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POVERTY AND INEQUALITY IN LAND HOLDING DISTRIBUTION IN RURAL BANGLADESH

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Among agrarian societies in the world, Bangladesh stands fourth in terms of her agricultural population. The livelihood of more than 85 per cent of the population is dependent on agriculture which produces only about 55 per cent of the gross domestic product. The main obstacle to development of this sector is the increase of population depending on it. The rampant population growth resulted in an increasing pressure on available land. The average land per person decreased from 0.42 acre in 1961 to 0.30 acre in 1971 and then to 0.20 acre in 1981 (4, p. 11). Rural society in Bangladesh, on the other hand, is highly differentiated in a complex structure of big landowners, landless farmers, share-croppers, artisans, agricultural and non-agricultural labourers, etc. Poverty is unevenly distributed among these groups.

Small land holding per family mingled with high concentration of land in a few hands is the main distributional feature of land in the rural areas. The trend in inequality in land holding distribution viewed from the previous surveys shows that the inequality as measured by the Gini index increased from 0.5460 in 1979 to 0.5507 in 1981. The existing inequality plays a discriminating role in respect of cropping intensity, labour employment, productivity and social justice. This aspect of inequality greatly hinders the development of peasant society which ultimately gives rise to landless farmers and wage labourers. The landlessness increased from 17.5 per cent in 1961 to 29 per cent in 1977 and to 33 per cent in 1982. In an agro-based economy, landless and nearly landless families form the core of the rural poor. The proportion of rural poor increased by 50 per cent between the early 1960s and the late 1970s, while the proportion of extremely poor increased more sharply over the same period (13, p. 59).

The main concern of this paper is to estimate poverty line, and to examine the trend in inequality and related factors and their effects on poverty. An attempt has been made to see the relationship between land holding size and poverty. Conclusions and policy implications have been described in the last section of the paper.

DATA AND METHODOLOGY

Information on land holding size was gathered from the 1960 Agricultural Census and Surveys conducted by the Ministry of Land Administration and Land Reforms and the Institute of Statistical Research and Training, University of Dhaka in 1979 and 1981 respectively. Other information like household size, income and expenditure was obtained from the 1981 survey for analysing poverty in rural Bangladesh. In the survey, information was collected from a sample of 4,081 households and thus the coverage is large and considered sufficiently representative for the rural areas.

The methodology refers first to measure poverty lines for different household sizes. These are determined by estimating the cost of package comprising the mi-

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nimum food and non-food requirements in terms of nutrition, housing, health, education, etc. Then the degree of inequality in land holding distribution is measured by both objective method and normative approach as suggested by Atkinson (4, p. 48). This measure is based on an explicit specification of social welfare and value judgement.¹

After determining the poverty lines, a popular poverty index known as head-count ration (H_p) is estimated. The index may be expressed as:

$$H_p = \frac{n_p}{n} \quad \dots \dots (i)$$

where, n_p is the number of households having income not higher than the poverty line and n is the set of all households. The other widely used index is called the "poverty gap" which is also estimated for the poor households. This index measures the aggregate shortfall of income of all the poor households from poverty line. This can easily be converted into per unit gap as:

$$I_p = \sum_{i=1}^{n_p} (Z - Y_i^*) / Z \cdot n_p, (Z - Y_i^*) \geq 0 \quad \dots \dots (ii)$$

where Z is the poverty line and Y_i^* is the monthly income of the i th poor household. Sen (1976) showed that both the indices have limitations and violate some axioms (12, p. 223). Keeping in view these limitations, Sen derived a composite poverty index which satisfies the important axioms and properties when the number of poor is large (12, p. 225). An attempt has also been made to estimate the composite index which is expressed as:

$$P_s = H_p [I_p + (1 - I_p) G_p] \quad \dots \dots (iii)$$

where G_p is the Gini index of income distribution among the poor and it is a function of the rank order weighted sum of individual income shares.

MEASUREMENT OF POVERTY LINE

A poverty line cannot be defined uniquely and can never be determined solely in terms of objective norms of physical deprivation, since it is affected by the choice of definition of poverty. Different definitions give different views on the nature and extent of the poverty and hence, on the appropriate measures of poverty line. However, in the present context the poverty line has been defined on the basis of daily calorie requirement for an individual for proper functioning in the society. Based on weight, age and environmental temperature, the FAO estimated the calorie requirement for an average person in Bangladesh at about 2,150 (13, p. 60). The requirement is much higher for those who are engaged in labour. Accordingly, daily calorie requirement for different age groups as prescribed by the Institute of Nutrition and Food Science, Dhaka University, has been used for estimating poverty line. On the basis of this calorie requirement, a monthly estimate of different food requirements is converted into quantity and set out in Appendix 1. Based

1. For details, [Atkinson (1978), pp. 47-49].

on the quantity of commodities required and their corresponding prices, the cost of per capita food requirements for different age groups is computed.

The cost of non-food items is estimated as the ratio of costs of non-food to food items for the lowest decile of income group. In the present case, 25 per cent cost for non-food items is added to the cost of food for getting the final estimate of poverty line. The estimated cost termed as poverty level income for different household sizes is given in Table I.

TABLE I. MONTHLY POVERTY LINE INCOME BY HOUSEHOLD SIZE
IN RURAL BANGLADESH

Household size								Poverty level income (Tk.)
One	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	258.0
Two	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	516.0
Three	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	662.0
Four	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	820.0
Five	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	1,044.0
Six	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	1,425.0
Seven	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	1,662.0
Eight	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	1,900.0
Nine	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	2,138.0
Ten*	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	2,375.0

* Households having more than nine members taken as ten members.

Households whose income level are inadequate to fulfil the calorie requirement are defined as poor households, and those who are incapable of obtaining 80 per cent of assumed norm are defined as extremely poor households.

DIMENSION OF INEQUALITY IN LAND HOLDING DISTRIBUTION

The characteristics of land ownership distribution in rural Bangladesh is very uneven. There are a few big farms among the vast majority of small ones. This can be visualised in Table II, which presents a high degree of inequality in land holding distribution. In 1979, about 16 per cent of the farm families having land below 0.5 acre owned only about 2 per cent of the total land, whereas in 1981, these figures changed to 20 per cent and one per cent respectively. The relative mean inequality in distribution of this size-group is 0.1419 in 1979 and 0.1892 in 1981. The larger holdings which possess 7.50 acres and more comprise about 3 per cent of the total holdings but command about 18 per cent of the total owned land in 1979. More or less similar distributional pattern is noticed for this size-group in 1981. The Gini index which measures the degree of concentration of land increased from 0.5460 in 1979 to 0.5507 in 1981. In the absence of data on land ownership distribution for the 1960s, the Gini index of this decade could not be compared with that of 1970s and 1980s.

In Table III, a comparison has been made between the distribution of operational areas of 1960 with that of 1979. Such comparison could not be made for 1981 due to dearth of data on operational land holdings. The table indicates an improvement in the distribution of operational areas over the last decade. This is substantiated by the decrease of Gini index from 0.5017 in 1960 to 0.4622 in 1979.

TABLE II. CONCENTRATION OF LAND OWNERSHIP IN RURAL BANGLADESH FOR 1979 AND 1981

Size class (acres)	1979†			1981		
	Cumulative percentage of		Relative mean in- equality or point of slope of Lorenz curve	Cumulative percentage of		Relative mean in- equality or point slope of Lorenz curve
	House- holds	Area of owned land		House- holds	Area of owned land	
Under 0.50	15.84	1.65	0.1419	20.35	1.43	0.1892
0.50 to under 1.00	31.34	5.66	0.2568	34.74	5.13	0.2961
1.00 to under 2.50	65.54	26.35	0.3919*	64.64	23.06	0.4158*
2.50 to under 5.00	85.71	51.87	0.3384	84.34	47.94	0.3640
5.00 to under 7.50	39.73	68.64	0.2509	92.54	66.10	0.2644
7.50 to under 12.50	97.45	81.56	0.1589	97.30	82.05	0.1525
12.50 to under 25.00	99.73	95.79	0.0394	99.66	96.19	0.0347
25 and above	100.00	100.00	—	100.00	100.00	—
Gini index			0.5460			0.5507

† Source: Table III of Rahman and Ali (1984).

* Maximum Relative Mean Inequality.

TABLE III. CONCENTRATION OF OPERATIONAL LAND HOLDINGS IN BANGLADESH FOR 1960 AND 1979

Size class (acres)	1960†			1979		
	Cumulative percentage of		Relative mean in- equality or point slope of Lorenz curve	Cumulative percentage of		Relative mean in- equality or point slope of Lorenz curve
	House- holds	Area of operated land		House- holds	Area of operated land	
Under 0.50	15.07	0.94	0.1213	9.40	0.96	0.0843
0.50 to under 1.00	24.31	3.24	0.2107	22.48	4.07	0.1841
1.00 to under 2.50	51.63	16.25	0.3538*	56.47	22.22	0.3425*
2.50 to under 5.00	77.94	42.64	0.3529	83.05	52.60	0.3046
5.00 to under 7.50	89.31	61.94	0.2737	92.62	71.34	0.2128
7.50 to under 12.50	96.52	81.08	0.1543	97.81	86.98	0.1083
12.50 to under 25.00	99.58	85.20	0.0438	99.76	97.28	0.0248
25 and above	100.00	100.00	—	100.00	100.00	—
Gini index			0.5017			0.4622

Source: As under Table II.

* Maximum Relative Mean Inequality.

Another measure known as normative measure of inequality has also been adopted to examine the degree and pattern of inequality in land holding distribution. This measure gives us a direction and magnitude of the potential gain that can be achieved from redistribution of land equally among the people. This method is suggested because the former method has some limitations (4, p. 47). A set of Atkinson index (I_A) of inequality has been estimated by assigning some weight to redistribution towards the bottom level of land holding distribution. The estimated figures of (I_A) for different values of parameter (E) for owned and operational holdings are presented in Table IV.

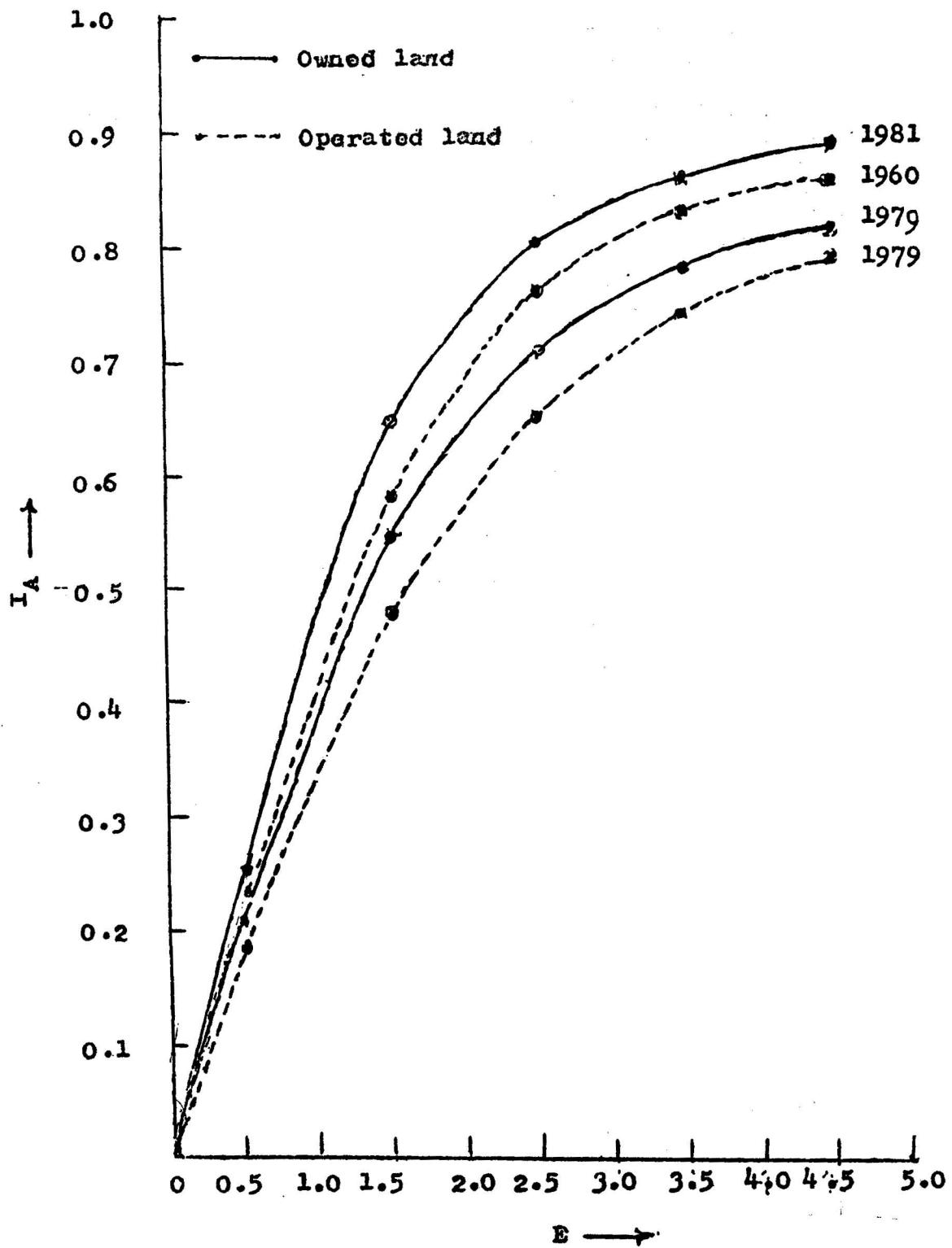
TABLE IV. ATKINSON INDEX OF INEQUALITY

Value of parameter (E)	Value of index (I_A) for			
	Owned area		Operational area	
	1979*	1981	1960	1979*
0.50	0.2338	0.2637	0.2229	0.1920
1.5	0.5553	0.6553	0.5889	0.4807
0.5	2.7212	0.8171	0.7755	0.6659
3.5	0.7927	0.8683	0.8457	0.7588
4.5	0.8258	0.8892	0.8692	0.8038

* Source: Table IV of Rahman and Ali (1984).

A higher value of (I_A) indicates higher inequality and lower social welfare. The index (I_A) has a very important interpretation. It tells us about the required proportion of the total owned and operational areas to maintain the same level of existing social welfare if lands are equally distributed. For instance, the parameter $E = 2.5$ corresponds to values of index 0.7212 for owned and 0.6659 for operational areas in 1979 which means that the same level of social welfare can be achieved by redistributing equally only $(1.00 - 0.7212 =) 27.88$ per cent of the total owned and $(1.00 - 0.6659 =) 33.41$ per cent of the total operational areas. Alternatively, it may be explained that the gain from redistribution to bring about equality in ownership and operational areas would be equivalent to enhancing 72.12 per cent of the total owned and 66.59 per cent of the total operational areas. These findings indicate a high degree of inequality in land holding distribution. Inequality in ownership distribution is much higher than the distribution of operational areas. The degree of inequality in the former category is increasing while in the latter, it is decreasing over a time spectrum. The estimated value of (I_A) shows a gradual deterioration in welfare between 1979 and 1981 in respect of land ownership distribution. Sensitivity of (I_A) corresponding to different values of E both for owned and operational areas is shown in Figure 1.

The important reasons of decrease in inequality in operational holding may be explained as follows: (a) high population growth; (b) increase of households dependent on agriculture; (c) effects of the inexorable operation of Muslim law of inheritance; (d) land cultivated in family based small and medium size holdings.

Figure 1—Sensitivity of I_A to Variation in E

Many big farmers, on the other hand, lease out a portion of their own land to the small farmers on share-cropping basis to make the size manageable and smaller, and (e) absentee owners lease out their whole land to different small farmers on the basis of share-cropping agreement. Thus, the process of leasing out through the share-cropping market leads to a less unequal distribution of operational areas. These statements have also been supported by Hossain (6, p. 23) in his study for Bangladesh.

The imbalance between the distribution of control over land and the number dependent on it breeds social and economic inequalities. It also leads to unequal access to developmental activities, institutional facilities, decision-making process, etc. Furthermore, the existing imbalance offers a great social injustice in respect of land tenure system including the half and half share-cropping agreement between tenants and owners. These situations call for an appropriate land reform measure. The more radical the land reform, the greater will be the equity effect. Several studies made by FAO and other agencies for Asian countries showed the effects of differences between distribution of land holding size and yields (16, p. 215). A study for the development of future land policy in Bangladesh in 1978-79 indicated that the average yield of *aman* rice varied from 12.15 to 10.87 maunds on farms up to 2.99 acres and 8.91 maunds on larger farms of 25 acres and above. Evidence also exists that cropping intensity and use of labour per acre are greater on smaller farms than on larger ones. The cropping intensity varied from 171.18 to 168.76 per cent on farms below 2.99 acres to 136.91 per cent on larger farms of 25 acres and above. Labour absorption varied between 54 and 46 man-days per acre for *aman* rice cultivation on holdings of less than 2.99 acres. On larger holdings it was 37 man-days per acre. These facts suggest that reduction in either holding size or inequality in land holding distribution is an important factor for increasing productivity and employment. Land reform measure should, therefore, be focused on three basic objectives, *viz.*, (i) higher productivity, (ii) higher employment opportunities and (iii) equity justice. A series of land reform measures were adopted in Bangladesh since the fifties but failed to safeguard the interest of the target group and led to increasing inequality and incidence of poverty.

LAND OWNERSHIP DISTRIBUTION AND POVERTY

In this section an attempt has been made to examine the relationship of land holding size with the level of food intake, income and incidence of poverty. The nature and size of difference in the incidence of poverty between the lowest and the highest strata of the rural society are also examined. Land holding size is possibly the far more useful factor to act as a discriminator of a rural household's economic status than any other socio-economic indicator.

The relationship between land holding size per household and food intake is summarised in Table V. It indicates a high positive correlation between land holding size and the consumption of different food items except a few. Cereal intake shows a regular increase with the increase of land size per household, while the intake of leafy vegetables indicates a negative relationship ($r = -0.22$). Root and tuber intakes remain more or less steady for households having land less than 3 acres and suddenly it rises up for those households with land holding size of 3 acres

and more. Highest correlation ($r = 0.57$) is observed between land size and consumption of cereal which is followed by fat and fish consumption.

In the rural areas, land holding size is usually the single most significant determinant of the distribution of income. Table VI shows the positive relationship between land holding size and average monthly income as well as household size. Household's income and size increase when the land holding size increases. Table VII presents an inverse relationship between land holding size and incidence of poverty. Rural poverty and landlessness go hand in hand. The proportion of the poor is the highest among the households of landless agricultural labourers which constitute 23 per cent of the total. About 98 per cent and 93 per cent of households of this group live in absolute and extreme poverty respectively. The proportion of poor households having land less than 0.5 acre is 0.8913 which is 3.5 times higher than that of big farmers (7.5-25 acres). The incidence of poverty decreases significantly when the land size increases. Households having land of 25 acres and more are, in fact, not exposed to the risk of poverty. Rural poverty is thus related to the distribution of land ownership.

TABLE V. RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN LAND HOLDING PER FAMILY AND FOOD INTAKE OF THE FAMILY MEMBERS

Land holding (acres)	Num- ber of house- holds	Food intake (gm./person/day) by food groups									
		Cereal	Roots and tubers	Pulses	Vegetables		Fish	Milk	Fat	Total	
					Leafy	Non- leafy					
0	172	448	58	6	28	95	16	11	3	712	
0.01 — 0.49	83	420	67	5	26	101	20	6	2	673	
0.50 — 0.99	80	448	70	5	28	81	15	16	3	699	
1.00 — 2.99	147	502	55	6	13	94	23	17	3	763	
3.00 and above	115	553	68	14	13	120	32	22	4	873	
Correlation coefficient	...	—	0.57	0.41	0.46	—0.02	0.48	0.53	0.36	0.56	0.31

Source: Nutrition Survey of Rural Bangladesh, Institute of Nutrition and Food Science, University of Dhaka, Dhaka, Bangladesh, 1981-82.

TABLE VI. AVERAGE MONTHLY INCOME OF HOUSEHOLDS, POOR HOUSEHOLDS AND AVERAGE FAMILY SIZE FOR DIFFERENT LAND HOLDING SIZE-GROUPS (OWNED), 1981

Owned land holding size-group (acres)		Average income of households (Tk.)	Average income of poor households (Tk.)	Average family size
Landless agricultural labourer	...	470.00	452.68	4.52
Less than 0.50	...	635.46	563.51	4.63
0.50 — 1.00	...	721.07	567.33	4.80
1.00 — 2.50	...	892.64	779.05	5.67
2.50 — 5.00	...	1,312.70	1,158.25	6.85
5.00 — 7.50	...	1,869.92	1,601.36	7.85
7.50 — 25.00	...	3,585.42	2,034.62	9.47
25 acres and more	...	5,606.40	—	13.80

TABLE VII. POVERTY INDICES FOR DIFFERENT LAND HOLDING SIZE-GROUPS (OWNED)

Owned land holding size-group (acres)	Proportion of households in		Income gap ratio (I_p)	Sen's poverty index (P_s)	Gini index among poor households (G_p)
	Absolute(H_p) poverty	Extreme poverty			
Landless agricultural labourer ...	0.9765(1)	0.9257(1)	0.6239(1)	0.6780(1)	0.1871(6)
Less than 0.50 ...	0.8913(2)	0.7826(2)	0.5883(2)	0.5924(2)	0.1964(3)
0.50 — 1.00 ...	0.8872(3)	0.7895(3)	0.5251(3)	0.5461(3)	0.1905(5)
1.00 — 2.50 ...	0.8152(4)	0.7186(4)	0.4280(4)	0.4431(4)	0.2019(2)
2.50 — 5.00 ...	0.7407(5)	0.6111(5)	0.4028(5)	0.3832(5)	0.1917(4)
5.00 — 7.50 ...	0.4925(6)	0.3467(6)	0.3171(6)	0.2220(6)	0.1957(7)
7.50 — 25.0 ...	0.2688(7)	0.1832(7)	0.2726(7)	0.1141(7)	0.2130(1)
25 acres and more	—	—	—	—	—

Figures in parentheses are the corresponding ranks.

The value of composite poverty index $P_s = 0.6780$ on account of landless agricultural labourers also indicates the highest incidence of poverty but it is the lowest ($P_s = 0.1141$) for those households having land more than 7.5 acres. Theoretically, H_p and I_p are related to P_s ; and empirically the pattern of H_p and I_p is similar to the pattern of P_s . The ranking of P_s looks similar to that of H_p and I_p . Due to dearth of data, an estimate of the proportion of households below poverty level by tenurial status could not be provided here.

It is clear that casting the issue of poverty in terms of productive assets (land) leads to an issue of inequitous distribution of land. In other words, unequal distribution of land may be identified as the main cause of continued existence of poverty in rural Bangladesh. The trend in inequality in land ownership distribution is consistent with that of incidence of poverty. These arguments seem to hold true for most rural poverty of the Third World countries as illustrated by a study of ILO. The proportion of absolutely rural poor households increased from 51.7 per cent in 1963-64 to 70.3 per cent in 1975, while the extremely poor households rose from ten per cent to 51 per cent during the same period (15, pp. 32, 147).

CONCLUSION

In most of the developing countries like Bangladesh, the data on productive assets are not fully accurate to give a real picture of land ownership distribution in the rural areas. There is a general tendency to underestimate the true size of holdings. There is also a serious inconsistency between recorded size and actual land including de facto ownership commanded by an individual. However, given the above limitations in the quality of data, the following tentative conclusions may be drawn from the analysis.

The analysis reveals a greater inequality in land holding distribution. The significant finding is that the distribution of land ownership is worsening day by day. Inequality appears to be fast advancing in the recent years. The Atkinson index (I_A), however, suggests that there is a scope for raising social welfare by redistribution of land. The process of conversion from small land holding families

into families of landless labourers accelerated the process of increasing proletarianisation in the rural areas. An increasing proportion of landowners joined the category of small or below subsistence farmers over the last two decades. These phenomena resulted in increasing the number of the poor in the rural areas.

Low resource endowment together with high concentration of land in a few hands may be identified as one of the important causes of rural poverty. This is reflected by the fact that the incidence of poverty is inversely related with the size of land holding. The highest incidence of poverty (98 per cent) is observed among the households of landless agricultural wage labourers. At the other extreme, households having land above 25 acres are free from the curse of poverty. The composite poverty index (P_s) is the highest for the former group while it is zero for the latter. The incidence of poverty decreases with the increase of land holding size. This means that the incidence of poverty is most serious among households of small farmers and landless agricultural labourers.

The above analysis and subsequent findings have some policy implications which are as follows: (i) An appropriate agrarian reform policy is an important strategy for rural development as well as a move for promoting egalitarian goals for peasants. And (ii) for balanced and sustained development of agricultural and rural economy, phasewise transition towards redistribution of land, including other complementary programmes in terms of credit, extension services, higher cropping intensity, spread of HYVs of crops and overall improvements in technology, on the one hand and rapid rural-based industrial development to absorb the landless people, on the other, are deemed to be appropriate measures against poverty. It is evident that without effective measures to combat unemployment, land reform measure, policy to increase production and equitable land distribution, etc., it will be extremely difficult to improve the socio-economic conditions of the poor.

APPENDIX 1

NORMATIVE MINIMUM PER CAPITA MONTHLY FOOD REQUIREMENTS BY AGE GROUPS

(*qty. in seer*)

Food items	Age in years						Average†
	1-3	4-6	7-9	10-14	15-18	19-49	
Cereals	5.16	6.56	9.38	11.25	14.06	15.00	13.00
Pulses and nuts	1.40	1.40	1.88	1.88	1.88	2.80	2.18
Vegetables (leafy)	1.88	1.88	1.88	1.88	2.80	2.80	2.38
Green vegetables	0.94	0.94	0.94	3.75	2.80	2.80	3.37
Potato	1.40	1.88	2.80	3.75	3.75	3.75	3.21
Fish/meat/egg	0.94	0.94	1.88	1.88	1.88	1.88	1.68
Sugar/gur	1.88	1.88	1.88	1.88	1.88	0.94	1.47
Milk	7.50	7.50	7.50	7.50	—	—	—
Fats and oils	0.23	0.23	0.94	0.94	1.88	1.88	1.30

(a) One seer = 2.06 lbs. or approximately 933 grams.

† Average requirements are not the average of the six specified age groups but the weighted average of requirements per person; the weight being the proportion of estimated rural population for 1981 of various age groups.

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