CHAPTER EIGHT:
DEVELOPMENTAL FEMINISM
AND PEASANT WOMEN'S LABOUR IN BANGLADESH

8.1 *Introduction*

'Developmental feminism' was born from the recognition that male dominated international institutions financing 'development' projects in the Third World were biased against women and tended to ignore women's contribution to economic production. In 1970, Ester Boserup's book, '*Women's Role in Economic Development*', highlighted the prominent role of women in field agriculture, in particular in Africa.(1) Since then, there has been a veritable *hausse* of investigations into the productive activities of women in Third World countries. A current of developmental feminist authors emerged, whose research work is largely financed by Western aid and is geared towards 'integrating women in development'. (2)

Bangladesh is one of those Third World countries, where women's labour has become the target of numerous feminist writings. Over the last fifteen to twenty years, a whole series of publications have described and analysed women's work in agriculture, in particular in the post-harvest processing of paddy. (3) The tone for the research was set by a study commissioned by the Population Council, a private American foundation involved in developing contraceptives and promoting their use in the Third World. The given study calls Bangladesh a class-divided and patriarchal society, and it provides a materialist definition of patriarchy: "the material base of patriarchy is men's control of property, income and women's labour." (4)

In this Chapter I will try to assess both the positive significance and the limitations of the research on village women in Bangladesh, that is financed with Western aid. On the one hand, I will show that developmental feminist research, in a certain sense, has 'outstripped' Marxist economic theory. While accepting, like Marxism, the need for a class analysis of rural economic relations, this research has brought into focus numerous home-based production tasks - such as the winnowing, drying and parboiling of paddy, and its husking on a foot operated instrument, the *dhenki* -, which traditionally have been overlooked by Marxist writers. At least one of the authors belonging to this current of feminism, Marty Chen, has given her own **conceptualisation** of village women's work. (5)

On the other hand, I will explain how research, that fails to question the fundamental causes of peasant women's pauperisation, inevitably is quite limited in scope. For 'development' and 'modernisation', as occurring in Bangladesh today, entail, amongst others, the enclosure of common property resources like water and fish, and the dispossession of peasant proprietors due largely to the 'skimming off' of the agricultural surplus by members of the country's commercial elite, - a process which can broadly be defined as one of 'original accumulation'. This Chapter places both peasant women's pauperisation and developmental feminist research against the background of original or 'primitive' accumulation in contemporary Bangladesh.

8.2 The River System of Bangladesh: The Problems Created by Embankments

Bangladesh is an evergreen, deltaic country, whose agricultural wealth has been profoundly shaped by its rivers. These rivers, numbering 230 in all, include the mighty Brahmaputra/Jamuna and the Ganges/Padma, and their tributaries. In pre-colonial times, Bengal's rulers and peasants had developed a unique irrigation system, which has correctly been characterized as the 'overflow system of irrigation'. (6) To re-fertilise the land, peasants relied on a combination of flooding by muddy river water in the early period of the monsoons, and extensive monsoon rainfalls. Rich silt was distributed throughout the delta via canals that were broad, shallow and long, and were maintained through peasant labour. These same canals ensured that the rainwater in the later part of the monsoons was drained and flowed back into the major rivers. The British engineer, Willcocks, has described the irrigation system as one which "ensured health and wealth to Bengal for very many hundreds of years". (7)

Over the centuries, Bengal's peasants developed their own knowledge system about agriculture. Some of their key practices have been summed up by the aged peasant leader Abdus Sattar Khan, in a briefing to the European Parliament in 1993.(8) In an extended parameter along the banks of the main rivers, tributaries and canals, elevations existed which could be termed 'natural embankments'. They were slightly higher than the adjacent fields. The sloping parts of these elevations were used for the production of winter crops and vegetables, while the lower-lying plots were suitable for the cultivation of paddy. The peasants also devised a method to contain water for post-winter irrigation purposes. After the season for the cultivation of *aman*-paddy was over, they would jointly close off the canals with small dams. The dams were breached after the month of *baishakh* (April/May), so that fresh floodwater would once again spread its sediments as widely as possible over the peasants' fields. In short, the ancient system of irrigation in Bengal relied on a combination of numerous, shallow canals, - and small, containment dams for the dry, spring- and summer-season of the Bengali year.

From the period of British colonial rule onwards, this indigenous system of agriculture and irrigation has been thoroughly disrupted. While they failed to properly maintain the comprehensive canal system, the British rulers initiated the construction of 'watertight' embankments, for instance, along the Ganges river. As several professional engineers who were top level functionaries of the colonial administration, have argued, the embankments created more problems than they solved. (9) They impeded the natural re-fertilisation of the soil and had a damaging effect on the natural production of fish (see description below). Moreover, whereas the overflow system of irrigation helped to combat malaria, the construction of embankments did the opposite, i.e. it promoted the spread of malarial mosquitoes. On top of this, the network of roads and railways built under the British administration also tended to disrupt the traditional system of water distribution, for it created obstacles for the free flow of both flood- and rainwater.

Yet, the construction of embankments has never been halted since the British rulers left. Instead, the building of embankments and polders was given a fresh impetus during the Pakistani period, in the 1960s, with the founding of a separate government body, called WAPDA, responsible for construction works. Further, in the two decades that followed Bangladesh' formal

independence in 1971, a spate of separate flood control schemes were implemented with foreign aid. (10) Some of these, such as Chalan Beel Polder D in Rajshahi District, engendered huge drainage problems, resulting in local peasant mobilisation to breach the embankments. Yet since 1989, Bangladesh' foreign donors have embarked on a multi-billion dollar, comprehensive 'Flood Action Plan' (FAP), aimed at building huge embankments and polder like areas all along the country's major rivers. While still in its preparatory phase, during which money is mainly being spent on studies and on implementing pilot schemes, the plan has become the object of a fierce controversy, both inside Bangladesh and abroad. (11)

Meanwhile, problems with old and new embankments are accumulating. One illustrative example is that of the 20 kilometer long embankment along the west side of the river Kangsa, not far from Netrakona town. According to newspaper reports, some 5 thousand acres of field crops have been destroyed due to artificial water logging behind the embankment. (12) In response to people's complaints, the Bangladesh Water Development Board (successor to WAPDA) constructed regulators as alternative drainage facilities, yet the water logging problem persists, and paddy production suffers. Similarly, along two rivers bordering the Zakiganj area of Sylhet, embankments were built that have disrupted the traditional distribution of muddy water via canals into the interior. The rainwater of the yearly monsoons could no longer be drained, and the area became permanently waterlogged. In July, 1994, thousands of people tried to cut one of the embankments blocking entrances to the canals. (13) Clearly, the non-indigenous structures like watertight embankments and polders are highly questionable as methods of water management Yet a powerful thrust exists to construct them at any cost. The question is - why?

8.3 Embankment Construction and the Destruction of Fishery Resources

Before venturing to answer the question raised above, we need to understand the effects of embankment and polder-construction on the natural production of fish. Steve Minkin has pointed out that "perhaps more than people in any other country, Bangladesh' citizens depend on natural wild fisheries resources for their food and livelyhood" (14). Approximately 80 percent of animal protein in the Bangladeshi diet comes from fish. Fisheries rank only second to agriculture in importance in the Bangladeshi economy. Roughly 5 million people belong to the professional fishermen's community. Moreover, for many poor peasant families, fish capture is a crucial, supplementary source of survival and/or income. Members of such families either add fish captured in rivers, distributaries and canals, to their rice-meals - or sell the fish captured here on the local market, earning some extra *Takas* of income.

Furthermore, among the various source of fresh water fish captures, the floodplains hold a relatively important place. Whereas roughly a quarter of the yearly fish capture is gathered in the open sea, the remaining three-fourths hail from inland fresh water bodies. Here, floodplains are as important as rivers, taking up as much as 50 percent of the inland fresh water captures. The yearly flooding of the rivers, as is common knowledge by now, stimulate the migration and spawning of fish, such as of the famous *ilisha*. As Willcocks noted in the 1930s, the overflow system of irrigation ensured an abundant, natural production of fish for the peasantry of Bengal. (15) Since the traditional irrigation system has been undermined, fish production has dramatically fallen. The diversity of aquatic resources has been drastically reduced by embankments, and past flood control projects have left scores of fishing villages in decay.

Quantitative data gathered by researchers under the Flood Action Plan graphically illustrate this trend. In flood control projects reviewed under component 12 of the FAP, losses of up to seventy five percent of the fish catch have been registered. (16)

Advocates of embankment and polder construction know well that the migration and spawning of fish is disrupted even where such structures are equipped with sluice gates. The Dutch environmental expert Van Vierssen has argued that even so called 'submergible embankments' tend to have negative consequences since they disturb the timing of spawning. (17) Proponents of the Flood Action Plan suggest to 'mitigate' the negative effect on fisheries by promoting fish production in ponds. Yet, as a report brought out by the Dutch Ministry for Development Cooperation points out, the expansion of fish farming in ponds represents a shift with crucial socio-economic consequences: "Traditional fishing is done in freely accessible waters used by fishermen, landless people and small farmers. Fish farms are private property - the owner families are relatively rich. Whereas formerly fish was a common resource mostly for the poor, it is turning into a private resource of the larger farmers". (18) In short, the shift from open fresh water captures to fish ponds has a multiple, negative effect. It leads to a steep fall in fish production, and it negatively affects the nutrition level and income of the rural poor, for the construction of embankments and polders signifies the appropriation of the commons - of common resources which traditionally helped landless families survive.

8.4 Appropriation of the Commons: Original Accumulation in Bangladesh

The enclosure of the commons has been identified as one of the key processes which historically laid the foundation of the capitalist mode of production. (19) In Britain, such enclosures took place from the 14th through the 16th century, to provide the raw material and labour force for the country's wool industry. Earlier, the system of 'open field' - of unfenced and communally managed strips of land - had guaranteed access to the land for the bulk of the population. Here the rural poor could work their own plots after having performed their labour services for the landlord. Further, upon completion of the harvest the villagers, for a part of the year, used arable land as collective pasture for their animals. The original or 'primitive' accumulation (20), which formed the centuries-long prelude to the Industrial Revolution, was first and foremost a process of dispossession of peasant proprietors on a large scale. They were either evicted from their holdings, or saw their commons fenced off by sheep farmers. The process was intensely violent, and was supported by numerous state laws, i.e. by some 4 thousand Acts of Enclosure. Through this veritable onslaught, British agriculture was transformed, and the basis laid for an industrial proletariat.

The floodwaters of Bangladesh, in a way, fulfil the same function, significance, as the 'open fields' and common pastures used to have for the British peasantry before they were dispossessed. Traditionally, water resources constitute the most important form of common property resources for the deprived, rural population of Bangladesh. As long as the muddy water of the major rivers freely flows across the land, as long as water and manure need not be paid for, the re-fertilisation of the peasants' soil is guaranteed and its irrigation greatly facilitated. Furthermore, the floodplains are common property in another sense too, since the landless, as noted above, during the monsoon season are free to capture fish in flooded areas. Like the British peasants in pre-industrial times, Bengal's peasants too have traditionally been able to

survive, thanks to access to the commons. (21)

The programme of construction of embankments and polders in Bangladesh, then, should be understood in these social terms. It is part of a broader process of dispossession of the peasant population. The control of fishery resources is transferred from the public to the private domain, and is henceforth monopolized by rich farmers and moneylenders who become the owners of the fish ponds. These ponds are synonymous with enclosures, they imply the dispossession of the formerly free, landless fishermen and women. Simultaneously, the rural rich are provided the very real possibility to turn water into a commodity for their private use and sale. Whereas earlier, none needed to pay for the flow of irrigation water, whereas floodwaters used to be a common property resource, - the rural rich can now force peasant cultivators to pay for irrigation water. Contrary to freely flowing floodwater, water entering polders via sluice gates can be privately managed and controlled. In this sense, even the polders along the coast of the Bay of Bengal, ostensibly intended for protection against the threat of storm surges and cyclones, are enclosures, which strengthen the capital and powerbase of the rural rich, at the expense of the masses of the rural poor.

Thus, whatever the rhetoric of 'development', of 'people's participation' in the design, building and maintenance of embankments and polders, these structures should be understood as part of a process of original accumulation taking place in Bangladesh. Just as the enclosures in pre-industrial Britain were sanctified by state laws, the building of embankments and polders too is legally protected by the state. According to a law promulgated in 1989, development projects cannot be challenged in court by the rural population, and where people question such projects in action - such as was done in Zakiganj in July, 1993 - they find the armed forces of the Bangladeshi state blocking their way. For the appropriation of the commons, of people's free access to water and fish-resources, is as essential to paving the way for capitalist accumulation, as is the expulsion of the peasantry from their privately held plots of land. Unannounced by 'development' institutions, and hidden behind a barrage of rhetoric, the history of original accumulation repeats itself in Bangladesh.

8.5 Pauperisation and the Growth in Landlessness

I wish now to record a process that is complementary to the above, namely the process of expulsion of peasant proprietors from their own land. It is generally agreed in the literature on landownership in rural Bangladesh that the percentage of landless people has been growing phenomenally over the last three decades, both in absolute and in relative terms. Whereas the rate of landless peasants was less than 25 percent in the early 1960s, today it is estimated to be 50 percent or more. Some sources mention a figure of 70 percent 'functionally landless'. (22) An ever increasing number of people thus have no means of production at their own disposal. They have either to depend on the sale of their own labour power against a wage, or are forced to migrate elsewhere, to urban areas or neighbouring India, in their search to escape from starvation and death. (23)

Secondly, the increased incidence of landlessness is clearly accompanied by a process of land concentration, of accumulation of land and other agricultural resources in the hands of the top layer of Bangladesh' rural population. This is, for instance, confirmed by Land Occupancy Surveys carried out by the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics and the USAID in the late 1970s.

According to the 1978 survey, the bottom 75 percent of the households owned only about 20 percent of the total land, while the top 8.5 percent of the households, owning more than 5 acres each, possessed 48 percent of all agricultural land. (24) Surveys on peasant differentiation in two villages carried out by the Bangladeshi academician Atiur Rahman (1981-'85) similarly brought out that there has been a "secular decline in the share of the bottom 60 % of households and dramatic rise in the share of the top 10 % of the households in both villages." (25)

These figures, further, indicate that the marginalisation of the majority of Bangladesh' peasant population is not primarily caused by population growth and the division of landholdings via inheritance. In fact, both Atiur Rahman's study and other rural investigations confirm that many of the land transfers are a consequence of the inability of poor and middle peasant households to cover their consumption needs with what they produce. The Norwegian academician, Eirik Jansen, in a detailed investigation into the economic relations in a village called Bhaimara, located not far from the junction of the Jamuna and Padma rivers, has highlighted the relationship between budget deficits of peasant households and the process of land transfers. According to him, "about 50 of the 62 households in Bhaimara are persistently in deficit and have to take up loans in order to survive." (26) The most important types of loans these households take are loans for which agricultural land provides the collateral. Through credit obtained from the village rich, and often the mortaging of their small plots of land, the village poor temporarily try to cover their deficits, but eventually are forced to give up their land, and are dispossessed.

8.6 Dispossession of the Peasantry: The Structure of Rural Indebtedness

A short review of the agricultural credit structure, furthermore, brings out that indebtedness is a problem afflicting the vast majority of Bangladesh' peasant households today. Here we need to distinguish between private and institutional lending. Most peasants travel the road towards landlessness via a loan from a private, usurious moneylender or well-to-do peasant. Yet, in order to understand the structure of rural indebtedness in Bangladesh, it is instructive to look at the system of institutional lending, i.e. by banks. The banking system is entirely biased against landless peasants. Since landownership is a prerequisite for receiving a bank loan, and since only a literate person can fill up the necessary forms, - landless families are structurally excluded from institutional loans. When the military government of Ziaur Rahman launched a credit programme in 1977, it officially targeted the rural poor. The programme was called off after a USAID study pointed out that it only reached the top 20 percent of all peasants, and that the share obtained by poor and middle peasants was negligeable. (27)

Investigations carried out by peasant organisations in the late eighties similarly revealed that 70 percent of the credits issued by agricultural banks were absorbed by rich peasants and other members of the rural elite. Middle peasants, i.e. those relying on their own resources (land, implements, labour) to make ends meet, were the second main beneficiary - they formed roughly a fifth of the bank borrowers.(28) Yet most middle peasant borrowers could not transform their deficits into balanced budgets. Having taken credit for production purposes, numerous peasants failed to repay. By 1990, there were literally hundreds of thousands of 'certificate cases', i.e. notices threatening peasants with a court case if they continued to default. Fearing arrest or detention, some sold their movable or immovable properties, or fled their own villages.

Newspapers in the late eighties abounded with stories of middle and lower-middle peasants with 'certificate cases' on their heads. Some of them, seeing no way out, committed suicide. (29)

The credit structure, thus, is a crucial link in the process of peasants' eviction from the soil. A peasant facing the threat of a certificate case can act in two different ways. One, he can sell his cattle/ and or his land, which to all accounts, has frequently occurred during the last decade. The other avenue open to him is to repay the bank by borrowing at usurious interest rates from a moneylender or *mahajan*. But by borrowing thus, a peasant only obtains 'delay of execution'. A *mahajan* charges an extremely high interest rate, of up to 350 or 400 percent. Thus, in time an indebted peasant is bound to loose his land and join the ranks of the rural proletariat. Whether he has lent from a bank charging a regular interest rate (12 percent plus service charges), or from a *mahajan*, - there is no way in which he can ultimately escape the consequences of the present agricultural crisis, which, as I will argue below, is at least partly caused by the market exploitation of the commercial elite.

8.7 Peasants' Eviction from the Soil and the Role of the Commercial Elite

Relatively little research, to my knowledge, has been carried out regarding the impact of market prices on agrarian relations in Bangladesh. Whereas Western and Bangladeshi academicians have systematically addressed such topics as increasing landlessness, peasant differentiation and the role of the sharecropping system of production (30), they have taken much less interest in analysing the transfer of wealth from the peasant population to traders and other intermediaries living in market centres and in the country's cities and towns. De Vilder has recorded that the domestic terms of trade have moved against agricultural products throughout the post-independence period.(31) On the whole, however, there is a dearth of statistics on the 'skimming of' of the rural surplus by members of the commercial elite.

Nevertheless, news reports and personal interviews (taken in 1991 and 1992) provide sufficient evidence to show that Bangladesh' peasants are at the mercy of traders buying off their products, and that the prices they receive for their crops often are not even high enough to cover their production costs. Daily newspapers in August, 1993, for example contained alarming stories of rice being smuggled to neighbouring India because of the "extremely low price" of rice on the domestic market.(32) Around the same time, various newspapers reported that raw jute was being sold to local traders, *fariyas*, at prices ranging from 100 to 200 *Taka* per *maund*, whereas the production costs were estimated to be 300 *Taka* per *maund* at least.(33) Data gathered during a field visit to Faridpur District, in 1992, similarly indicated that peasants producing onions and other *rabi* (winter) crops, received market prices below their production costs, while consumers in urban areas were stated to pay four- or five-fold the price that was paid to the actual producers.

Undoubtedly, peasants belonging to different classes are not to an equal degree affected by the fluctuations in the market prices of crops. As Eirik Jansen, for example, points out, rich peasants are able to profit from such price variations through speculation, by hoarding paddy and other products until the sales' price goes up. (34) Yet it seems clear that only a tiny section of the peasantry is able to engage in such practices, namely those who have substantial capital resources at their command. The vast majority of the village population, i.e. the landless, land

poor, lower-middle and middle peasants, are adversely affected by the 'market squeeze'. Being unable to build enough financial reserves to repay the money they have borrowed, they are continuously at risk of loosing their small pieces of land, and even their homestead plots.

8.8 The Commercial Elite as Obstacle to the Country's Industrial Development

The dominating position which is held by the commercial elite in Bangladesh' economy can be illustrated by referring to the evolution in the country's industrial sector in the 1980s. Although, as we will see in the following Chapter, Bangladesh has seen a rapid expansion of readymade garments' production since the late 1970s, this is by no means indicative of a general process of industrial expansion. On the contrary, the share of manufacturing output in the Gross Domestic Product (GDP), "has remained virtually unchanged in over two decades" (35). It, reportedly, was 7.8 % in 1969/70 and 8.4 % in 1988/89. While some significant growth in manufacturing output was registered in the period 1976-1981, the growth rate sank during the subsequent period from 1982 to 1989. According to the economist Rehman Sobhan, in three years during the given period (i.e. in 1982/83, 1985/86 and 1988/89), it was stagnant or even negative.(36)

This industrial stagnation has not been due to lack of investment resources, for development financial institutions and nationalised banks provided a vast amount of loans for 'industrial projects'. Rehman Sobhan, in '*The Decade of Stagnation*', has spoken of "chronic financial indiscipline", citing a figure of *Taka* 10 Billion of unserviced debts to the mentioned institutions. The same problem was targeted by the then interim President Shahabuddin, in a speech to the Bangladeshi parliament in 1991, "as to loans provided in the name of 'industrial establishments' by various nationalized banks - not even 10% is being recovered.... Many people, using various names, have drawn huge amounts of lending money from industrial banks, from industrial lending institutions and other nationalised banks, stating that they will build industries. But they did not build industries, nor did they repay the loans. As a result, 10 thousand *Koti Taka* of industrial loans are to be recovered". (37)

Thus, the above data confirm, that the big borrowers of banking institutions in the 1980s were not interested in productive investments, i.e. that they belonged to the commercial elite. Aside from their central role in the transfer of agricultural products from rural to urban areas, members of this elite engage in import- and export business and absorb a major part of the monetary resources entering Bangladesh as foreign aid. They consume expensive luxury items, many of which are imported at high costs, and use their capital resources to speculate in the housing sector in Bangladesh and abroad. As Rehman Sobhan states, "Trade, speculation, real estate investments and export of capital often using public resources, remain investments of choice for the new financial elite of Bangladesh." (38)

8.9 Pauperisation and its Effects on Rural Women

I will now start analysing the changing socio-economic position of rural women. In what way are rural poor women particularly affected by the ongoing process of pauperisation of Bangladesh' peasant population, of dispossession and the creation of enclosures? At least two trends may be mentioned preliminarily - the growing participation of women in field labour and

the replacement of the bride price by dowry payments. The traditional division of labour by sex prescribed that women's work be strictly limited to the home. While peasant men were responsible for all agricultural tasks performed in the field, such as ploughing, transplanting and harvesting, - women were burdened with all household chores and with 'indoor' agricultural tasks, i.e. the pre-planting and post-harvesting operations. They undertook to handle the seeds, and did arduous and labour-intensive tasks like winnowing, parboiling and husking. Toiling from dawn till dusk within their homes, women's scope for social intercourse was very limited. (39)

Now, under the impact of pauperisation, women from the 1970s onwards have begun breaking down the age-old barriers against work outside the home. Several feminist authors have marked that after Bangladesh was struck by famine in 1974, - landless women were **forced** to look for outside employment. They started ignoring the rules of seclusion, *purdah*, out of the sheer need to ensure their own and their families' survival. As Rafiqul Huda Chaudhury and Nilufer Raihan Ahmed have noted, immediately after the 1974 famine, 30 percent of the workers in foreign-financed food-for-work schemes were female, "Without any formal encouragement, women came forward to take advantage of these rural work opportunities, where food in the form of wheat could be earned, in exchange for hard physical labour - digging and re-excavation of canals for drainage and irrigation, building of roads and flood-embankments." (40)

While some joined food for work schemes, often related to the creation of enclosures, others tried to ensure their survival by joining production tasks in the paddy fields. Today, plowing remains a male preserve as in the past, but many landless women do tasks like sowing seeds, weeding the crops and cutting paddy stalks. Thus, the boundaries between men's and women's work are gradually changing. This change has not brought equality to women, and the value accorded to women's fieldwork is grossly unequal to men's. As Shamsun Nahar Khan, a representative of landless peasant women, notes, while male agricultural labourers are paid 30 *Taka* per day, plus their meals, female labourers receive only half this amount, i.e. a mere 15 *Taka* aside from food. (41) Nevertheless, their employment outside the home is hailed by women themselves as a positive change.

Another change that has occurred since the 1970s does not have this positive side-effect: the transformation of the payments' system around (arranged) marriages, which transformation is merely an indication of women's social degradation. Amongst Muslims, the groom or his family traditionally used to pay a sum called *mahr* to the bride, in the form of gifts at the wedding and insurance money in the case of a divorce. The practice of the *mahr* reflected, as has been stressed, the need for female labour in the groom's household. Woman's status was low, but the importance of her work was implicitly recognized. With pauperisation in progress, however, the practice of *mahr* is rapidly being replaced by the system of dowry, more common among Hindus. Here, the bride's family pays money and/or goods to that of the bridegroom, in exchange for the latter's willingness to marry their daughter.

Quantitative data regarding the shift at micro-level are provided by Sarah White, in a study regarding a village in Rajshahi District. Whereas in the British period, bride prices were paid in more than 90 percent of Muslim marriages, by the 1980s "there was an almost equal balance between dowry and non-dowry marriages" amongst the Muslims of the village. (42) The spread

of the dowry system, which is not limited to one or a few villages but is universal in contemporary Bangladesh, contributes to pauperisation, since as White notes, most dowries are not raised through saving, but by 'asset stripping' at the time of the wedding. The shift indicates that women, more than in the past, are considered a liability, and has been accompanied by an escalation of violence. Newly married women are often put under pressure to bring in additional dowry, and if they fail to do so, can be murdered by their in laws. (43)

8.10 Developmental Feminism and the Critique of Official Statistics

In the following sections I shall describe how developmental feminists have challenged male economists, more particularly Marxist ones, by highlighting women's role in agricultural production. First of all, developmental feminists have criticised official, Bangladeshi statistics for vastly underestimating the number of women who work, who are 'economically active'. This male bias underlying statistical data is, of course, not unique for Bangladesh. Maria Mies and other authors have criticised Indian census data for suggesting that rural women, under the impact of the commercialisation of agriculture, are transformed into non-earning housewives. Mies' field-data show that rural women, *de facto,* are forced to continue to work. Their work is only made invisible by statisticians and planners. (44)

One of those who have analysed the data put out by the Bangladeshi government is Martha Chen. Chen has made a crucial attempt to study women's labour from within the framework of a foreign-financed NGO (Non-Government Organisation). In her book '*A Quiet Revolution*', Chen states: "Micro-studies have begun to show that nearly all rural women work, but macro-data obfuscate this simple fact." The Census of Bangladesh tells us that a total of 15 and a half million women are 'housewives', and that over 3 and a half million women are 'inactive'. Chen considers these quantifications deceptive, for they hide the fact that nearly all village women are full-time workers in agriculture and animal husbandry. According to her, the 15 and a half million housewives should be described as 'full-time workers', and she justly adds: "Clearly, the definitions of work and of rural production systems in Bangladesh need to be re-analysed." (45)

This criticism is parallelled, amongst others, by the earlier mentioned study 'Class, Patriarchy and Women's Work in Bangladesh', published by the United States-based Population Council. The authors of this study try to explain the origin of the vast under-enumeration of women's work. The Bangladesh Census adheres to the '**labour force approach**', which largely limits enumeration of participation in the labour force to those employed in waged and salaried jobs. "The labour force approach was developed in the United States during the depression in order to get better measures of current employment. This approach was designed for, and is best suited to, an economy in which the dominant form of economic activity is stable wage employment." (46)

This comment seems slightly off the mark, since it ignores the fact that the statistics of industrialized countries do also gloss over part of the labour performed by women, i.e. their household chores. Yet the authors rightly question the relevance of the 'labour force approach' in analysing Bangladesh' economy - which is family-based, with 40 to 60 percent of the main staple food crop, i.e. rice, being produced for home consumption. As the Population Council's investigators write, this approach "yields categories and indexes that reveal little about the nature

and extent of people's economic activity." (47)

8.11 Village Women's Role in Rice-Processing: Central Topic in Developmental Feminist Research

Developmental feminists further have given detailed descriptions of the whole range of agriculture-related, productive tasks performed by village women. The central theme of their research is women's post-harvesting tasks, i.e. their work in preparing the harvested paddy for consumption by the family or for sale on the market. Their descriptions tend to be of an empirical character only and contribute little to international, feminist theorising on the sexual division of labour between women and men. Nevertheless, their descriptive work is important, for it bring out facts on women's labour which traditionally have been ignored by male economists. (48)

Gudrun Martius von Harder, for instance, lists seven main processing tasks which need to be accomplished after the harvesting of paddy from the field. Of those, two are primarily performed by men, i.e. the threshing with bullocks or a pedal thresher, and the storing of the processed paddy. Men also carry the paddy to the place where the drying takes place, but women clean the yard, turn the kernels during the drying and keep a watch all through. Other rice-processing activities are almost exclusively female tasks. Women winnow the paddy several times over, they steep the paddy and/or steam it before husking ('parboiling'), and they husk the paddy on a foot-operated *dhenki*. Lastly, it is they who store the paddy seeds in a basket which is hermetically closed with a cow dung and mud mixture. (49)

Though developmental feminists do not aim at throwing light on the rate of exploitation of village women's labour, some of their quantitative data are helpful precisely to those interested in this aspect. Thus, various articles mention that rural women's labouring hours are far longer than men's (upto 14 hours, compared to 10-11 hours for men). Moreover, women spend a roughly equal amount of time on agriculture-related tasks, as they do on household chores. Martin Greeley estimates that labour performed on post-harvest processing tasks adds 25 percent to the value of the rice. (50) One can, therefore, conclude that village women's labour contributes directly and essentially to the value of rice and other field crops.

Moreover, rice processing activities performed by women as **wage**-labourers have also been taken into account by developmental feminist authors. Thus, it is stressed that the labour of husking in well-to-do-peasant homes is a key source of income for many landless women and their families. One source states that post-harvest work accounts for 25 percent of employment in rice production. (51) But since all this work is done in-doors, thus invisible, since it, like other post-harvesting work is done by women, and since it is not defined as 'social production', it falls beyond the scope of traditional, Marxist economic analyses of labour exploitation in agriculture. Where women's wage-labour is at all taken stock of by such sources, it refers foremost to their waged work outside the home. (52)

8.12 Class Differentiation: The Scheme Developed by Marty Chen

Developmental feminists are not unaware of the class differences existing between village

women. In this respect their research in fact contributes more to economic analysis than the research of the ecofeminist author Vandana Shiva, to be discussed in Chapter Nine (53). Several authors, for instance, have shown that both the workload and the type of labour relations vary according to the class position a peasant woman holds. Thus, one study has brought out that the rice processing tasks of women belonging to subsistence, i.e. middle peasant households, may be larger, more cumbersome, than those of landless women, who are deprived of a sufficient amount of harvested paddy to feed their families. Here, extreme poverty and the 'release' from agrarian production tasks, paradoxically, coincides.(54)

Marty Chen has redefined rural classes in terms of women's labour and income. She distinguishes between unpaid family labour, paid village labour, and wage employment outside the village - which latter category in her definition comprises fieldwork too. Taking the type of labour relations women are subjected to as her clue, she (re)divides households into three categories, namely **surplus**, **subsistence**- and **below-subsistence households**: "1. Those below subsistence level: that is, households which cannot subsist even given their female paid village labour and must deploy all members of the family to seek wage labour opportunities. - 2. Those at the subsistence level: that is, households which can subsist given their female unpaid family labour and paid village labour. - 3. Those above the surplus level: that is, households which, for status reasons, can withdraw their women from paid village labour and, in some cases, unpaid family labour." (55)

Chen's scheme of peasant classes in Bangladeshi villages forms a mirror image of the traditional, marxist economic analysis of peasant classes. Whereas such analysis takes peasant households as given units and draws its distinctions on the basis of the economic exploitation to which the male peasant head of the household and other male members are subjected (56), Chen starts from the position of the subordinate, female members of peasant families. As she states explicitly: "The various classes of households....can be distinguished one from the other by the degree to which women's labour and/or income are required to meet the subsistence needs of the household." (57) Her redefinition, then, at first appears as a welcome correction of the male bias in Marxist economic theory.

Yet, whereas Chen's analysis allows one to take account of certain effects of pauperisation - of the process which forces landless women to seek non-traditional forms of waged work in order to survive, her classification is not satisfactory. For as a mirror image of Marxist classifications of the peasantry, Chen's conceptualisation does not enable one to make a more comprehensive assessment of the exploitation to which the vast majority of village women and men are subjected. A full assessment of production relations in the Bangladeshi countryside can only be made by looking closely at the economic position of both. Moreover, her classification is limited to the labouring classes only. It leaves out of consideration those classes which do not engage in agricultural production tasks for their own livelihood, such as the *jotedars*, i.e. the landlords, the moneylenders, and the class of market traders who, as indicated previously, accumulate at the expense of the whole peasantry.

8.13 Displacement of Women's Labour Through Mechanisation of Paddy Husking

Before discussing some of the major drawbacks of the developmental feminist approach, I

wish to draw attention to one further contribution of their research. An aspect which has not been touched upon in this Chapter yet, but which frequently appears in developmental feminist literature on Bangladesh is the displacement of women's labour, caused by the introduction of rice-mills. As noted before, landless and land poor women traditionally were employed in the houses of rich peasants' families to do paddy husking on a *dhenki*. This work was/is heavy, seasonal in nature, and very poorly paid. Landless and land poor women were easily exploited by those who appropriate the agricultural surplus. And yet the work on the *dhenki* was/is an indispensable source of income for the rural poor.

Now, over the last two decades, increasing numbers of women have lost their jobs, as rich peasants, landlords, and merchants have bought and installed rice-mills. For a well-to-do peasant household, such mills represent clear advantages, because mechanized milling is both cheaper and more speedy than manual paddy husking. It may even be true that some rich peasant wives benefit, as they are relieved of (part of) their toil. For landless women, however, the effects of such mechanisation have been loathsome, and without a class differentiated analysis this might well be overlooked. Literally millions of women who used to be employed for paddy-husking have already been displaced by automated mills and by custom mills.

Khaleda Salahuddin who specifically deals with the impact of technological change in agriculture on women in Bangladesh, for instance, has calculated that each custom mills throws about 3 hundred poor women out of work. According to her, the labour-displacement effect of automatic mills is even more serious than that of custom-mills, "because it does away with the need of pre-milling manual operations such as drying, parboiling, winnowing, etc. in addition to the husking operation." This author calculates that 900 part-time employed women and an estimated 64 fulltime (or 180 part-time) women employed in pre-milling processing work can be displaced by one automatic mill. (58) Khaleda Salahuddin concludes, that "the introduction of mechanized devices in the post-harvesting processing operations has created a devastating negative impact on the female wage-employment in rural areas." (59) Some skilled male labourers do receive employment, but at the cost of displacement of a massive number of women.

Developmental feminist authors have commonly condemned this male-biased modernisation. While they are all concerned with 'integrating women into development', with enhancing women's 'output and productivity', and with suggesting the best possible state policies for such, - the introduction of rice-mills is seriously questioned. For they denounce the fact that the establishment of modern rice-mills, instead of helping to combat poverty, helps widen the gap between the rich and the poor.

8.14 Developmental Feminism's Limited Discourse: Original Accumulation and Women

In the first part of this Chapter I have summarized the process of pauperisation which condemns the vast majority of Bangladesh' peasants to a life of misery - the low prices which peasant producers receive for their agricultural products, generalized indebtedness and the loss of arable land. As stated, the dominant mode of appropriation in Bangladesh today is comparable to what Marx, in the context of Britain, has termed 'primitive' accumulation, - a process which involves the expulsion of the peasantry from their soil and the private

appropriation of their common property resources. As in the case of Britain, the basis for 'modernisation' in Bangladesh is being laid through the dispossession of peasant proprietors on a massive scale.

Now, those being dispossessed primarily belong to the **male** section of the rural population. Although legally, Muslim women are entitled to some landed property - a daughter may inherit half the amount of what her brother inherits, in practice women hardly ever exercise their rights. 'Living law' here clearly diverges from 'lawyers law'. (60) Thus, in Bangladesh, it is men who own the land and who are in control of most agricultural means of production, while female owners of land form a rare exception. And it is the ownership of land and other means of agricultural production, such as ploughs, oxen and sickles, which enables men to dominate women. Unequal property relations lie at the roots of the system of patriarchy.

In consequence, the process of dispossession affects male peasants directly, it is they who are deprived of their status as proprietors. At the same time, it is also true that female members of a peasant household feel the consequences of the process of original accumulation sketched - peasant women too are loosing opportunities for subsistence labour, are uprooted and are forced to migrate. Women also loose their (limited) source of security as much as do men, - a topic which is insufficiently addressed by developmental feminist researchers. While they refer to important aspects of the pauperisation in Bangladesh, such as the fact that women are forced to throw off *purdah* customs and seek new forms of employment, they do not relate these concrete changes to the overall process of original accumulation. The broader framework of economic relations is ignored.

This, then, is a significant limitation of developmental feminist analyses. While the issue of 'classes' and 'class hierarchies' is raised, in particular in the writings of Marty Chen, the classes which are really in control, who form the main burden on the back of peasant women and men, are hardly discussed. While developmental feminists draw attention to the negative consequences of rice-processing mills for village women, they at the same time fail to draw attention to the most serious obstacles male and female peasant producers face. Since their aim is to provide government- and donor-institutions with ideas for policy-making, they strikingly overlook the exploitation by Bangladesh' commercial elite.

8.15 The Consequences of Enclosures for Women - Another Poorly Researched Theme

Another issue of particular concern for women is the appropriation of the common property resources, of water and fish resources. In the first part of this Chapter I have already identified the appropriation on the commons as a major form of original accumulation which has been sweeping the Bangladeshi countryside over the last several decades. Embankment schemes, flood control projects and irrigation schemes - most of which are financed by the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank and/or other 'donor' institutions - all involve the privatisation of formerly free water and fish resources. At the same time, these schemes have a direct bearing on the labouring activities of women, and on their chances of surviving physically.

As stated before, the floodplains for many centuries have been a crucial source of natural fish production in Bangladesh. Now, aside from the professional fishermen, women belonging to

landless and land-poor peasant families, in spite of cultural constraints (61), to an extent too engage in fresh water fish-captures in the open waters accessible to all, such as rivers, canals and *beels*. In a District like Khulna, for instance, one can see scores of women in the early morning taking cages and nets to the river in order to catch fish for a few hours each day. When in Patuakhali District, 8 thousand landless families occupied four newly emerged lands (*chars*) in January 1992, it was women who helped ensure their families' survival by catching fish in the Tetulia river with their bare hands.

The appropriation of the commons in the form of water management schemes has a truly devastating effect on these survival strategies of women. Where natural fish production falls in consequence of embankments and flood control projects - a causal connection noted in the first part of this Chapter -, women belonging to professional fishermen's families loose out in terms of food security. Those women, who themselves used to catch fish, henceforth miss both the opportunity for the production of use values, and that for the production of exchange values. For fish caught by women is either directly consumed or sold on the market to supplement their families' meagre income. Thus, the enclosure of Bangladesh' commons, both directly and indirectly, does specifically affect peasant women, and without an assessment of these consequences, the impact of foreign financed development schemes cannot be complete.

Unfortunately, however, the enclosure of the commons, to my knowledge, so far has not formed an integral part of the research efforts of developmental feminist authors who have analysed the labouring activities of women in Bangladesh. In some cases, such as for the 'Dinajpur Fish Culture Development Project', the role of women in the cultivation of fish in village ponds has been studied as part of Western-financed development efforts.(62) Yet such schemes do not constitute a genuine equivalent to fishing in rivers and floodplains, since inland water resources generally are not considered common property. To draw a balance sheet of Bangladesh' aid-financed economic strategy, the analysis of the social consequences of enclosures is a must. Thus, the lack of field investigations into the consequences of enclosures for poor peasant women is a serious drawback.

8.16 Original Accumulation and Patriarchal Violence Against Women

The absence of the theme of original accumulation from the developmental feminist discourse on women's labour in Bangladesh can lastly be demonstrated also by discussing the escalation of patriarchal violence against women. As elsewhere, modernisation in Bangladesh is being accompanied by an alarming increase in cruelty against women. The male violence takes the form of acid throwing, which spells doom to a woman victim for the rest of her life; it takes the form of beatings or physical tortures to which many married women are subjected; and it also takes the form of outright murder. Most frequently, the murder of a bride or wife is committed by her husband and/or inlaws, when she fails to comply with (increased) demands for dowry. According to the publicised results of a survey of 48, mostly young, women brutally killed in a period of eight weeks ending January 21, 1994, 25 of the murders were related to discords over dowry.(63) Another Dhaka press report, published early 1994, claimed that 80 percent of cases where married women are killed, are due to the dowry system.(64)

Developmental feminists have noted the historical shift from the *mahr* to the dowry system, but explain it with reference to the fragmentation of landholdings and the decreasing need for

female labour in the processing of paddy rice. They do not emphasize that the trend is intrinsically related to the process of modernisation. The dowry system was first adopted by landlord and rich peasant families, whose sons got access to urban education. It subsequently spread to all rural classes, including landless and land poor peasants. Further, in the course of time, the amount of dowry demanded has skyrocketed. Today, the rates vary from several thousand *Taka* - the amount paid by a landless peasant for marrying off his daughter, to 50 or 60 thousand *Taka* paid by well-to-do peasants.(65) If the bridegroom's family belongs to the class of urban, commercial traders, the dowry will be fixed at several *lakhs* of *Taka*, to which are added luxurious goods like refrigerators and cars.

This escalation of dowry demands, and the accompanying patriarchal violence against women, are an expression of original or 'primitive' accumulation. Where other avenues for gathering wealth have been closed off, where peasants are continuously threatened with eviction from their soil and where indebtedness is generalised, - peasants seek to survive as agricultural producers by taking recourse to high dowry demands and to violence against those who have least power. Tragically, the escalation of dowry demands in turn leads to the dispossession of numerous peasant families. For in order to marry off their daughters, many peasants borrow money from usurious lenders, they are forced to sell arable land, or even their own homesteads. Thus, the adoption of the dowry system in Muslim-dominated Bangladesh is related, like elsewhere, to the transition in the country's social system. As Maria Mies has stated in the context of India, the "economic rationale of the dowry system" is that it is "a form of primitive accumulation" of men. (66)

8.17 Summary: Developmental Feminism's Failure to Address the Main Obstacles to Development

Developmental feminists who have analysed the labouring activities of rural poor women in Bangladesh have posed an ideological challenge to Marxist economic theory. The classical Marxist view of peasant societies, as has been argued above, leaves out of consideration almost all of women's toil, since rural classes are defined in terms of the position of the male head of the household. (67) This approach ignores both the labour of women that precedes the fieldwork of peasant men, and the various post-harvest processing tasks. It entails a gross underestimation of how much labour precedes the marketing, sale and/ or consumption of agrarian goods.

Yet the developmental feminist literature on Bangladeshi women does not succeed in superseding Marxist theory. Though some attempts have been made to calculate women's workload; though class differences existing between peasant women are pointed out - developmental feminist authors overlook the dominant process of class exploitation affecting village women, i.e. the market exploitation by commercial traders. They do not relate the pauperisation of the majority of rural women to the dominant mode of appropriation of the agricultural surplus. Nor do they question the appropriation of common property resources through flood control schemes. Because of the bias underlying their research work, they gloss over much of the displacement of women's labour taking place under the impact of 'modernisation'. Whereas enclosures in the name of flood control do negatively affect the subsistence and market oriented labour of rural women, these form no integral part of their analytical work.

Ultimately, the labour of Bangladeshi peasant women can better be understood, and their rights defended, by combining the feminists concepts of patriarchy, the sexual division of labour and women's double workload - with the insights provided by Karl Marx. In the first Volume of his '*Capital*' Marx argued, that "the capitalist system presupposes the complete separation of the labourers from all property in the means by which they realise their labour" (68). The process which clears the way for the capitalist system is a process which takes away from the labourers the possession of their means of production. During the last two decades, since Bangladesh' independence, the process of original accumulation has involved the eviction from their land of peasant proprietors on a massive scale, and the appropriation of common water- and fish-resources to the detriment of peasant women and men. Since developmental feminism does not embark on a critical investigation of modernisation, it is incapable of providing a truly comprehensive analysis. As Sarah White has stated about developmental feminism, "the mystification of its own highly contradictory origins lies at the roots of the unsubstantiality and analytical weakness of most of the discussion about women in Bangladesh up to now." (69)