

# LEKTIO

## Consumption in Rural Bangladesh: Households, Lifestyles, and Identities

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Bangladesh, once known as '*Sonar Bangla*'- the Golden Bengal, has a long and glorious cultural heritage. "Its long, turbulent history is replete with the epic saga of invasions and subjugation that resulted in a great deal of cultural fusion and transfusion" (Shrestha, 2002: 267). Bangladesh is one of the most densely populated countries in the world. Despite rapid urbanization, more than 75% of the people still live in rural areas. The density of the rural population is also one of the highest in the world. Being a poor and low-income country, its main challenge is to eradicate poverty through increasing equitable income. Since its independence, Bangladesh has been developing rapidly, and its economy has progressed steadily over time. Consequently, the country's economy is developing and the country has outperformed many low-income countries in terms of several social indicators. Bangladesh has achieved the Millennium Development Goal (MDG) of eliminating gender disparity in primary and secondary school enrollment. A sharp decline in child and infant mortality rates, increased per capita income, and improved food security have placed Bangladesh on the track to achieving in the near future the status of a middle-income country. Such development and economic progress fueled certain changes in the consumption patterns of Bangladeshis, including those living in rural areas. Since the majority of the population lives in rural areas, the study of consumption patterns among rural Bangladeshis is significant.

In this study, the rural household is an entity, and household information served as the basis for analysis. This study aims to identify the consumption patterns of rural Bangladesh and its changes over time. Moreover, this present study aims to answer many questions related to everyday life: How does consumption shape the lifestyles of rural people? What are their consumption experiences? How is the culture associated with consumption? What is the relationship between consumption and technology? This study also sheds light on the emerging consumer culture characterized by various Bangladeshi practices, discourses, and institutions. This study also finds the myriad reasons why consumers nevertheless feel compelled to consume chemically treated foods.

I have used both qualitative and quantitative data to investigate consumption and everyday life in rural Bangladesh. The combination of qualitative and quantitative data also served as a triangulation of data and enabled me to use multiple methods. The qualitative approaches enabled me to examine more closely people's interpretations and experiences of consumption and everyday life. On the other hand, different quantitative secondary data helped me to verify and supplement the findings obtained through the qualitative approaches.

Data were collected in two phases in the summers of 2006 and 2008. In 2006, the empirical data were collected from the following three sources: 1) interviews with consumers, producers/sellers, and doctors and pharmacists; 2) observations of sellers/producers; and 3) reviews of articles published in the national English and Bengali (the national language of Bangladesh) daily newspapers. A total of 110 consumers, 25 sellers/producers, 7 doctors, and 7 pharmacists were interviewed and observed. In addition to various quantitative tools and techniques, content analysis was also applied here. In 2008, data were collected through semi-structured in-depth qualitative interviews, ethnography, and unstructured conversations substantiated by secondary sources and photographs. I followed Thompson's (2000) schematic outline interviewer's guide for a flexible life story interview in the preparation of a questionnaire and in conducting interviews with the respondents. The respondents were chosen opportunistically from various occupations normally available in rural Bangladesh. The total number of persons interviewed was 22. In order to compare the pre-independence and post-independence periods, I interviewed two generations born and raised in two different periods – before and after 1971, the year Bangladesh achieved its independence. The interviews were recorded with a digital voice recorder in face to face conversations. Interviews lasted for around 1.5 to 2.5 hours. Data were collected on the consumption of food, clothing, housing, education, medical facilities, marriage and dowry, the division of labor, household decision making, different festivals and leisure. Here, I employed narrative analysis techniques to analyze my research data.

Some secondary quantitative data served to support the qualitative findings in order to create some sort of triangulation. Baseline historical data were drawn from the Household Expenditure Survey for 1973-74, conducted by the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS). Other necessary secondary data were collected from various published data sources, including the BBS, various Household Expenditure Surveys of Bangladesh, Bangladesh Demographic and Health Surveys (BDHS), the Bangladesh Institute for Development Studies (BIDS), various scientific journals, published books, and websites. Publications of the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, the United Nations Children Fund, the World Health Organization, and Bangladesh Bank also served as sources of secondary data.

The findings of this study suggest that the consumption patterns of rural Bangladeshis are changing over time along with economic and social development, and that technology has rendered aspects of daily life more convenient.

Although the percentage share of (rural households') consumption expenditures on food dropped and non-food items rose sharply, rural people consume more food and drink, clothing, and footwear now in the post-independence period (Article I). Since independence, the daily per capita food intake has been increasing in both rural and urban areas of Bangladesh. The consumption of rice and wheat, however, has decreased, resulting in an overall decrease in cereal consumption. The consumption of potatoes is becoming increasingly popular and has grown sharply. In rural areas, the daily per capita potato intake has increased sharply, whereas the daily per capita cereal intake has decreased. Previously, potatoes were only a minor vegetable in the diet of rural Bangladeshis, but nowadays, the potato is almost compulsory for any kind of preparation of vegetables and even occasionally substitutes for rice (Scott and Bouis, 1996). The consumption of vegetables is growing, whereas the consumption of pulses has decreased due to their high price and limited production in the country. The homestead production of livestock (mainly cows and goats) and chicken have decreased for several reasons, resulting in a rise in the price of meat (beef, mutton, and chicken). Meat is moving beyond the reach of rural Bangladeshis, especially the poor. Nowadays fish from inland waters are seldom available due to climate change and other issues, such as the silting of important rivers, which disrupts fish reproduction, thus raising the price of fish rapidly in relation to the price of rice. However, "the overall availability of foods has increased, and rural people can buy the basic foods needed to live" (Hossain, 2010a: 353).

Housing conditions in rural areas have improved considerably, and almost every household has access to safe drinking water. Achievements in education are also notable, as the number of schools has increased significantly since independence. Consequently, the literacy rate is rising day by day, and the literacy rate among women has also improved significantly since independence. Medical facilities are also better than in the pre-independence period, although it remains unsatisfactory and insufficient. Many complain about the absenteeism of public-sector doctors and how they shirk their public duties to focus on their private practices. Technological developments and the consumption of technology can significantly alter consumption patterns, and the use of technologies has made the everyday lives of rural Bangladeshis much easier than before (Article II).

This study identified the perceptions and experiences of rural people regarding technologies in use and explored how culture is associated with consumption. Along with changes in consumption patterns, a consumer culture is also emerging. Little literature is available on the consumer culture of rural Bangladesh. It (Article III) focuses on the cultural aspect of consumption and explores the everyday life of rural Bangladeshis. The rural people are very simple and enjoy festivity. Many religious and national festivals are celebrated in rural Bangladesh. Although dowry is a comparatively new phenomenon in Bangladesh, it has become an integral part of most marriages in rural Bangladesh (Article III). Despite legal ban, marriage at an early age and dowry are common. A larger dowry is needed for an older bride, which makes it very difficult to break the vicious circle of marriage at an early age and dowry. Dowry also involves a significant exchange of goods, money, and property. Studies claim that dowry payments contribute

significantly to the poverty of many rural households. Unfortunately, laws alone are insufficient to eradicate the curse of the dowry.

Women in rural Bangladesh perform most of the household work, and as in many other patriarchal societies, men make most major decisions. Most educated men share decision making with their wives, help with household tasks, and marry without taking a dowry. The government and NGOs can boost awareness among rural people through education. To prevent early marriage, effective birth registration systems and proper verification of age at marriage should be implemented.

Rural people have their own way of pursuing leisure activities. Nowadays, women can also enjoy some free time for leisure (Article II, III). Despite a government ban on showing Bollywood films and Hindi songs in the theatres and the efforts of conservative groups concerned about preserving Bangla culture, Bollywood film and Hindi songs have remained a popular means of entertainment for many.

This study identified the reasons behind the use of hazardous chemicals in foods as well as the extent to which food producers/sellers used such chemicals. In addition, this study assessed consumer perceptions of and attitudes toward these contaminated food items and explored how adulterated foods and food stuffs affect consumer health. This study also showed that consumers were aware that various foods and food stuffs contained hazardous chemicals, and that these adulterated foods and food stuffs were harmful to their health. The extent of food adulteration is very alarming, and finding unadulterated foods is difficult (Article IV). Food adulteration in Bangladesh continues to imperil public health. Consumers in Bangladesh are at the mercy of unscrupulous producers and sellers because the government is unable to eliminate corrupt practices and alliances through law enforcement. Although producers and sellers cited many reasons, this study found that producers/sellers sought mainly to increase profits and to conduct business with less capital and equipment by mixing hazardous chemicals with foods and food stuffs (Article IV). To safeguard consumer rights, a permanent solution involving better law enforcement and scientific food testing is needed. Some consumers also prefer foods with a colorful and attractive look without considering the quality or ingredients the foods contain. The government should improve consumer awareness and motivate sellers/producers through various actions and programs.

To achieve further success, Bangladesh should emphasize rural development because a major portion of the population lives in rural areas. The adaptation and consumption of more modern and appropriate technology in everyday life in rural areas will play a vital role in rural development. The adoption of technological innovations and services takes time (Repo et al., 2004); therefore, attention should also be focused on their proper use. As some of the respondents mentioned, adult movies were shown in small shops without observing age restrictions. Others noted the misuse of mobile phones with features for photographs and videos, and that young people talk unnecessarily on mobile phones late at night due to the cheaper price at that time, and so on (Article II). Generally, if parents are not careful, these lackadaisical habits can make children less attentive in their studies

and hamper teenagers' normal activities, which could ultimately threaten to spoil them.

Despite political instability, frequent natural disasters (e.g. floods, cyclones, and draughts), extremely high population density, a vast uneducated population, a poor base of natural resources, insufficient power supplies, corruption and inefficient governance, all of which hinder the economic and social development of the country, Bangladesh has achieved much success.

Although the results of this study show changes in rural consumption scenarios along with an increase in income and GDP, the living conditions of many rural households remain miserable. Corruption is a major obstacle to achieving macroeconomic goals such as reducing income poverty. As a result, many in Bangladesh do not benefit from GDP growth. An important question, then, could be how to make GDP growth more beneficial for the common people, and especially the poor. Finding fruitful, solid answers to these questions will require further substantial research.

Md. Motaher Hossain's academic dissertation "Consumption in Rural Bangladesh: Households, Lifestyles, and Identities" was presented for public discussion with the permission of the Faculty of Agriculture and Forestry, University of Helsinki, on Friday, 25 March 2011.