am slowly learning the work. I don't get paid though I have been working for two years. I didn't like going to school, what is the use? It is better I learn the work because my mind was not in my studies. Some of the boys who have studied have not got any work nor have they learnt any work. They don't have anything to do. At least I have.

In other families, it was parents who had decided to send their children to work, having given up the struggle to get them to go to school. Work provided a discipline and kept them out of trouble:

Bina P., Suarmari: He was not at all studying and had become naughty...he was loafing around in the neighbourhood, mixing with bad boys who had bad influence on him. That is why his father decided to take him to work even though he does not earn any money.

However, it was not always easy to get children who had refused to go to school to accept the discipline of work, particularly if the mother was attempting to manage on her own:

Sujay studied up to class 3 or 4. But I was never around to monitor that he studied, I would leave home early. When I came back I would ask, 'Have you been

to school?' He would say, yes. But actually along with other boys in the basti they would be playing and fooling around, they would skip school and go elsewhere. How would I know? This Sujay is so naughty everyday there are complaints about him pinching and pushing others, to beating up other children I was fed up of the daily complaints and I withdrew him from school.

He is 14 years old. Look at him with a broken leg for weeks. I had fixed him a job in a cloth shop in Burra Bazar ( the big trading centre), he had to look after the customers. But after four days he gave up saying the job is too difficult and tedious. Look at the fellow what a good job I had got him and he has given up the work because it is hard. What is hard? Changing buses so many times, getting up early in the morning? Can any body live without working, how can we manage like this? He would get Rs 1200 a month. Everyone has to work. Now he sits and fools around and has gone and broken his leg and look at the money I have spent on him and the time that has gone to get him treated. How can I manage everything?

In a number of cases, parents, and mothers in particular, appeared to have given up entirely on sons, concentrating to a greater extent on ensuring that their more compliant daughters went to school. This is probably a key factor in explaining the higher levels of education among girls than boys. Along with the greater docility of daughters, there appears to be a growing belief among parents that they were more likely to be looked after by daughters when they grew old than by their sons. Two interviews illustrate these views, both from Darapara. The first is with a mother who had only sons and describes her efforts to get them into school so as to keep them out of trouble. The second is with a mother whose children are still very young. One has given up on educating her sons - 'all the boys are wicked, there is no hope for them...daughters have a heart, sons dont' - while the other appears to have already given up on trying to educate her 8 year old: 'what is there to worry about boys? They work and they survive'.

Rukshana: My children never went to school nor did they ever want to go to school. Do I have the time to send them to school or should I work to make sure we do not starve? I had sent Azad and Akbar to the Prem Dan school run by Mother Teresa next to Darapara. I thought at least it would keep them away

from trouble when I go to work. Also that they might get some benefits. But the boys are so wicked they would abuse other children and beat them up that the Sister got fed up and told me that the two boys would not be allowed to attend the school. One even ran away from school. They are not at all interested to go to school. Let them be, it's not in their fate. Haven't you seen the basti, do decent people live here? All the boys are wicked, there is no hope for them. My neighbour told me that there is a hostel in Muchibazar for boys. You have to give Rs 100 during admission and everything else is free. It is a good idea to keep Azad and Akbar in the hostel since they will be kept within four walls and this will keep them away from mischief. They are constantly fighting, the moment they get up from sleep. But if they run away from that school I will lose all that money. Knowing my two boys, I don't trust them.

The only wish I have is for a girl. She would have taken care of the house and helped me to cook. I would then not have to run from Sealdah to the shop and then back home. The boys help by fetching water and doing shopping occasionally. Asad sometimes takes care of the smaller children. My daughter would have taken care of the home front. I don't know whether my sons will take care of me, do any sons take care of their parents? Daughters in fact have a heart, boys don't. And when boys get married, who knows what their wives will be like. These days daughters in law are different, they don't care about anybody.

Rehana: Boys and girls benefit from education differently. I do not worry about my son (Ishrat, 8 years old). He does not want to go to school. I took him to the local Ambedkar School but they did not admit him because he was too old. I have no faith in boys. If he wants to study, let him study. Otherwise, I am confident he will get some work in the basti whether in the press or as a mechanic. He will survive, other boys in the basti have survived. He is in fact very keen to work, let him. I don't bother about him. What is there to worry about boys? They work and they survive.

But daughters are different. They are 'paraiah', they need to be looked after and nurtured so that they can stand on their own feet and be independent. Girls should study so that in times of trouble, they can do tuition at least. One does not know the future. But I will definitely not allow my daughter to get married at an early age as I had got married. Let my daughter first know and understand the ways of the world. Never at 14. Look what it has done to my health, babies almost every year.

Like I have learnt from my mother to do household chores, I have learnt to behave with people and the world at large, though she did not teach us how to study. I too want to teach my children 'tarika' so that they can handle the world, the times are bad and so are the people. Like all parents, I want my children to take care of me in my old age, give me money. At least my daughters

will, they will inquire about me. I don't expect my son to do so, I have no hope in boys.

### **Yesterday's poor: parents' histories**

The accounts cited so far shed some light on the factors which give rise to child labour and the failure of children to complete even primary levels of education in the bastees that we studied. They suggest that the current poverty of households and the communities in which they live plays an important role in determining which parents feel that they can afford to send their children to school, which children and for how long. In addition, some of the accounts also provide us with a glimpse into the pasts of the parents who are making these decisions today. They suggest that many of these parents were themselves children from poor households and as such, experienced some of the disadvantages that their children are facing today - even if they grew up in a different time and in more rural locations.

Aside from also having been poor, however, their parents share other experiences in common with their children today. Some of these relate to demography. As our statistical analysis shows, the parents of working children have large families. Their interviews suggest that they in turn came from large families. Even if the *affection* that a child receives does not vary by family size, it is likely that the amount of *attention* they receive will, particularly if all members of the family are engaged in the struggle for survival. We also find that many of the mothers of the current generation of working children were married off at a very young age (as were some of their fathers) and we observe that they are following the same practice in relation to their daughters. The demographic transition has passed some of these families by.

Our finding that the education levels of parents play an important role in influencing the education levels of children, a finding that has been reported in other studies as well, draws attention to one of the most important pathways by which past disadvantage translates into present disadvantage. The qualitative interviews confirmed this pattern. Most of the parents we have cited in this paper are those whose children have dropped out of school or have never been to school. What their accounts of their lives tell us is that most of them have themselves never been to school. Many do not know what the inside of a school is like or what is entailed in attending school. They did not go to school for the same reasons that they are not sending their children to school today. Their parents also pursued livelihoods that were too insecure to afford to send their children to school or to consider it as an option. Many of those in Dhaka spoke of childhoods spent working as agricultural labourers alongside fathers who were agricultural labourers. Others may have owned some land but had lost it to the river or were cheated out of it. The finding by CINI ASHA that many of today's child labourers in the Calcutta slums were the children of yesterday's child labourers supports the likelihood of cycles of poverty within particular kinds of families.

For such families, the issue is not simply one of affording education but of considering education relevant to their lives. The transition in time horizons that would have allowed them to think about investing in their children's future has not happened for them: as one of them put it, 'my future lies at the bottom of an ocean of uncertainty'.

My life has been one long struggle and only Allah knows what lies ahead. I was born and brought up in Darpara basti. I have two brothers and sisters. When I was young my father would drive a horse cart and my mother worked as a domestic in people's homes. I don't remember much about my early life with my parents. No, we never went to school, no one ever in my family ever heard of school or even thought of it. We would help my mother with the housework or

go with her to people's homes and help in the chores. My father died after an accident while driving his cart. Did we have the money to do treatment? We are too poor.

There are other similarities in experiences across generations highlighted by our interviews which suggest further pathways through which poverty was reproduced over generations. One of these related to alcohol abuse. Many of today's parents had fathers who were alcoholic, often violently abusive, and mothers who had to support the family on their own. This pattern of alcoholism continued to run in some of these families today. For scheduled caste parents who grew up in an era when caste discrimination was far more severe than it is today, some still appeared to operate with the assumptions about their life chances that prevailed when they were growing up.

### **Tomorrow's poor? Breaking the cycle of poverty**

The idea of the inter-generational transmission of poverty, and the evidence for it provided here, suggests a degree of path-dependence in the life-trajectories of those who have been disadvantaged, often from childhood. Some of the pathways we have identified are material: the disadvantages in question relate to deficits in education and assets. Others are social: they relate to the nature and intensity of 'social connectedness' of families, the social identities ascribed to them and the place assigned to them in the job market and within the community. The children of the poor grow up in neighbourhoods where few children go school, where the pressure of peers serves to promote forms of consumption that discourage school attendance and makes the idea of earning money from an early age a more attractive option. The life trajectories they observe around them does not promote a belief in education as a route out of poverty. Finally, the pathways are also subjective: they relate to the aspirations, the worldviews, the boundaries of

the possible that people grow with and that influence the future that they imagine for themselves and for their children.

However, while some degree of path dependence may explain why so many children in the urban slums do not go to school, there is enough evidence from the same slums to suggest that their future is not pre-ordained. We have focused in this paper on those parents that failed to send their children to school or failed to keep their children at school. A very different set of stories emerges from the experiences of those parents, still a minority, who have managed to send their children to school and to keep them there long enough for them to complete primary and in some cases, secondary education. These are stories of enormous sacrifice and enormous persistence by both parents and children. They bear witness to the fact that, although the odds are against them, uneducated parents need not necessarily produce uneducated children. What has made the difference?

One of the most important factors appears to be the promotion of new norms about education. One of the recurring refrains that we heard from parents explaining why they had not gone to school themselves was that no one had told them it could make a difference. This has changed. While the government in Bangladesh has largely failed to promote educational opportunities for the urban baste population - part of its policy of denial that they exist - a number of committed NGOs do exist and have played a pro-active role in motivating parents, following up on children, trying to provide an atmosphere of 'joyful learning'. Both BRAC and Proshika were active in the slums that we studied. Where the government has played a role has been through a campaign of public awareness about education. Many of the parents we interviewed used the government slogan about illiteracy to explain why they thought education was important: we have eyes, but we are blind. Why government action matters is that, despite all its failings, it continues to have

a presence and legitimacy in the lives of the poor. What it says often seems to carry more weight than messages carried by NGOs.

In Calcutta, the work of CINI-ASHA was evident from the accounts of many of the parents we spoke to. It may have explained by NGO membership had a statistically significant effect on the likelihood of a child going to school. It was evident also from some of the changing aspirations reported by children interviewed in a study conducted by CINI-ASHA itself. Children who had previously said that they wanted to become housewives, labourers, auto drivers and domestic labourers now said they wanted to be teachers, doctors, policemen and so on (CINI-ASHA, 2003). Indeed, CINI-ASHA's experience highlights the importance of motivating children themselves with regard to education. As the discussion of the interview material in this paper suggests, children appear to make decisions about their own lives to a much greater extent than might be the case in middle-class homes and it was their agency very often that explained why they were not at school or why they were at work. Motivating children, giving them a different view of their own future, appears to be a significant route for getting them into the educational system.

However, it is also clear that getting children into school is only the beginning of a long and difficult process. The first generation learners in a family are known to require a higher level of support and commitment from the educational system. Their parents are not accustomed to the idea that children need to attend school regularly to benefit from education; that they should not be withdrawn to do household chores or step in for a breadwinner when the household faces a crisis; that they should be encouraged to do their homework on a regular basis. In addition, such parents are often unable to give them the help they may need at home to guide them in their homework because they themselves are illiterate.



It is, therefore, teachers who have an important role to play to compensate for these limitations in the child's home environment. Yet, with few exceptions, there was little evidence that teachers did play this role. Stories of beatings at school, of abuse by teachers, of ad hoc charges, even of bribery to pass exams suggest that there is a great deal of scope for improvements. Moreover, while government schools are notionally free, in both contexts, the public school system was bolstered and kept in place by a shadow private tuition system in which many of the same teachers who failed to give children a decent education in the class room supplemented their income by giving them private tuition at home or in coaching centres. Since such tuition is now considered essential if children are to pass exams, education has become even more unaffordable for poor parents. An examination of the experience of excluded children thus raises questions about the extent to which the schooling system is itself part of the process of exclusion.

Finally, however, there is a need to consider the very real material constraints that lie behind the failure to send and to keep children at school. Cini-Asha's study of how poor households had adjusted to sending children who had been working to school found a series of responses that resemble those reported by the literature on crisis coping mechanisms: an increase in working hours by other family members, support from relatives, cutting back on inessential items of consumption, economising on food expenditures by switching to cheaper items. However, while it is possible for households to make such adjustments in 'normal' times, it is their responses to periods of crisis that will be the test of their capacity and commitment to their children's education. Some form of basic safety net or social floor that helps to tide households through such periods could make an enormous difference to their capacity to keep their children at school. Indeed, if it was possible at the very least to provide collective insurance against health related crisis, probably the single most important category of crisis featuring in the



5-15	75	76	62	63	12	11	8	11		
16-49	38	20	1	0	95	38	21	33		
50+	33	0	-	-	88	40	20	29		
All ages	40	29	15	15	59	25	14	22		

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