

# The geopolitics of bare life in 1970s' Bangladesh

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## Abstract

This article explores how the people and landscape of the Bay of Bengal came to be cast in terms of what Giorgio Agamben called 'bare life' - a people without the protection or mandate of sovereign law - in the international discourse of the early 1970s. This was a period marked in the emerging nation of Bangladesh by cyclone, war, and famine. International actors were influenced by Malthusian notions of the need for 'triage' in relation to international food security, but also by counter-currents marked by a humanitarian impulse to aid this disaster-prone and populous poor country. This article discusses prominent examples of the framing of the Bangladesh development challenge as a Herculean effort of uncertain outcome, arguing that this framing licensed a kind of humanitarian experimentalism which has pervaded Bangladesh's national development project, and shaped international development more broadly. Geopolitics exert biopower over the Bangladeshi population in new and different ways, but the nation-state now exercises greater control over the conditions of bare life than in the 1970s, and is better able to protect its people.

## Keywords

Bangladesh  
Bare life  
Bhola cyclone  
Biopolitics  
Disasters  
Famine

## Introduction

In its introduction to the world in the early 1970s, the new nation of Bangladesh was cast as a place of human and ecological devastation, in which people struggled for survival in a Hobbesian state of nature, a zone of cyclones, war and famine. Television news was in its infancy, and the outside world witnessed terrible images of human suffering on a scale previously unseen by the West (Mohaiemen, 2008). The Western gaze was influential. A senior US State Department official described Bangladesh as ‘the international basket case’, and that label has stuck throughout its half-century, even if in recent years it has served chiefly to marvel at how far Bangladesh has come.

This article explores powerful depictions of the place and people soon to become Bangladesh, examining how those representations reflected neo-Malthusian ideological currents in Washington DC policy, including in relation to the United States’ controversial policy on the Bangladesh 1974 famine. Malthusian notions of the dispensability or disposability of some of the world’s most vulnerable people came from powerful places, but they faced counter-currents from the liberal end of politics and popular culture, for which Bangladesh became the object of a visibly heart-felt humanitarian impulse. This more compassionate view arguably won the day, at least in liberal Western discourse. But against the view that Bangladeshi people were on the permanent brink of disaster, humanitarian compassion was transformed into a kind of humanitarian experimentalism, exercised to manage the population in what were framed as economically viable ways, largely without reference to their human rights (Murphy, 2017). The idea of a purely humanitarian and altruistic mission in Bangladesh occupied its international relations, in particular with the United States. Disinterested aid as an act of pure charity, rather than out of the mutual interest supposed by foreign policy or trade, became the main site on which the sovereign state of Bangladesh interacted with other countries.

The central theme here is how ideas about the bleakness of Bangladesh’s prospects helped license this experimental approach to the economic and human development, to discuss which, I draw on my own work and that of Michelle Murphy. That the ‘basket case’ became the ‘aid lab’ (Hossain 2017a), a site of ‘exuberantly experimental’ aid-financed economic and social programmes (Murphy, 2017), is not in question. But what drove that external construction of Bangladesh is less clear. Here I offer one answer: that the treatment of Bangladeshis in the 1970s as ‘bare life’, or people on the edge of survival without the protection of a sovereign state, enabled an ideology of strict altruism in aid policies towards Bangladesh. This ideology gave moral cover to aid experimentalism. It meant that aid effectiveness came to be viewed in terms of results, and in a quantification of social impacts that required an ‘economization of life’ - a way of governing people as if their lives could be measured as units of the economy (Murphy, 2017). I hope to build on Murphy’s pioneering work on how Bangladeshi lives came to be treated as units of development impact by offering an explanation of how such measures of human life became not only permissible, but justified. Despite the occasional intrusion of human rights concerns, such justifications remain the driving ethical calculus of international aid.

To understand how Bangladesh went from being perceived as a ‘basket case’ to the object of humanitarian experimentalism, I draw on Giorgio Agamben’s idea of ‘bare life’. Agamben’s account of living beings without sovereignty over the conditions of life and

death, who are deemed beyond the scope of the law (1998) draws attention to how constructions of Bangladeshis helped justify external intervention. The concept of 'bare life' has helped illuminate mechanisms of powerlessness, exploitation, and official neglect in Bangladesh, chiefly among groups experiencing what Jones (2009) calls 'displaced sovereignty' – for example, camps of Urdu-speaking people in Bangladesh after 1971, residents of the enclave islands of Bangladesh surrounded by India, both in their ways relics of Britain's careless cartographies of empire and partition (Cons, 2016). In the struggles of those excluded from the national law, the use of 'bare life' takes us to the very edges of Bangladeshi sovereignty, showing us where those lie, and what that means.

In dominant Western perspectives in the early 1970s, it was not disfavoured groups but Bangladeshis as a whole seen to be at chronic risk of disaster. What did it mean for a whole country to be designated 'bare life'? I am interested here in how constructions by powerful actors in the global North rendered Bangladeshis beyond politics, and (therefore) subject to purely humanitarian and altruistic purposes. Whatever the merits of the argument that international aid was motivated by pure altruism, it is precisely these moral claims that licensed experiments on the lives and institutions of Bangladeshi society. These aid experiments, as I have written elsewhere, have generated vast social and public changes, many for the good, but plenty of ambiguous value or outright harm (Hossain 2017a).

The article does not claim to make theoretical advances in Agamben's concept of 'bare life', but to use it to make sense of an enduring puzzle: how and why Bangladesh started on its experimental development project, and with what implications for sovereignty and state power in this emerging nation. A motivation for this probe into the origins of US-led humanitarian experimentalism in Bangladesh is an unresolved question about the culpability of the US for delayed food aid during the Bangladesh famine of 1974; this matter warrants closer investigation as a matter of historical accountability to Bangladeshis, and as a critical moment in international aid history. The present paper originated in an effort to unpack the discursive and ideological currents within which famine relief policy was devised during that period, in an effort to make sense of the behaviour of the US during the 1974 famine (on which, see in particular Sobhan, 1979; Islam, 2003).

The article proceeds as follows. The next section discusses the concept of 'bare life', and why it helps make sense of how Bangladesh was seen by powerful actors in the 1970s. The article then examines four formative moments for Western perceptions of Bangladesh: the Bhola cyclone of 1970, the episode in which powerful US policymakers labelled Bangladesh the 'basket case', an alarmist but influential book about famine and 'triage theory', and George Harrison's *Concert for Bangladesh*. These moments are followed by a discussion of the emphasis on humanitarianism in views of the world's role in relation to Bangladesh, drawing indicatively on oral testimonies and official texts. A final section concludes with some final reflections about the Bangladeshi state's growing biopower, and its implications for human rights.

## Bare life and state sovereignty in Bangladesh

The parallels between dominant constructions of 1970s' Bangladesh and Agamben's concept of 'bare life' show how such constructions draw boundaries around and exclusions from sovereign power. In Agamben's account of Roman legal history, the figure of *homo sacer* exemplified a form of life that was 'politically unqualified', biologically human but excluded from civic life or the purview of the law. The existence of 'bare life' determined the boundaries of the polity (who was in or out) but also the power of the sovereign, who determined to whom the law applied and the conditions under which a 'state of exception' or exemption from the law could be made (Agamben, 2005).

But while sovereignty is defined by the power to determine to whom the law applies, for Foucault, 'natural life comes to be included more and more in the mechanisms and calculations of state power' (Edkins, 2000, p. 5); modern state power is increasingly exercised as 'biopower', or the technologies and institutions that govern biological life (Rabinow and Rose, 2006). A state with biopower is able to decide where the boundaries lie because it can take the actions needed to protect or to exclude. Bangladesh in the early 1970s stands out as a state deficient in biopower – unable to feed its people, incapable of protecting against the disasters of the delta.

Determining who or what constitutes 'bare life' is a political act of acute importance in the world of aid and humanitarian assistance. Two distinct elements in the construction of 1970s' Bangladesh resonate with Agamben's ideas of the political effects of bare life. The first is the exclusionary matter of who gets to be governed by sovereign power. The weakness of the Bangladesh state in the 1970s meant it lacked the administrative capacity or material resources to make decisions over whether large sections of its population should live or die – to exercise biopower, in effect. Its lack of sovereignty over its own population, in turn, was treated as grounds for its exclusion from the protection or support of global powers. As Jenny Edkins has argued in relation to refugee camps, the 'sovereign power, the power that produced and was produced by the state of exception that was the relief camp, was the international community with its humanitarian agencies' (2000, p. 14). In framing Bangladesh as an entire land of bare lives, the international community with its humanitarian agencies, and soon after, its development agencies, licenced itself to intervene.

This sense of bare life as an exclusion from state rule is addressed in some informative debates about sovereign power in contemporary Bangladesh. Agamben's argument that the construction of populations as 'bare life' enacts sovereignty is both confirmed and complicated by scholarship on the enclave communities, those bizarre legacies of empire and partition that created small islands of Bangladesh in a sea of India and vice versa (Cons, 2016). The 'everyday lives of the enclave residents expose the rough edges of the sovereign state' (2009, p. 377), rendering sovereignty itself suspect:

the existence of the enclaves undermines the claim of an unambiguous connection between a sovereign authority, a particular territory, and a single people (Jones, 2009, p. 377).

Shewly, also on the enclaves, finds that 'bare life is not produced by excessive sovereign power but rather by a state of abandonment' (2013, p. 24), as much a state that cannot, as chooses not to, include them. Writing about the camps of Urdu-speaking populations stranded in Bangladesh since liberation, Redclift finds that much reading of Agamben 'suppresses a political reading of the camp, thus ignoring the complex social relations contained within' (2013, p. 309); this serves as an important reminder to examine sovereign power from below, as well as from above. Dunn and Cons similarly reimagine the denizens of borderlands and camps as 'burdened subjects rather than objects', to afford a more realistic understanding of sovereignty in these 'sensitive spaces' (2014, p. 105). Sovereignty was by no means a settled question in 1970s' Bangladesh, and the use of bare life ideologies on the new nation points to a malleable construct, at least as it applied to the lives of its newly-made citizens.

The literature offers several productive advances on Agamben's theory in the context of Bangladeshi sovereignty, but Shewly's idea that bare life is created not only by sovereign powers choosing, but also those *failing* to exercise sovereignty is of particular interest. Shewly argues that in ignoring violence against its own citizens, the Bangladesh state treats them as 'bare life' gave me fresh insight into my own conclusion (Hossain 2017a): that even for the majority population living neither in enclaves nor in refugee camps, the emergence of Bangladeshi sovereignty has not been automatic. There has been a protracted (and incomplete) struggle for biopower by the state, and this has meant growing the state's capacities to decide who dies, but also over the technologies to govern life (Rabinow and Rose, 2006). The choices that the Bangladesh state has made with respect to the lives, bare or otherwise, of people in its territory plainly matter. But the Bangladeshi state has not always had the power to take such decisions; the years since 1971 have been driven by the political imperative to build its administrative, political, and societal capacities to enable the lives, rather than only lament the deaths, of the people under its rule (Hossain, 2017b).

A second element uncovered by the bare life treatment of the Bangladesh of the 1970s is less commonly discussed in relation to Bangladesh<sup>1</sup>: this is what could be called the sacred nature of those who are treated as bare life. In Agamben's account, *homo sacer* was a figure who was unprotected by law and so could be killed with impunity. But their death could not be a sacrifice, that is, a religious or ritual act. Refugees and people suffering from famine or disasters occupy a 'sanctified' space in Western liberal thought (Barnett and Stein, 2012). In this they are akin to *homo sacer*, as the objects of humanitarian aid are deemed beyond or above political consideration: 'the operation of power in the relief effort ... meant that the refugees had been produced as "bare life," life that could be "saved" but not life that had a political voice' (Edkins, 2000, p. 14). No person or state could be held to account before the law for the millions of deaths of starving or storm-swept people in the early 1970s; but the attempt to save them from death would become a (secular) sacred act, holy not because it was written in some scripture, but because it was wholly altruistic, without political intent. Here my aim is to draw attention to the sanctification of the Western impulse to aid

Bangladesh, and how this justified an experimentalism that would have been disallowed by a state better able to exercise decisions of life and death itself.

We turn next to four moments in which the nation soon to be known as Bangladesh was first introduced to the world, in which its people were cast as 'bare life' - a people without hope, rather than as they were – a historically marginalized people waging a war of liberation against the military might of Pakistan.

## Bhola, 1970

In November 1970, one of the most destructive storms in world history struck Bhola in the southwest Bay of Bengal. This was then the province of East Pakistan, with over a thousand miles of India separating it from the centre of the Pakistani state and military power in the West. Between a quarter and half a million people died when they and their homes and livestock and livelihoods were struck by a storm travelling at 150 miles an hour at high tide. It unleashed a 20 foot tidal wave of impossible ferocity of violence (Hossain 2017b) (see Figure 1). *The New York Times* described a scene of utter devastation:

*a lone dog, a mangy brown mongrel, survived on the island of Shakuchia. Most of the birds are gone, killed or driven off by the cyclone. That is why no vultures had descended on the corpses, which had lain untouched and blackened in the sun until they were haphazardly buried* (Schanberg, 1970, p. 1).

The story recounts the ordeal of a couple, 40 year old farmer Munshi Mustansher Billa and his wife, who had watched helplessly as one by one each of their five children was torn away from their grasp by howling winds and waves. Finally,

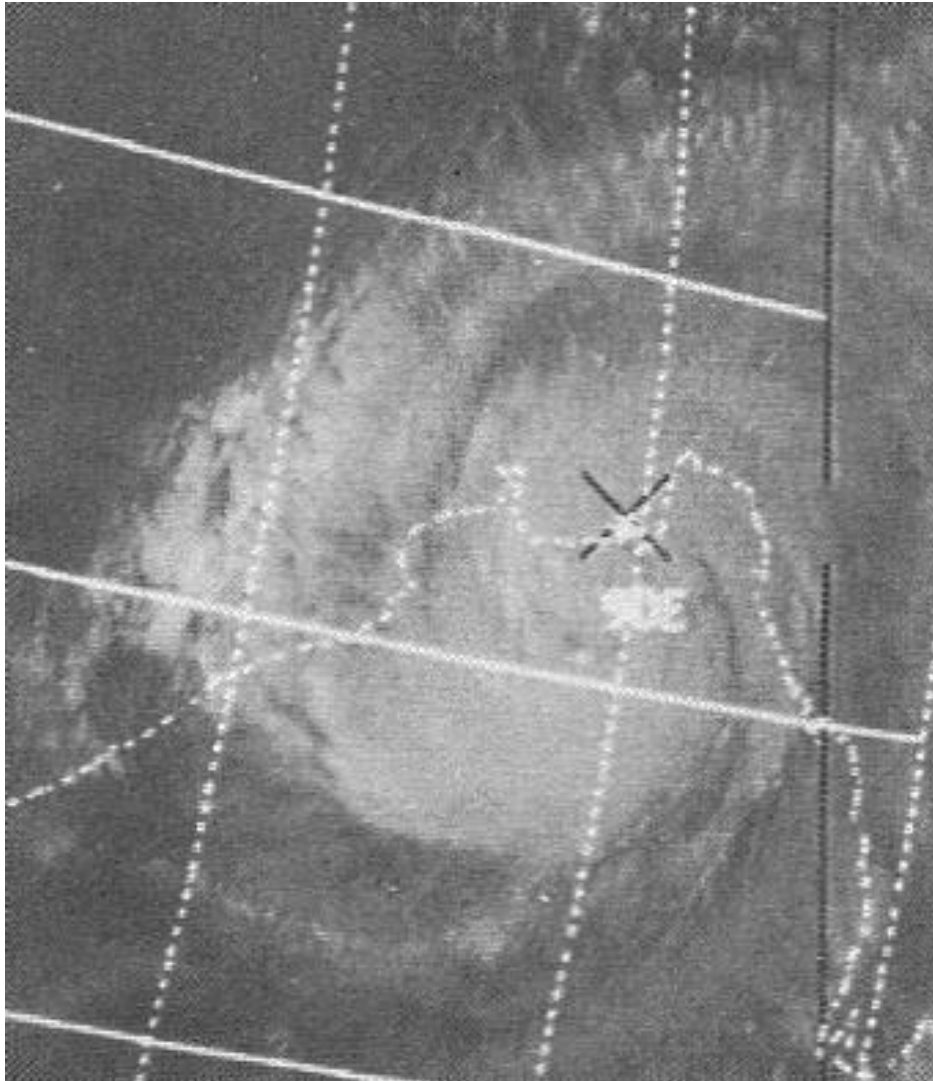
*Sapped of all strength, they fell down on the sodden earth and wept themselves to sleep. [Their] skin had been scraped raw... Their clothes had been ripped off by the storm* (Schanberg 1970, 2).

While depicting the bare life to which these people of Bhola have been reduced, *The New York Times* article pays due attention to the politics of this disaster, fingering the negligence of the West Pakistani authorities for failure to mitigate or prevent the destruction. Nevertheless, to the outsider it is the human devastation and not the political forces that shaped it that is most forcefully conveyed. The political fallout from this disaster took the form of a stunning victory by the East Pakistan Awami League in the first democratic elections of Pakistan that triggered the civil war and Bangladesh's independence (Hossain 2017b). For present purposes, what is most relevant is that this was a such devastating tragedy that the international media came to record it; this was the moment when the outside world got its first glimpse of the people and the place that soon became Bangladesh.

A Thames Television film<sup>2</sup> about the aftermath offers an insight into those initial depictions. Across a grainy black-and-white half hour film, we are shown a watery land with no infrastructure, peopled by peasants and fisherfolk wholly exposed to the tropical storms of the Bay (see Figure 2). There is an account of three survivors of the storm, rescued from the sea by (Cold War observers note) a passing Russian ship. The voiceover describes their scars

as 'the surface wounds of clinging too tenaciously to life' (*Thames TV Bholá Cyclone*, 1970, p. 2: 44). They are relieved to be home, but their village is devastated: we see a flat landscape broken only by the slender trunks of coconut palms and betel nut that bend without breaking. It seems an inhospitable, featureless landscape.

*Figure 1 NASA images of the Bholá cyclone*



Source: 1 ©NOAA (*Mariners Weather Log*, January 1971, pg. 19)

Picture: BayofBengalTCNov1219700956UTCITOS1.png

<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File%3ABayofBengalTCNov1219700956UTCITOS1.png>; Used under Creative Commons licence

Figure 2 Opening scenes from Thames TV's Bhola cyclone film



Source: 2 Screenshot from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=krtJM0lz4lw>

The film then visits a group of British Army engineers who had arrived to help with the relief effort. They complain of sitting idle because the Pakistani officer authorized to release their relief materials has not arrived. Into the traumatized and desperate state of the local people these engineers read lethargy and indifference; from their brief experience, they are suspicious of its humanitarian aims. The Pakistani officer finally arrives, and is without evidence described by the voiceover as 'sympathetic' to the cyclone victims. His prosperous appearance, pale skin, and sunglasses mark him out as every bit as foreign as the beefy British engineers: '[t]he viewer is left with no great confidence in the future of these people' (Hossain 2017b, 197).

The Bhola cyclone was such a disaster that even if the Pakistani authorities were slow and callous in their response, the rest of the world came to help. Iran declared a day of mourning, and offers of planes, relief and personnel poured in from all around the world. The disaster was the first emergency handled by the group that eventually became Médecins Sans Frontières. It was also the inspiration for F. H. Abed, the founder of the world's largest development non-governmental organization, BRAC, who took a boat out to help when the cyclone hit, and was forever marked by what he witnessed of the 'fragility of life of poor people' (cited in Hossain 2017b, 197).

Human devastation, in particular that wrought by disasters and famine, was nothing new to this part of the world. Cyclones had killed thousands of people here over the past decade alone (Frank and Husain, 1971). But this time, the spotlight of the international media was on the delta. What was found was an unhappy combination of poverty, population and



limited natural resources on an unimaginably vast scale, an unfortunate uniqueness 'previously obscured by the area's incorporation into a larger entity' (CIA, 1972). Immediately following the Bhola cyclone, this implausible concentration of underdevelopment, poverty, and natural disaster fought a mostly guerilla war of liberation against its oppressors in the larger entity of West Pakistan. Bangladeshis sought national sovereignty, for among other reasons, to protect themselves against disasters such as the Bhola cyclone, to which they were exposed.

### 'Not our basket case'

Bangladesh found no friends among the powerful nations during the liberation war that followed the crackdown on Bengali nationalists in 1971, and support was slow even when nationhood was achieved. There was nothing inevitable about the birth of Bangladesh (Raghavan 2013), and the independence struggle was politically inconvenient for the US, for whom the Pakistani military leadership were brokering relations with China. Bengali nationhood was undesired by India and the Soviet Union, eyeing similar secessionist struggles at home (Bass, 2013).

Bangladesh's economic viability was in question, as it had been at the time of Partition (Ali, 2019). This was an unimaginably densely-populated part of the world prone to natural disaster and famine, yet dependent on subsistence agriculture, with low levels of economic development and no natural resources to speak of (CIA, 1972; Nyrop, 1975). From the outset, aid and economic prospects flavoured US foreign policy towards South Asia. This included a favourable tilt towards Pakistan in World Bank IDA (soft) loans, and a correspondingly punitive 'short tether' food aid policy for India (Rudolph and Rudolph, 1980a, 1980b), possibly the model for US food aid policy in response to the 1974 famine in Bangladesh (Sobhan, 1979, 1991).

Whatever their views on the economic viability of Bangladesh, US cold war foreign policy objectives were the main motivation for the infamous 'tilt' in White House foreign policy (led in the Nixon administration by National Security Advisor, later Secretary of State, Henry Kissinger) to the (West) Pakistan side. From this angle, 'the Bengalis became collateral damage for realigning the global balance of power' (Bass, 2013, p. xv). It was during the Indian intervention into the Liberation war in early December 1971 that the infamous 'basket case' epithet was used, at a Washington Special Actions Group (WSAG)<sup>3</sup> meeting on December 6<sup>th</sup>. Jack Anderson, 'America's Most Famous Investigative Reporter' who broke the 'basket case' story before the documents were public, noted that public sensitivities around the genocide were so great that a fake WSAG meeting was staged for the television cameras, while the real meeting went on in the Situation Room in the White House basement (Anderson, 1974, p. 226).

The exchange is well-known (Bari, 2008). The meeting discussed military, aid and other strategies for bringing about an end to the war in East Pakistan, favouring West Pakistan. I want to draw particular attention to the specific mention of famine and the likely need for emergency relief. Near the end of the meeting, apropos of nothing that had gone before, Kissinger raised the possibility of famine:

*Dr. Kissinger: (to Mr. Williams [Deputy Administrator, USAID, Chairman of Interdepartmental Working Group on East Pakistan Disaster Relief]) Will there be a massive famine in East Pakistan?*

*Mr. Williams: They have a huge crop just coming in.*

*Dr. Kissinger: How about next spring?*

*Mr. Williams: Yes, there will be famine by next spring unless they can pull themselves together by the end of March.*

*Dr. Kissinger: And we will be asked to bail out the Bangla Desh [sic] from famine next spring?*

*Mr. Williams: Yes.*

*Dr. Kissinger: Then we had better start thinking about what our policy will be.*

*Mr. Williams: By March the Bangla Desh will need all kinds of help.*

*Mr. Johnson: They'll be an international basket case.*

*Dr. Kissinger: But not necessarily our basket case.*

*Mr. Sisco [Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern and South Asian Affairs]: Wait until you hear the humanitarian bleats in this country.*

(Extract from 'Document 235 - Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969–1976, Volume XI, South Asia Crisis, 1971 - Historical Documents - Office of the Historian', no date).

Like President Trump's more recent use of 'shithole', this label is a crude foreign policy précis: these are people and places of no value to us and our interests, and for whom we should expend little effort. In October 1972, a New York Times editorial commented on the vast corruption in the vast relief effort (*The New York Times*, 1972), and the basket case then came to signal not only helplessness, but also leakiness (Bari, 2008).

Several points about the 'international basket case' exchange are of interest. This was a high-level cross-governmental group tasked specifically with crisis management, not some minor meeting in the South Asia division. The views of these people were weighty and stand on the public record as insights into decision-making with profound human and historical consequences. And this powerful policy space explicitly considered the possibility of famine as a factor in their decision-making, almost three years before a full-scale famine did in fact occur in Bangladesh:<sup>4</sup> this was a live possibility in the minds of American policymakers, who had time to think about how to respond. It was clear that the short-term needs of Bangladesh could only be met by international assistance: there was no question of national sovereignty in this instance. The statement that Bangladesh was 'not necessarily our basket case' speaks of a willingness to jettison humanitarian responsibilities towards that country. It is this denial that sought to exclude Bangladesh from the international community, rendering the entire country in effect bare life, at least as far as US foreign policy perspectives went. The exchange signalled a clear willingness to exercise sovereign power

over a weak and vulnerable country, as well as an awareness that the abandonment of that population would go against humanitarian beliefs.

The focus on famine in the basket case exchange rings alarm bells as we fast-forward to 1974, when the US withheld food aid to Bangladesh, officially on grounds that trade with Cuba made it ineligible for US food aid under Public Law 480 (PL480). By the time US food aid finally arrived, the peak of the famine had passed.<sup>5</sup> In the exchange reproduced above, Kissinger displays unseemly alacrity to think about 'what our policy will be' regarding a possible famine in the country whose birth he had failed to abort. The qualifiers 'not necessarily our' summarize the quid pro quo of US food aid: you need to be on our side if you expect to eat.

Aid in the 1970s served brutal foreign policy ends, much as it professed humanitarian aims. This included coercing Bangladesh into an early and protracted dependence on external aid, driving it into more open, and frequently exploitative, global markets (Sobhan, 1981, 1982). The economic crisis and famine of 1974, inadequately alleviated by international humanitarian aid, were critical to the defeat of early nationalistic ideas of non-alignment and socialist secularism, as well as of democracy, in Bangladesh.

### Triage theory: *'America's Decision: Who Will Survive?'*

That US foreign policy politicized food aid to Bangladesh is clear. Yet there are reasons to believe this politicization may have been as much an exercise in ideology as in pursuit of material foreign policy interests. In Bangladesh, the US response to the 1974 famine appears to have been influenced by ideas of 'triage theory' as applied to US food aid policy, as popularised in a 1968 book by the Paddocks, a pair of American agro-technocrat brothers who had predicted mass worldwide famine by 1975 (Paddock and Paddock 1968).<sup>6</sup>

The Paddock's *Famine – 1975! America's Decision: Who Will Survive?* is almost amusingly anachronistic, writing of copulating brown masses in 'The Hungry Nations' being fed by misguided Peace Corps idealists. Yet triage theory and lifeboat ethics were deadly serious ideologies (Singer, 1972). The Paddocks analysed population trends and agricultural production to conclude that catastrophic worldwide famine was imminent. They argued that some (including Pakistan) were worth attempting to save, because they were improving the relationship between population size and food production (through agro-industrialization). Others (including India) were beyond help, because the more food aid assistance that was given, the more dependent they would become, without pressure to stem population growth or reform agricultural policies (Paddock and Paddock, 1968, pp. 217–22).

This application of the triage principles of emergency medicine rested on a diagnosis of what was wrong with most 'undeveloped' (sic) countries: a simple Malthusian equation of too many people reproducing too fast plus backward agricultural systems producing too little food. Population control and green revolution technologies were the answer, but too few 'undeveloped' country leaders had recognized and taken up these challenges, and it was too late.<sup>7</sup> Many millions of people would be faced with starvation in catastrophic famines and disasters lasting years or decades, leading to 'revolutions and social turmoil and

economic upheavals [sweeping across] areas of Asia, Africa, and Latin America' (Paddock and Paddock, 1968, p. 8). The bare life bodies of the starving thus paved the road to the global breakdown of law and order, and finally, Communism.

This imminent catastrophe was framed by the Paddocks as an opportunity for America, with its vast but not limitless bounty, to take a firm hand and decide who to help and who to leave behind. The concluding chapter, named 'Time of Famines – Catalyst for American Greatness' assesses how to insulate America against international pressures, recommending a more 'sophisticated' technical approach than the merely humanitarian:

*America's bountiful land has imposed on us a noblesse oblige which we must face up to ... Before the end of the 1970's (sic) the interplay of power politics will be based on who is starving and who is not, who has extra food to send to others and who has not. Food will be the basis for power. Here the sophistication will lie in the need for the "food nation" to select which countries, out of the many hungry ones, will receive its limited food stocks, which countries will be left in the miseries of their starvation (Paddock and Paddock, 1968, pp. 231–2).*

Although their later writings suggest they may not have noticed, the Paddock brothers' predictions came largely true in Bangladesh: two per cent of the population were lost to famine in 1974-75,<sup>8</sup> and the food aid decisions of the US have generally been understood to have contributed to that outcome (Sobhan, 1979).

The Paddocks published in 1968, and the 'not our basket case' statement was made in 1971. Did the Paddocks shape US official thinking or response to the 1974 famine in Bangladesh? The US response to the 1974 famine may or may not have been a test of triage theory, but there are signs that it was among the ideological baggage with which the US government addressed the Bangladesh crisis (Rothschild 1976; Tweeten 2001). In a preliminary search of published literature and oral history testimonies from the time, I have explored whether and how triage theory featured in the understandings of US officials, or may have shaped their behaviour during the 1974 famine. Several testimonies name-check the Paddocks or their theory specifically. One State Department official, Assistant Administrator of the Asia Bureau in the 1970s, noted that:

*The first issue was that of sufficient food. We'd had a lot of problems in Bangladesh. If you think back to the early to mid-70's, there was a tremendous fear that there was going to be great food shortages, and in fact the Paddock brothers wrote the book, *Famine 1975*, and there were other grim warnings. Famine didn't happen exactly but there were some food shortages. The Indonesians had a rice crop failure in 1978. Bangladesh continued to be a problem (Interview with John H. (Jack) Sullivan, no date).*

Joseph Stepanek, a US Agency for International Development (USAID) employee stationed in Bangladesh in the early 1970s and an authority on agriculture and food noted that 'during those early years, outside experts were saying "Triage", "Hopeless, hopeless", and so on' in relation to food security in Bangladesh (Interview with Joseph F. Stepanek, no date).<sup>9</sup>

## ‘(we’ve got to relieve) Bangla Desh’

Cynical Malthusian views such as those of the Paddocks competed with a more generous impulse towards Bangladesh in the West of the early 1970s. This impulse was spread in no small part by the success of ex-Beatle George Harrison in ensuring the world was at least notionally aware of the unfolding tragedy over in eastern South Asia through *The Concert for Bangladesh* he organized with his friend, the Bengali (Indian) musician Ravi Shankar (Raghavan 2013). The concert aimed to raise money for hungry and displaced people fleeing war in Bangladesh, and was the model for the 1980s’ Live Aid, bringing together multiple rock legends (including Eric Clapton and Bob Dylan) to perform for a good cause.

As the images used on the album cover and the ‘Bangla Desh’ single sleeve left no doubt, the impulse to humanitarianism appeared to depend on the graphic depiction of bare life to excite responsibility. The single cover depicted an emaciated sari-clad woman looking down at her sleeping child in exhausted desperation.<sup>10</sup> The album imagery was even more iconic, as it:

*solidified the image of Bangladesh. The poster featured a starving child with a bowl in front of them. The image of the child was representative of the starving nation, bowl in hand waiting for the world community, the ‘global civil society’ to save it, protect it. Above this image the poster proclaimed that the Bangladesh benefit concert was ‘a triumphant success, a historic event’ (Mookherjee, 2011, p. 401).*

Harrison’s single ‘Bangla Desh’ is a vague depiction of human devastation that seeks to enjoin sympathy with people in a place few of the audience had any reason to know. He sings of ‘so many people dying fast’ and enjoins the listener to ‘lend your hand’ to help the people of Bangladesh. The distress the song dramatized was sufficiently great to licence an entirely new innovation in humanitarianism, that of the benefit concert. It drew public attention in the West to the human crisis in 1971, granting a wide audience some awareness of events unfolding across the world.

The effects of these humanitarian strategies to represent the moral desert of their objects are both victimizing (for those so depicted) but also empowering for those who consume such depictions:

*By presenting starving babies in need of salvation, and the rock and roll benefit concert as the savior, popular music was a conduit through which the West’s economic and moral superiority was reaffirmed (Christiansen, 2014, p. 141).*

The concert was a ‘critical moment in the reductive imagining of South Asia’ (Christiansen, 2014, p. 142), with an almost total lack of engagement with the politics of the conflict in the rationale or framing of the conference. In the press conference to announce the concert, Harrison commented that he knew little about the situation in East Pakistan, but that humanitarian disasters were all too frequent, there, in Biafra, and elsewhere:

*[T]he political side – I’m not interested. There is a war – any war is wrong as far as I can see. Bad situation there. All I’m trying to do is to generate enough money, and make sure the money is distributed in such a way as to alleviate some of the agony.*

*That's all. I'm not interested in the politics (Press Conference For The Concert For Bangla Desh, 1971, p. 2: 31).*

For Harrison, the purely humanitarian nature of the matter in which he has become is underlined by the fact that he got involved “[b]ecause I was asked by a friend if I’d help, you know, that’s all” (Christiansen, 2014, p. 142).

The problematically unidirectional nature of the purely charitable act or humanitarian gesture is a mainstay of the economic anthropology of ‘the gift’: in a relation featuring altruism as opposed to reciprocity the giver is always in a position of power over the recipient (see, for instance, Stirrat and Henkel, 1997). Harrison’s Concert showed how powerful a humanitarian act by someone of his position could be, and how that power could be harnessed to shift Western worldviews on the problems of East Pakistan. This does not detract from his generous gesture of help, but it does point out its unintended effects in casting Bangladesh as an object of humanitarian aid.

After the early 1970s, there was a similarly strong emphasis within US aid on its purely humanitarian impulses in Bangladesh. Several US officials noted the total absence of US foreign policy interests in the country in their oral testimonies and the predominance of USAID concerns in that country. US Ambassadors to Bangladesh from the 1970s and the 1980s noted that the aid mission was almost the entirety of the US mission in Bangladesh (ADST, 1986; *Interview with Davis Eugene Boster*, no date). The impression that is conveyed is that the US had no interests other than humanitarian concerns in Bangladesh, and it sought to emphasise this. This stood perhaps in contrast to the idea apparently held by some Bangladeshis, that US aid was ‘bloodguilt’ for having turned a blind eye to West Pakistani genocide in 1971 (*Interview with Lawrence Lesser*, no date).

## The global aid lab

In the decades since the 1970s, Bangladesh became the world’s laboratory for experiments to use aid for human development in the most testing of environments (Hossain 2017a). As Michelle Murphy has argued, these efforts have marked an expansion of both the biopower of the Bangladeshi state and of the aid infrastructure through which to ‘manage’ life in the interests of the economy, averting and disciplining life as much as preventing death (Murphy, 2017). In fields from fertility control, childhood immunization, diarrhoeal disease, microfinance, food security, water and sanitation, women’s empowerment, and many others, experimental schemes took off backed by aid resources and with little regulation.

Much of this was a boon to the population, and has been appropriately scrutinized or lauded. Other parts of this experimentalism included the use of Bangladeshi women for unethical trials of reproductive technology, and the water project that led to the worst mass poisoning in world history, the mass arsenicosis that afflicts large swathes of the country. These were notable failures, and in the case of the arsenic poisoning, the cause itself of yet another major health disaster for Bangladesh. Experimentalism treats people as means, not as ends; bare life casualties are collateral damage, and, being beyond or outside the scope of the law in their state of exception (Agamben 2005), have no rights to resist or demand accountability.

This experimentalism was not just about individual pilot projects, but also about the overall reform agenda: the first World Bank Country Director described Bangladesh's development challenge as the 'test case of development', a country-sized laboratory for economic growth (Faaland and Parkinson, 1976). Reading US State Department official testimonies that discuss the US aid regime in Bangladesh indicates a need for US aid to Bangladesh show measurable 'results', precisely because the US had only humanitarian motivations for intervening and US audiences needed to know that the money was being well-spent. The infrastructure needed to show such results has been developed in and on Bangladesh; this includes an array of research and 'intervention' technologies that measure, classify and 'nudge' Bangladeshi bodies to behave in ways deemed most conducive to GDP and other metrics of development (Murphy, 2017).

An interview with Philip Ely Church, program economist and then agricultural economist at USAID in Bangladesh in the late 1970s, explained:

*[T]he value of a Washington, DC tour with USAID became apparent in Bangladesh where the Agency had a very high profile program. Bangladesh was a country that Henry Kissinger had called an internationa (sic) "basket case." Bangladesh became independent from Pakistan after a bloody war in the 1970s only to be devastated by monsoon floods.<sup>11</sup> Its first decade as a country was one more of disaster relief than economic development. Many doubted that Bangladesh was viable as a country.*

*The whole South Asian continent was undergoing an exploding population. Despite a "green revolution" that promised significant increases in food grain production, mass starvation was still a real threat. The region at that time was still very unstable both economically and politically and USAID was most anxious for some economic development "success stories." (Interview with Phillip Ely Church, no date)*

Church went on to lead an effort to measure and document results, to feed back to a Washington, DC hungry for success. And so constructions of bare life evolved, with the aid apparatus itself, into a form of humanitarian experimentalism with profound impacts on the Bangladeshi people. For Bangladeshis to die as a result of failed development was never legally wrong, because they were but bare life; nevertheless, efforts to attempt to save such lives became sacred acts within secular humanitarian and aid thinking and practice.

## Conclusions

That in the early 1970s Bangladeshis were constructed as bare life, a kind of biological minimum without the benefit of national law, seems unarguable; these examples are well-known. To date, however, we have paid insufficient attention to the paradoxical aspect of Agamben's concept of bare life: that exclusion from the law is the basis of sovereign power, and it places those so excluded above and beyond the profane practice of politics. The sacredness of *homo sacer* is reflected in the insistence that action on behalf of vulnerable or suffering Bangladeshis can only be altruistic in motivation, as a group without or beyond or incapable of qualified political life.

The bare life formulation advances our understanding of the possible political consequences of such a construction in the international aid relationship. Drawing on selected sources, I traced what eventually became an experimental approach to Bangladesh's development to a construction of Bangladeshis as on the edge of survival in the early 1970s, and to how that shaped an ideology of aid to Bangladesh. Was Bangladesh to be jettisoned with the guidance of triage theory, as 'not necessarily our basket case'? Or an object of pure humanitarianism, reflecting the helplessness of the people themselves? Bare life constructions ended up sanctifying the suffering of Bangladeshis while simultaneously depriving them of political agency. It enabled a specific regime of humanitarian experimentalism in the Bangladesh aid relation, in which the urgency and scale of the problem in country, and the political need to demonstrate results back up the global system, licensed a 'whatever works' mentality. This produced the many well-documented examples of experiments that failed as well as those that succeeded (Hossain 2017a). Humanitarian experimentalism, including what Murphy identifies as a shift towards technological and 'evidence-based' programming (2017), was visible in the attitudes of US officials towards Bangladesh during the period.

The things the world learned from its Bangladesh experiments have been trialed elsewhere, making accountability for those experiments particularly important. One question is whether they mark a breach of national sovereignty – a recognition that a state that has no biopower and no capacity to keep its citizens alive, even – cannot be judged sovereign, and international action is justified on humanitarian grounds. This does not fully explain what happened in Bangladesh, because efforts to reduce poverty were equally part of the national political elite – and broader societal - agenda. The need to tackle their vulnerability provided the basis for a transnational social contract in which the elites, the masses, and, indeed, their donors, agreed on the provision of at least basic subsistence protections, in particular against disasters and food crises (Hossain 2005). This contract also created the political space for non-governmental organizations and the Grameen Bank to emerge.

The relationships of power in which newborn Bangladesh was cast as the 'international basket case' have shifted considerably; the country is now an acknowledged development success, an account in which its bare life past can always be glimpsed, but which relies far less on foreign aid than it once did. Because aid in Bangladesh enables donors to show 'results', some countries' aid programmes need to give aid to Bangladesh more than their aid is now needed. Bangladesh's strong performance on human development indicates its transformed biopower, in particular in respect of disasters and food security, but also in health, education, and social inclusion. It has built state capacities for and elite commitment to such advances. It takes on powerful interests in its leadership of developing countries on global trade rules and climate change adaptation in transnational policy spaces. It continues to need international aid, but is now leading a vast humanitarian effort for the Rohingya population of Myanmar, expelled in a parallel to the forced displacement of Bengalis in 1971 to which the Government itself draws attention. There is far to go on human rights, but that is where the radical potential (Balakrishnan, Heintz and Elson, 2016) lies for Bangladesh, and I believe, where it will find its future success in a competitive world system. The achievement of basic economic and social rights has been a vital advance towards this rights-based future, as there can be no bare life in a human rights regime.





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## Biographical note

Naomi Hossain is a political sociologist, currently working at the Accountability Research Center at the School of International Service at American University in Washington DC. She also holds a position at the Institute of Development Studies, Sussex. Her work focuses on the politics of inclusive development.

## Declaration of interest

No conflict of interest declared.

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## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> Although it is prominent in the literature on humanitarianism; here I have drawn in particular on Jenny Edkins' analysis of 'bare life' in refugee camps as 'life that could be "saved" but not life that had a political voice' (Edkins, 2000, p. 14)

<sup>2</sup> See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=krtJM0lz4lw> [accessed March 20<sup>th</sup> 2018].

<sup>3</sup> WSAG was one of six special committees set up under the Nixon National Security Council by Henry Kissinger, National Security Advisor. WSAG was 'an interdepartmental crisis management forum chaired by the National Security Assistant' (Moulton, 1980). The minutes for the December 6<sup>th</sup> meeting note the attendance of the President's National Security Advisor (Kissinger) and senior officials from the National Security Council, including U. Alexis Johnson, Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs, Alexander Haig, Deputy Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs, and Maurice Williams, Deputy Administrator, Agency for International Development (USAID) and Chairman, Interdepartmental Working Group on East Pakistan Disaster Relief.

<sup>4</sup> Post-war Bangladesh narrowly averted major famines in 1971 and 1972 thanks to humanitarian aid under the UN reconstruction effort (Chen and Rohde, 1971, 1973).

<sup>5</sup> The best contemporary and firsthand sources on the 1974 famine remain (Sobhan, 1979, 1991; Islam, 2003). See also (Hossain 2017a) for a summary account of the famine.

<sup>6</sup> Similarly influential and from the same Malthusian school was Garrett Hardin's 'lifeboat ethics' (1974).

<sup>7</sup> As a counter-example, see Ali 2019 on experiments with "Green Technology" in Comilla in the Pakistan period.

<sup>8</sup> Their revised edition of the book, published after the 1974 famine, fails to note this, or indeed the partition of Pakistan at all.

<sup>9</sup> It should be noted that Stepanek's own work was a far more scientific and systemic analysis of the specific relationships between food and inclusive development in Bangladesh, in many respects a rebuke to the pessimism and naked power inequalities of the Paddock notion. His 1979 monograph *Bangladesh – Equitable Growth?* remains a standard scholarly source for its analysis of the rural economy of the 1970s (Stepanek, 1979). It seems likely that there were significant differences in views on food security depending on professional background and role, and that the aid and foreign policy parts of these institutions were at odds over triage 'theory' and US food aid policy.

<sup>10</sup> Unfortunately copyright restrictions mean it is not permitted to reproduce the cover of the single, but it can be viewed here: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:George\\_Harrison\\_-\\_Bangla\\_Desh.png](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:George_Harrison_-_Bangla_Desh.png) [accessed July 9 2021].

<sup>11</sup> This appears to be a reference to the floods of 1974, which presaged the famine.

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