

## Situating Anthropology in Bangladesh: Transformations and Trajectories in the Anthropology Tradition

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### ABSTRACT

The Anthropology tradition, and the associated ‘production of knowledge in the academic field, is relatively of recent origin in Bangladesh. The article intends to shed light on anthropology as becoming a separate field of knowledge through exploring the historical trajectories and significant transformations in Bangladesh. Anthropology remains a changing discipline in this country and as such, it continues to remain endlessly fascinating. The anthropological enterprises, in understanding social realities of this region, have begun in early fifties of the twentieth century. The early anthropological enterprises by individual scholars have paved the pioneering institutional pathways of engagement with anthropology in late seventies. The present article extensively reviewed these major anthropological enterprises in Bangladesh from a historical perspective, identifying changing subject matters and trends within this academic tradition, shifting patterns of interests, and depicting areas of activities and concerns of anthropology in this region. Drawing on the empirically grounded works, in Bangladesh and neighboring regions, the paper would allow the readers to assess the overall attainments and limitations of contemporary anthropology in Bangladesh. The article would critically analyze some of the existing dilemmas, contested issues, and contemporary theoretical and practical challenges of applying anthropological perspectives for accelerating development in Bangladesh.

**Keywords:** Bangladesh, anthropology, development, engagement and challenges

### INTRODUCTION

The article aims at surveying the history of anthropology in Bangladesh and would allow the readers to assess the overall attainments and directions of contemporary anthropology in the country. The discussion would shed light on present research interests, and areas of activities and concerns of this academic tradition particularly of this region. The anthropology tradition, and the associated ‘production of knowledge’ in this academic field, is relatively of recent origin in Bangladesh. We would try to develop an historical account on anthropology as becoming a separate field of knowledge and some of the contemporary practical challenges of applying or involving anthropological perspectives in devising successful strategies to bring about equitable development in the context of Bangladesh. This article aims to provide and an excellent opening for future reference on anthropological subjects and the progress of this discipline in Bangladesh.

Anthropology is relatively a new academic discipline in Bangladesh. In last forty-five years, since the independence of the country, both foreign and local anthropologists have extensively conducted ethnographic fieldwork in Bangladesh and developed some discourses about the dynamics of changing society of Bangladesh with their own specificity, which has had also a profound impact on the discipline as a whole. At present, there are 07 public universities, which have both graduate and postgraduate program in anthropology. Non-degree

anthropology courses are also taught at some private universities. Every year, about 500 students get enrolled in anthropology program in different public and private universities. The present departments of anthropology at the universities differs in their own focus, curriculum and syllabus planning, and setting priorities and concerns, yet they constitute significant premises for generating, modifying, reproducing, retaining and articulating anthropology as a system of knowledge, embracing social/cultural anthropology as the major field of orientation and of interest (Z. Islam & Shafie, 2006)

## ANTHROPOLOGY IN BANGLADSH: PHASES OF DEVELOPMENT

Anthropology started as an extension of natural history and gradually engaged in the study of so-called primitive man, of *other cultures* and societies. Anthropological enterprises are intended to explaining human behavior and the context in which the behavior embedded and is acted out. Although the institutional development of anthropology in Bangladesh is very recent, yet the ancient or early writings by travelers, missionaries and colonial administrators have presented anthropological materials on this region. These writings on the cultural or social history of these region contains anthropological essence, which, in terms of Eriksen and Nielsen, can be defined as proto-anthropology or near-anthropological writings (Eriksen & Nielsen, 2001). Of these proto-anthropological works, the earliest descriptions are mostly travelogues followed by missionary descriptions and colonial administrative records. We, however, can recognize the three developmental phases of anthropology in Bangladesh.

### The Formative Phase and Earlier Works

The sources of our knowledge on social life in Bengal during ancient and medieval period are very scanty, except a few literary sources (Rahim, 1963). Description on social and cultural fabric during precolonial period of this region mainly came from the travelers and missionaries. Some of the significant writings on Indian subcontinent including Bengal are: Battuta (2004), Bernier (1916), Bouchon&Thomaz (1988 original in 1521), Du Jarric (1615), Huan&Ch'eng-Chün (1970 original in 1544), Legge (1886), Manrique (1653trans. by Luard, &Hosten in 1926), Phillips (1885), Van der Heiden (1675) and Xuanzang (trans. by Beal in 1958). The subject matter of these writings are on various themes including village life, settlement pattern, geography, navigation, religion, trade and commerce, culture, local institutions and administration, and so on. The authors of these sources were mostly foreign-born travelers, sailors, traders or missionaries who had been trying to understand *other cultures*.

During colonial period, a significant number of studies have been conducted to explore the life of people living in this subcontinent. These studies were mainly driven by the colonial interest of conquest and bring people under administrative control. The studies mainly focused on several themes, for instances, language and linguistic features of different groups, caste system and social stratification, racial characteristics of the local people, social features of different ethnic/ tribal groups and so on. Apart from these, there were some travelogues and missionary reports contributed to the production of knowledge on the social life of this subcontinent during colonial period. **Table 1** provides an overview of the significant sources of information on the life of people under colonial administration.

The production of anthropological knowledge on this region (Bangladesh) begun during post-colonial era particularly around the middle of twentieth century. The Department of Sociology was founded in 1957 at the University of Dhaka which initially served as a forum for organizing ethnographic and ethnological studies in Bangladesh. During 50s, a number of anthropologists from different countries also did explorations in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) of Bangladesh. The first initiative came from UNESCO by sending Claude Levi-Strauss, the eminent French social anthropologist, to explore the possibilities of the development of social sciences in Bangladesh (A. N. Karim, 1974). Professor Levy-Strauss met government officials as well as university teachers and emphasized that together with the planning for the development of natural resources, the administration should not be oblivious to the development of human resources, without which all grandiose schemes for economic development might be frustrated (ibid). He had conducted short fieldwork on the deciduous forest people of Chittagong Hill Tracts in the eastern part of Bangladesh and was very much amazed seeing the rich storage of cultural diversities of the ethnic communities of Bangladesh. His fieldwork later paved the way for many other national and foreign anthropologists to do rigorous fieldwork among the ethnic, rural and peasant communities of Bangladesh. Karim mentioned the significance of the Professor Levy-Strauss's visit to Bangladesh and CHTs (A. N. Karim, 1974):

*He [Professor Levy-Strauss] was so much impressed by the pristine and untarnished primeval condition of the tribesmen, such as, the Mugs, the Murangs that at a gathering of intellectuals at Dacca, he in his enthusiasm exclaimed: "Bangladesh is a veritable place for social anthropologists". On his return to Paris, he continued to take active interest in the development of social sciences in Bangladesh, and began to send a series of scholars for the study of the tribal life as well as help develop the teaching and researches in the social sciences. In 1957, with UNESCO's help and assistance, the University of Dacca brought into existence a separate Department*

**Table 1.** Formative works shaping the emergence of Anthropology in Bangladesh.

Timeline	Formative Anthropological Works	
	Influential Works on Indian Subcontinent	Formative Works on Bangladesh Region
Pre-Colonial Era (Before 1757)	<b>Travelogues and writings about India:</b> (Battuta, 2004; Legge, 1886; Manrique, Trans. by Luard, & Hosten, 1926 [Original in 1653]; Phillips, 1885; Xuanzang & Beal (Trans.), 1958).	<b>Travelogue</b> (Bernier, 1916; Bouchon & Thomaz, 1988 [Original in 1521]; Du Jarric, 1615; Huan & Ch'eng-Chün, 1970 [Original in 1544]; Manrique et al., 1926 [Original in 1653]; van der Heiden, 1675).
Colonial era (1757 – 1947)	<b>Language and Linguistic Studies</b> (D. Bernot, 1958; Buchanan, 1799; Campbell, 1874; Konow, 1903; Pinnow et al., 1942; Sebeok, 1942; Shafer, 1955; Smith-Forbes, 1881; von Hevesy, 1930; Whitney, 1875). <b>Caste and Racial Studies</b> (Bose, 1967; Guha, 1936; Havell, 1918; J. H. Hutton, 1946; Majumdar, 1947; Morris, 1888; Sherring, 1879). <b>Ethnic/ Tribal Studies</b> (Brown, 1922; Buchanan, 1799; Dalton, 1872; G. A. Grierson, 1906; T. C. Hodson, 1922; Hughes, 1881; W. W. Hunter, Kisch, Mackie, O'Donnell, & Risley, 1877; R. S. Hutchinson, 1909; J. Hutton, 1921; J. H. Hutton, 1946; Lewin, 1869, 1870; Mills, 1931b; O'Malley, 1908; Phayre, 1841; Pogson, 1831; Risley, 1892, 1908; Roy, 1912, 1915; S. C. Roy, 1916; Roy, 1928; S. N. Roy, 1916; Sen, 1931; St-John, 1873). <b>Travelogue, Administrative and Other Studies</b> (Arousseau, 1920; Baden-Powell, 1896; Bose, 1929; Buchanan, 1807; Gait, 1906; Hoernle & Stark, 1906; W. W. Hunter, 1886; S. W. Jones, 1784; W. Jones, 1801; Lewin, 1885).	<b>Language and Linguistic Studies</b> (Buchanan, 1799; Campbell, 1874; G. Grierson, 1904; G. A. Grierson, 1906, 1968; Konow, 1903; Pinnow et al., 1942; Sebeok, 1942; von Hevesy, 1930). <b>Ethnic/ Tribal Studies</b> (Dalton, 1872; T. Hodson, 1921; W. Hunter, 1876; W. W. Hunter et al., 1877; R. H. S. Hutchinson, 1906; R. S. Hutchinson, 1909; Lewin, 1870; Mackenzie, 1884; Mills, 1931b; O'Malley, 1908; Pogson, 1831; Risley, 1892; Roy, 1912; Sen, 1931; St-John, 1873). <b>Travelogue, Administrative and Other Studies</b> (Ahmad, 1956; Bontekoe, 1929; Hosten, 1925; Jack, 1915; Mills, 1931a; Nathan, 1936; Prance, 1916).
Post-Colonial Era (Independence of India and Pakistan in 1947)	<b>Language and Linguistic Studies</b> (D. Bernot, 1958; Shafer, 1955). <b>Caste and Village Studies</b> (Ambedkar, 1945; Bailey, 1957, 1970; Beteille, 1965; S. Dube, 1963; S. C. Dube, 1958, 1964; Dumont, 1969; Dumont & Pocock, 1957; Elwin, 1947, 1964; Ghurye, 1957, 1969; Gough, 1955; Hasan, 1967; J. H. Hutton, 1961; Leach, 1960; Lewis, 1958; Majumdar, 1937, 1958, 1961; Marriott & Beals, 1955; Mayer, 1956, 1960; Opler & Singh, 1952; Sarkar, 1954; Sivertsen, 1963; M. Srinivas & Shah, 1960; M. N. Srinivas, 1952, 1960a, 1960b; Thorner, 1966; Vidyarthi, 1969; Wiser, 1936). <b>Ethnic/ Tribal Studies</b> (Datta-Majumder, 1956; Majumdar, 1961).	<b>Village Studies</b> (Ahmad, 1956; Ahmed, 1969; Beech, Bertocci, & Corwin, 1966; Greenhill & HILL, 1957; Hara, 1967; Husain, 1962; A. Islam, 1969; Lindenbaum, 1968; McCarthy, 1967; Mukherjee, 1948; Qadir, 1960; Rashiduzzaman, 1968; Zaidi, 1970). <b>Ethnic/ Tribal Studies</b> (L. Bernot, 1960; Bessaignet, 1958; Furer-Haimendorf, 1958; R. H. S. Hutchinson, 1906; R. S. Hutchinson, 1909; Kauffmann, 1962; F. Khan & Choudhuri, 1965; F. K. Khan & Khisha, 1970; Levi-Strauss, 1951; Lévi-Strauss, 1952; Löffler, 1964, 1968; Sopher, 1964).

*of Sociology. Thus, the introduction of sociology marked another major step in the development of social sciences in Bangladesh.*

Following Levi-Strauss, PierreeBassaignet, a sociologist from France and David Sopher (1963, 1964), a renowned South-Asian cultural geographer from the United States also conducted studies on the ethnic/ tribal communities of Chittagong Hill Tracts. Professor Pierree Bassaignet was appointed as the first Head of the Department of Sociology at the University of Dhaka. David Sopher wrote a number of articles based on his anthropological exploration in Chittagong. A few of those articles were published in the Annals of the Association of the American Geography and the Geographical Review. Lucien Bernot (1957) another social anthropologist wrote articles on Chittagong Hill Tribes. During the 1950s and 1960s, many of the sociologists worked on various anthropological issues mostly focusing on rural politics, power structure, social stratification, peasant societies and the ethnic communities. Nazmul Karim, a faculty member of the Sociology Department during that time, did his Ph.D. under the supervision of T. B. Bottomore at the University of London basing on anthropological and ethno-historic data collected from a village of Bangladesh. Karim's comparative study on Muslim stratification of India, Pakistan and Bangladesh is one of pioneering study in the area of social anthropology. During that period, "in Dacca University, anthropology has been proposed to be taught as a separate discipline under the auspices of the

**Table 2.** Founding works guiding the establishment of Anthropology discipline in Bangladesh

Focus of Interest		Example of Works	Dominant Paradigms
Themes	Issues		
<b>Village Studies</b>	Peasant Class Differentiation; Mode of Production; Agrarian Structure and social formation; Rural Power Structure and Leadership; Rural Development; Gender and Reproductive Health.	(Adnan & Rahman, 1978; Ali, 1975; Arefeen, 1986; Arens & Van Beurden, 1980; Aziz, 1979; Aziz & Maloney, 1985; Bertocci, 1972, 1977, 1984; Blair, 1974; Blanchet, 1984; A. Chowdhury, 1978; Ellickson, 1972; Haq, 1973; Hartmann & Boyce, 1983; Herbon, 1985; A. Islam, 1973; A. A. Islam, 1974; Jahangir, 1979; Jannuzi, Jannuzi, & Peach, 1980; Jansen, 1987; A. Karim, 1984; A. K. N. Karim, 1976; A. Z. Karim, 1990; F. R. Khan, 1979; Martius-von Harder, 1981; Miller, 1984; Rahman, 1981; Sarker, 1976; Thorp, 1978; Van Schendel, 1981; Westergaard, 1983; Wood, 1976; Zaman, 1982)	Marxism, Modernization theory, dependency and world system theories
<b>Ethnic/Tribal Studies</b>	Descriptive Ethnography	(Chakroborty, 1977; R. I. Chowdhury, Mia, Hossain, Choudhury, & Golamquddus, 1979; S. Islam & Ray, 1984; S. N. Islam, 1981; Mey, 1978; Qureshi, 1984; Sattar, 1971, 1975; A. Serajuddin, 1971; A. M. Serajuddin, 1984)	Cultural evolution, structural functionalism

Department of Sociology, and it is expected that all other universities will take similar steps in the near future” (Karim 1974: 3).

### Foundation Phase of Anthropology during 70’s and 80’s

The development of higher education receives impetus from state policies and plans. Bangladesh became independent in 1971 which brought into existence a set of different political ideologies and commitments with the spirit of secularism. The necessity of anthropology within institutional framework was gradually recognized in different universities which was expressed in the writings of Professor Karim, “Chittagong University has by now separate departments for sociology, political science and economics, and the creation of a department of anthropology and another department of public administration is under contemplation. Jahangirnagar University which started functioning just a few years ago at Savar, near Dacca, has organized the department of economics and plans to have departments of political science, sociology and anthropology in the near future” (Karim 1974: 3). But the said necessity of anthropology as a separate discipline was not materialized until the middle of 1980s.

The advancement of anthropology in Bangladesh continued with the efforts of a few individual scholars having academic affiliations to universities and institutions abroad during sixties and seventies. These studies were mainly village studies conducted by anthropologists, sociologists and scholars of allied disciplines of both home and abroad, following anthropological research tradition of doing intensive fieldwork. These scholarly works laid foundation of anthropological studies on various issues including rural social structure, power structure, social stratification, land tenure systems, agrarian structure, kinship systems and others (see [Table 2](#)).

Besides the department of sociology at different universities, the Institute of Bangladesh Studies (IBS) at the University of Rajshahi played another significant role in the development of anthropology in Bangladesh. The institute was established in 1974 and since then, it has been carrying out a lot of anthropological research on various aspects of rural societies. As a post-graduate research institute, IBS has been regarded as one of the most prestigious institutions in the country, which has attracted many foreign anthropologists to work in Bangladesh. For example, Jean Ellickson of the Western Illinois University of the USA (1974), Peter Bertocci an anthropologist from the Oakland University of the USA worked with the institute in 1974 and 1975 respectively and supervised a number of postgraduate research students. Joana Kirkpatrick was another anthropologist from Bennington College of the USA joined the institute in 1976 and stayed there for a little more than a year. After that, a Bangladesh-born American anthropologist named A.K.M. Aminul Islam from the Wright State University joined the institute in 1978, while followed by him, another American anthropologist Raymond Lee Owens arrived at the institute in 1979. Clarence C. Maloney, an anthropologist and linguist from the United States also worked with the IBS from 1979 to 1982. Mr. Jane Paul Emmert, an anthropologist from the University of Hawaii of the USA also worked with the IBS. Thus, the Institute of Bangladesh Studies played a significant role in the development of anthropology in the mid-1970s and 1980s. It is important to note that the IBS has been offering Anthropology as a required course for its M. Phil. and Ph.D. students. It is perhaps the only institute in the country at the postgraduate level which promotes anthropology among its students. It also provides its students with financial assistance and a work environment for carrying out anthropological research relating to topics on Bangladesh society and culture.





**Figure 1.** The transformation of research interests in Anthropology of Bangladesh from 1980 to 2010

### The Establishment Phase of Anthropology as a Separate Discipline

Anthropology as a separate discipline was first introduced at the Jahangir Nagar University in 1985/86. After that, a number of other public universities started Anthropology Programs (both Honors and Masters) during the 1990s and early 2000s. They include the University of Dhaka (1992), University of Chittagong (1996), Shahjalal University of Science and Technology (1995), University of Rajshahi (1998/99), University of Comilla (2009) and the Jagannath University (2007/8). During the same period, a number of private universities also came forward to offer anthropology courses within their Anthropology/ and Sociology or Social Science programs. Independent University of Bangladesh, North South University, East West University, BRAC University, Green University, Dhaka International University, Northern University, University of Asia Pacific, ASA University, University of Liberal Arts Bangladesh and few others have now anthropology programs either as separate department or anthropology as allied courses of other departments. In the last thirty years, anthropology has become a demandable subject within the faculty of Social sciences of different universities; and so, a large number of our country's brightest students are now attracted to the graduate and postgraduate programs of anthropology.

At this juncture, it must be noted that the areas of research interest of anthropologists and sociologists changed over different periods of time in Bangladesh. For example, during the period of the 1950s and 1960s, sociologists and anthropologists were mainly interested in doing research on tribal communities and the caste systems in rural Bangladesh, while during the period of the 1960s to 1980s the focus of interest shifted to the study of rural societies. The former periods were mainly influenced and characterized by the 'utilitarian' and 'interventionist' approaches embedded in colonial anthropology. But that does not mean that anthropologists or sociologists of these periods were preoccupied with naïve mimicry of the colonial tradition. Their works belong to these periods also bore the post-colonial ideology and sentiments marked by the intention to nativize anthropology which eventually weakened the colonial hegemony over the discipline. These periods along with the 1960s witnessed the uprise of cultural movements in the then East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) emanated from the struggle against the oppression of the Pakistani rulers which eventually led to the independence of Bangladesh in 1971. Works done by anthropologists or sociologists during these periods had a soul searching attempt in order to find out the cultural diversity history of the people. This trend continued till 1980s where anthropologists and sociologists of the newly independent country mainly focused on the agrarian dynamics of the rural society. The anti-imperialist political motivation among the native scholars at this time paved the way for studying rural societies from various genres of left-inclined theoretical paradigms. But due to the frustration with the oversimplification of the structuralist approaches, during the 90s anthropology and sociology, two separate traditions now, took an interpretive and critical turn influenced by the post-modernist and post-structuralist knowledge tradition. This tradition still dominates the anthropological and sociological researches in Bangladesh accommodating issues like identity, gender, environment and ecology, development, migration and diaspora, transnationalism etc.

The shifts in the research interests among the anthropologists of Bangladesh have clear reflection in the research works done by the postgraduate students in different anthropology departments of the country. Even though anthropology is now being taught in six public universities, we could collect data of the students' work from four universities covering a time frame from 2005 to 2015. But it must be remembered that not all four departments shared common interests, rather they have heterogeneous research priorities as shown in [Figure 2](#). It shows that while the students of Jahangir Nagar University had a high concentration on gender and sexuality related issues, ethnography and village studies have been dominant among the students of Dhaka University and Shahjalal University. And the students of Chittagong University have shown highest interest in issues pertaining

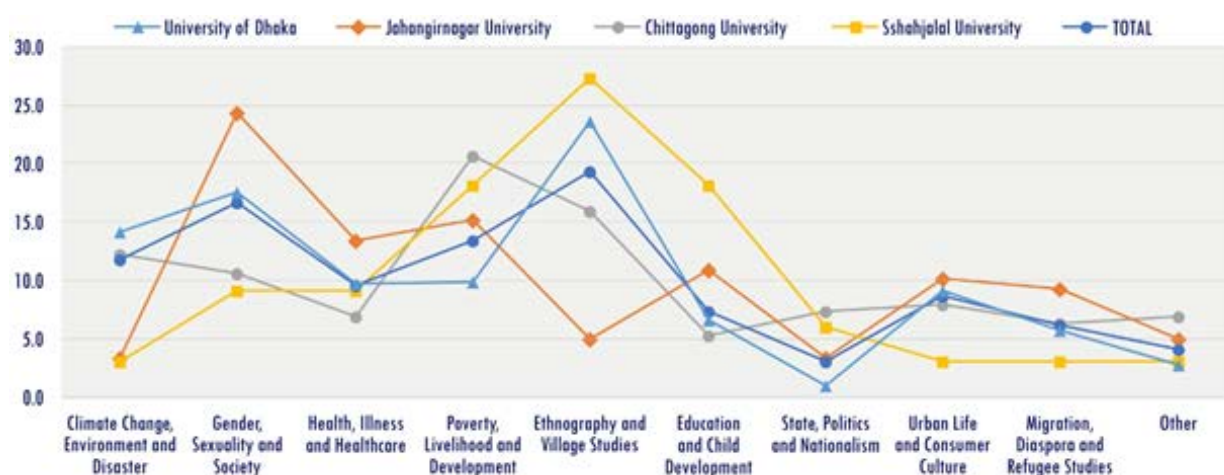


Figure 2. Focus of interest at postgraduate level research works in Anthropology from 2005 to 2015



Figure 3. Major employment for Anthropology graduates in Bangladesh

to poverty, livelihood and development. Apart from the major research areas graphed above, students of all the universities have also conducted research on issues like gerontology, film and media, folklore, historical construction, tourism industry, ship-breaking industry etc. which have been grouped under a separate category titled as ‘other’.

### SECTORS OF EMPLOYMENT OF ANTHROPOLOGY GRADUATES

In Bangladesh, like in other countries of the world, students who are graduating from various departments of anthropology are being mostly employed in national and international development and research organizations. For many organizations, anthropology graduates are the top choice as most of the anthropology students can easily engage with various community and social development activities. Special training on doing fieldworks among different communities, societies and cultures helps anthropology students to get involve in various research, development and action programs. Moreover, the multi-layered and critical understanding of the anthropology graduates over the complex social and cultural trajectories works as motivating factors for the development organizations to accommodate anthropology graduates. Now there are hundreds of local and international non-government organizations in Bangladesh, where anthropology graduates can easily get jobs with good salary packages. Opportunities for higher education in different foreign universities are also increasing.

Beside different national and international development organizations, the Government is also giving due emphasis on the employment of anthropologists in their various research and development programs. The Government is not only sponsoring anthropological research but also giving emphasis on the teaching of anthropology at different levels of education. In last 2/3 years, a number of anthropology courses have been included in the curriculum of primary, secondary and higher secondary level of education.

Professional anthropologists are now working with a number of government-funded research projects implemented by the Ministry of Education and facilitated by the International Mother Language Institute, University Grants Commission, Bangladesh Bureau of Educational Information and Statistics (BANBEIS), and by the Prime Minister’s Office through A2i (Access to Information) and Development Assistance for Minor Ethnic Communities (DAMEC) projects. Other Ministries of the Government have also some projects where anthropologists are working. Knowing the importance of anthropology in development, many of the international organizations working in Bangladesh such as the World Bank, UNDP, UNFPA, ILO, ICDDR’B, Action Aid, OXFAM, CARE Bangladesh, UNICEF, UNESCO, WFP and others are now increasingly looking for more anthropologists for their qualitative research and development programs (see Figure 3).

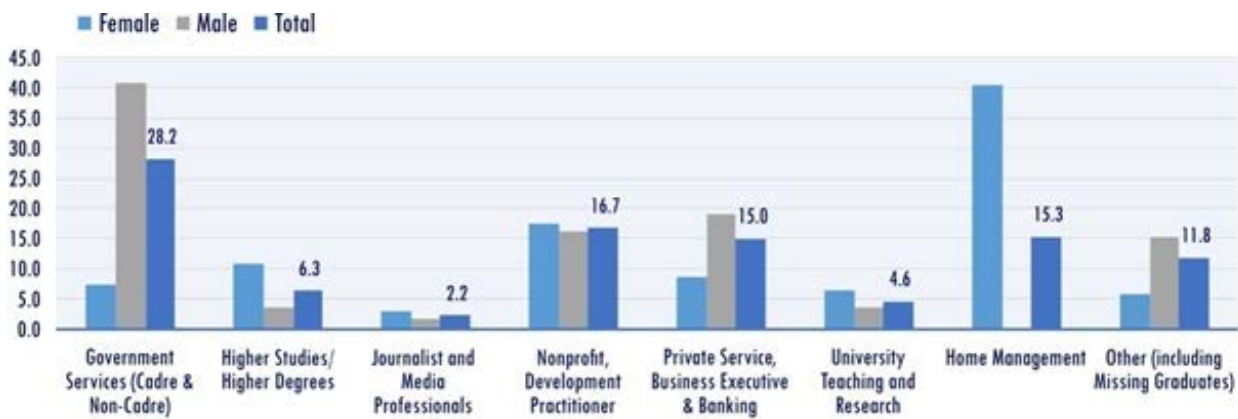


Figure 4. Major employment sectors of Anthropology graduates from 2005 to 2013

A statistical attempt has been made in Figure 4 in order to show the employment status of the anthropology graduates of the University of Dhaka. It demonstrates that Government services of various sorts stand for the highest sector of interest for the graduates. It does not take great effort to assume that in a developing country like Bangladesh job security is given highest priority. And it is equally a well-known fact that government jobs come with more security and even in bad situation like economic recession, government seldom opts for job cut. So, irrespective of any particular stream or profession, job seekers in Bangladesh prefer to be hired in government sectors. Figure 4 shows that 28.2% anthropology graduates have hitherto been appointed in various government jobs of which male students constitute 40% and that of the female students is 7.5%. Development sector and private services respectively stand next to the government sectors in terms of priority given by the graduates. 16.7% graduates are involved in development organizations while 15% opted for private services. The female to male ratio in government sector job participation rate shows that despite many attempts to ensure equal gender participation in every walk of life, female graduates are yet to find an equal footing in government sector jobs. If we consider that national scenario in this regard we would find that the ratio found among the anthropology graduates is of no exception. The Labour Force Survey conducted in 2012<sup>1</sup> reveals that in 2010 while male participation in formal sectors stood for 14.5% that of the female was only 07.7%. But it is a matter of hope that Bangladesh government, with an aim to achieve the SDG goals, has given highest priority to ensure increased female labour force participation. And it is presumable that female anthropology graduates won't fall behind to grasp the opportunities in the days to come. Hopeful scenario in terms of equal gender participation is already prevailing in non-governmental job sectors. But again, it is matter of despair that a great number of female graduates are involved in home management only which eventually echoes the dominant stereotypical image of womanhood and also contrasts the very spirit of anthropology.

## STREAMING ANTHROPOLOGY INTO NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

The anthropological engagement in and on development and the interface of applied anthropology and development has now become an important issue for discussion and debate. Engaging anthropology for development and social change also raises methodological, epistemological and ethical questions. A core concern of anthropology remains the engagement that fieldwork implies and such empirically grounded fieldwork provides anthropology with its ethnographic insights and analytical tools for understanding the society and its dynamics. Over the years, anthropologists have come to turn their attention to development as a critical anthropological subject of study. Yet the relationship between anthropology and development remains utterly ambiguous and contested. Consultancy and short-term research on a predefined problem have increased with the demand of development institutions for anthropological knowledge, a situation which seems to have deepened the schism between a theoretically oriented anthropology and a more applied anthropology. The major challenges of engaging anthropology are therefore to reconnect theory and practical application, and to create a platform for dialogue between a theoretically oriented, empirically grounded anthropology, and an anthropology directly applied to development and social change. It is fact that by the skillful and systematic combination of participation and observation of social life and social interaction, anthropologist is embedded in, and influences life in the social setting s/he is studying (Hagberg & Ouattara, 2012; Sluka & Robben, 2007). Same line of reasoning is suggested by Laurent, "Engagement is an obligation, and that non-engagement is a methodological error, because scientific validation in anthropology is done through the engagement to objectify one's subjectivity in order to establish the

<sup>1</sup> Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS) 2010. *Gender Statistics of Bangladesh 2012*. Statistics and Informatics Division Ministry of Planning Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh. P. 70



facts of reality, according to one's interlocutors" (Laurent, 2011). Nowadays, we can see that anthropological knowledge and perspectives are demanded by development agencies as it is considered badly needed to understand and, by extension, influence development and social change. But the main challenge for today's anthropology is how and by what means anthropology may engage in development in very practical ways with scientific rigor and methodological requirements. In terms of practicing anthropology, Low and Merry distinguish a number of forms of engagement: (1) sharing and support, (2) teaching and public education, (3) social critique, (4) collaboration, (5) advocacy, and (6) activism (Low & Merry, 2010).

The situation of the development industry in Bangladesh is of no exception than that of the entire world and, might be said that, "It forces us to question some of our most deeply-held convictions and even to compromise between the interests of the communities we represent and those of donor agencies, who use the development discourse to achieve and maintain a position of power" (O'Driscoll, 2009). According to Pieterse, the development industry implicates 'an ideological performance in which discourse production, paradigm maintenance and tweaking the perception of receding horizons are the actual achievement' (Nederveen Pieterse, 2012; Pieterse, 2009). In Bangladesh, the value of social science, let alone anthropology, in development researches and activities was not even recognized until the late 1980s by GOs and NGOs. There is a disjunction between development projects and anthropologists, as Mannan suggests that development practitioners demand instant solutions, based on statistical figures, to their problems which anthropologists, very often, are unable to produce due to their disciplinary orientation (Mannan, 2006).

Does it mean that the avoidance of anthropological perspectives is coming with a better result for the project personnel? The answer is more often negative. In most cases what has been observed is the fact that project personnel, by seeking short-term solutions to their problem, are creating, though unintentionally, long-term problems which eventually initiates another new project and thus takes the development imperatives away from one of its central goal known as 'cost minimization'. A few cases from Bangladesh will help find how short-term problem solving attitude along with the exclusion of social science perspectives has created failures in the long term.

Bangladesh is a country of cultural and social diversity. A variety of occupational groups and communities live in Bangladesh covering a much diversified area of uplands, coasts, floodplains, hills and haor basins. Life and livelihood of communities in Bangladesh are very much dependent on different ecosystems and their services. People and the communities living and working in different regions and environments, in rural or urban areas, in coastal or hill areas, have different social and cultural backgrounds, livelihood practices and economic activities. To address any problem of these diversified communities, development policy and planning should be taken with proper understanding about the communities and programs for such communities should reflect the aspirations of the communities (Saifur & Islam, 1997).

Since independence, Bangladesh has been undergoing with many large scheme development programs implemented by both the government and non-government local and international agencies. Many of such big projects, for example Jamuna Multipurpose Bridge Project (JMBP), Flood Action Plan (FAP), Dhaka Metropolitan Development Plan (DMDP), Dhaka-Narayanganj-Demra (DND) embankment project, Beel Dakatia Project (Khulna and Jessore District), Chandpur Scheme, Meghna-Dhonagada Irrigation Project had become less effective and created a lot of social, economic and environmental problems, as these were not developed in consultation with the grassroots people and were not implemented through the participation of local stakeholders (Saifur & Ahmed, 2001; Saifur & Islam, 1997; Saifur & Mahmood, 2016). For many instances, policies were formulated by the administrators and the development professionals through conventional top-down approach. A closer look at the FAP example reveals that FAP not only ignored the people's participation but also adopted anti-people activities such as embankment construction and land acquisition which ultimately worked as 'death trap' for many of the local people. Without considering the people's knowledge base, FAP rather took some inappropriate programs and created conflicts among the local communities. The ongoing Padma Multi-Purpose Project and the Rampal Coal Based Power Generation Project might have the same fate, if these projects are not implemented on the basis of the consultation with its various stakeholders in collaboration with the people like anthropologists and other social scientists who are capable to work with the people at the project level and can understand the immediate and long term impacts of any of these projects on the local community, economy and the environment. However, the broader national policy making, planning and programme design process completely follow a top-down approach without any proper accounting of local peoples' perspectives or community voice.

It is now a fact that for determining an appropriate development intervention, planners should have sufficient knowledge about the community or the stakeholders. It is also required to understand that stakeholders know a great deal not only about their circumstances, resource status, needs and constraints but also capable to take new scheme for their own development in their own ways even with their limited resources. The more the government and other development agencies engage anthropologists in their policy formulation and intervention process, it is expected that the program will be more sustainable, equitable and effective. The situation demands an



anthropological approach in the public policy making in Bangladesh because ‘anthropological approach uncovers the constellations of actors, activities, and influences that shape policy decisions, their implementation, and their results’ (Wedel, Shore, Feldman, & Lathrop, 2005).

## TOWARD A MORE ENGAGED ANTHROPOLOGY IN BANGLADESH

In this article, we endeavor to provide an overview of anthropology’s history and the future prospects for the discipline in Bangladesh. Although the preceding discussion focused on the shared legacy of anthropology in India and Bangladesh, yet there are differences in these two national traditions. Reflections on anthropology, as a field of scholarship and research practices in India, it might be said that the discipline has somewhat been subsumed within sociology owing, perhaps, to its intellectual heritage in British Social Anthropology. In many Indian Universities, sociology-anthropology department is combined under the label of ‘sociology’ without differentiating between anthropology and sociology. This type of disciplinary configuration is also validated by eminent Indian scholar, Professor M. N. Srinivas, a British trained social anthropologist, who rejected the label ‘anthropology’ in favor of sociology (Thompson, 2012) cf. (Chatterji, 2005): 163). Absorbing anthropology within sociology represents, according to Thompson, “a particular British post-colonial position that sought to suppress the very colonial conditions of anthropology, especially British anthropology, which would come under such harsh criticism in the following decades” (ibid: 669). However, unlike Indian context, we observe a strong tradition of divergence between anthropology and sociology in Bangladesh. The public universities in Bangladesh house both anthropology and sociology as separate departments and recruit faculty members and new students separately. These departments have played a significant role in giving anthropology a public profile and as a focal point for interactions among members of anthropologists’ community over the past decades in the country.

The public visibility of anthropology in Bangladesh, as a discipline, has somewhat increased in recent years. A close examination of the contemporary anthropological practice, in the country, suggests the priorities of bringing public engagement close to the center of the discipline. The call for an engaged anthropology that addresses public issues has received growing importance in many recent articles and books (Basch, Saunders, Sharff, & Peacock, 1999; Borofsky, 2000, 2010; Lamphere, 2004; Low & Merry, 2010; Patterson, 2001; Rylko-Bauer, Singer, & Willigen, 2006). Anthropology needs to find approaches and ways to generate the impacts of the discipline and connect to wider audiences (Borofsky, 2010; Rylko-Bauer et al., 2006). As Peacock suggests, “If the discipline is to gain recognition and a valuable identity, it must accomplish things; it must be active beyond its analytical strategy. Pragmatism and searching critique need not be mutually exclusive” (Peacock, 1997):12). Following from this line, anthropology in Bangladesh should respond to this call for more engaged anthropology and generate significant impact on both academia and the broader social arena, thereby contributing to widen the horizon of anthropological work in Bangladesh. In a conference at Dhaka in 2005, while discussing on the prospects and future directions of anthropology in Bangladesh, Professor Fredrik Barth expressed that, “I think ... you have a marvelous opportunity with the kind of enthusiasm that I see among you, and you can make some very good anthropology” (Islam & Shafie, 2006).

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