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RESEARCH ARTICLE

THE SELF-RATED PRESTIGE BASED SOCIAL STATUS OF THE PEASANTS IN TWO VILLAGES OF BANGLADESH

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Abstract

Peasants usually lack financial, social, physical, and human capital in nearly every aspect of their lives. Many parts of the world depict them as a subjugated and low-status group. Many studies have found a correlation between peasants' prestige-based social status and their degree of homogeneity as measured by objective class. Nevertheless, the association between objective class and social status may differ according to a person's subjective interpretation of social status. This study examines how peasants perceive their own social status, as well as how their income, land ownership, and educational attainment correlate with prestige-based social status. Two villages in TanoreUpazila of Rajshahi, Bangladesh were selected as study villages. In this study, quantitative and qualitative data were combined to minimize the weaknesses of each data type and to improve their accuracy and validity. To gain a comprehensive understanding of the research problem, focus groups and pre-tested questionnaire surveys were conducted simultaneously. The results of the study indicate that even though peasants do not possess large farmland, higher income, or higher educational attainment, a significant number of respondents claim to be in the 'good' or 'very good' social status category. According to the survey, approximately 62% of the peasants rated their social status as 'good' (53.70%) and 'very good' (7.70%). A noteworthy finding is that only 3.80% of respondents ranked their social status as 'bad' or 'very bad'. Survey results indicate that 38.40% of respondents claim to be in the middle of the social status spectrum. Income, ownership of farmland, and educational attainment do not represent a strong association with the prestige-based social status of the peasantry. Rather, in settings where peasants cultivate their land, grow their own food, and provide food for others, they regard their occupation as more prestigious. Respondents reported that they scored highly in their occupation because they are not entirely dependent upon the market for their daily needs, especially for food. While there may be a degree of heterogeneity among peasants in terms of income, education, and occupation, they are still referred to as sons of the soil in general. Thus, the peasants appear to be homogenous, and they value their status as well.

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Introduction:-

In the history of mankind, farming has played a fundamental role in the development of civilization and the provision of basic human needs. As a farming community, peasants have played an integral part in feeding the world over the past 10,000 years. Globally, approximately one-third of the population continues to live as peasants despite changes in occupational patterns (Vanhaute, 2008; 2021). Peasants, however, have difficulty maintaining their livelihoods and preserving their prestige as civilization evolves.

There has been a long tradition of undervaluing the peasantry by other classes. In literature, they are often depicted as a subjugated group due to their inferior social, political, and economic status. Historically, the word 'peasant' used to imply criminality, villainy, rusticity, the devil, robbery, brigandage, thievery, or looting (Edelman, 2008; 2013; Webster, 2013), which eventually indicates peasants' lower occupational status in society. Shanin (1971) identified peasants as an occupational group for multi-directional subjection to powerful outsiders. In his 2003 study, Schüren classified peasants as lower-class rural cultivators. Other social scientists have depicted them as subjugated, politically less influential, oppressed, and marginalized people because of their subordinate status in socioeconomic hierarchies (Wolf, 1966; Freedman, 1999; Vorley, 2002; Singharoy, 2004; Borrás, 2009). According to Beteille (1974), Indian peasants hold a lower position in both the economic and political hierarchies. According to Obaidullah (1995), Bengali peasants were exploited and low social status throughout the history of the region, despite some golden ages of prosperity. The peasants have thus struggled over the years to maintain their status and prestige.

Prestige refers to both occupational images and differences in social standing. Garbin and Bates (1961) argue that prestige is a way to express respect for a specific position at work or a way to view it, and it plays a critical role in determining human behavior and occupations. An individual's behavior and livelihood are greatly affected by the degree of prestige he is accorded by others in society. In several studies, including Parsons (1954), Mitchell and Epstein (1959), MacKinnon and Langford (1994), Krieger, Williams and Moss (1997), and Fujishiro, Xu, and Gong (2010), occupational prestige has been found to be an explicit measure of an individual's social status as well as a significant factor in determining his social position.

Within a social hierarchy, social status refers to an individual's position relative to one or more social dimensions. In social science, the concept of 'social status' is widely studied, but no universally accepted meaning has been determined (Bradley and Corwyn, 2002). Status is a built-in part of every group culture, and one's status requires interest, attention, and respect from others. In Bradley and Corwyn (2002), social status can be defined as the position an individual occupies within a particular social, political, or economic hierarchy. According to Ellis, Hoskin and Ratnasingham (2018), the concept refers to the position of an individual within societal hierarchies. It is likely that individuals with higher social status will have better access to resources, services, and information (Pritchett, 1999; Burt, 2000; Pretty and Smith, 2004), and will be more likely to develop productive behavior (Knowles, 2006). In addition to facilitating productive activities, social status can enhance livelihood opportunities (Sorensen, 2000; Kirori, 2015). According to Helliwell and Putnam (2005), individuals' social status also influences their perception of others' intentions (i.e., their ability to respect their rights and fulfill their obligations). In Fukuyama (1995), social status can be defined as the expectation that arises within a community of regular, honest, and cooperative behavior, based on commonly shared norms.

As a result of varying access to resources, Coleman (1988), Fukuyama (1995), and Hunter (2016) argue that social status is distributed unequally in society. A multidimensional scale is used to assess the relationship between social status and variables such as income, occupational class, caste, race, and ethnicity. The relationship between social status and economic well-being is generally agreed upon by social scientists (Coleman, 1988; Leonardi and Nanetti, 1993; Lin, 1999; Putnam, 2005). Crossley (2008), however, demonstrates that Bourdieu distinguished himself from Marx by considering class and status in the context of cultural and social resources. The Marxian and interest-group positions assume that the various components of an individual's socioeconomic status—education, occupation, and income—are highly correlated; while the pluralist position assumes that they are poorly inter-related, making distinct class interests for each individual difficult to perceive (Hodge and Treiman, 1968). Furthermore, while the Marxian and interest group theories hold that socioeconomic status is the prime determinant of class identification, with other variables.

Accordingly, studies show that a wide range of socioeconomic and political variables have significantly influenced rural society as well as the peasantry in Bangladesh over the past century. Using socioeconomic attributes,

Ramkrishna Mukherjee explains changes in rural social society in his 1957 book "The Dynamics of a Rural Society". In his study, he found that the polarization of peasants was caused by a discriminatory farming arrangement resulting from uneven income and debt arrangements. A 1970 study by American social scientist Bertocci reveals rural power structure, leadership, and social stratification based on objective class structure. As part of his ethnographic study of Bangladeshi peasant society, Aminul Islam (1974) examines conflict and cohesion in Bangladeshi villages. In this study, conflict, cohesion, factions, and groupings are examined in relation to access to resources in peasant society. In their famous study 'Jhagrapur: Poor peasants and women in a village in Bangladesh, 1977', Jeenek Areno and Jos Ven Beurden investigated the issue of class struggle in agrarian society. This study provides some significant insights into the mode of production and the relationship between production and poverty in peasant societies from a Marxist perspective as well. Anwarullah Choudhury, however, examines the stratification pattern of rural residents using Max Weber's three-dimensional system - property, power, and prestige - in his 1978 book, *A Bangladesh Village: A Study of Social Stratification*. All rural communities, both farming and non-farming, were included in the study.

In rural Bangladesh, most studies use income and capital ownership as a basis for class or status determination, and peasants have typically been characterized as a homogeneous occupational group due to their social status. Peasants, however, have demonstrated pluralistic characteristics over time. Hobsbawm (1994) observes that peasants have been distinguished from their neighbors by their class, place of origin, values, income-earning patterns, and farming practices since the 1950s, when modernization and the green revolution became global phenomena. According to Kearney (1996), the peasantry has emerged as a heterogeneous group over the past half century. Even though peasants once shared a homogeneous identity, over time, they have developed their own distinctive characteristics that distinguish them from one another. Furthermore, the subjective understanding of one's position in society is underrepresented in research, particularly in Bangladesh. Feeling of belonging to a specific class or prestige-group (subjective) also have an impact. Kornhauser (1950) contends that how individuals perceive themselves and how they rank their position in society influences their way of life and social system. Similarly, Jackman and Jackman (1973) emphasize the importance of the individual's subjective perception and psychological evaluation of his own position within the hierarchy of social status to gain a deeper understanding of social status.

Therefore, the purpose of this study is to investigate how peasants rate their farming occupation in terms of prestige, and how income, land ownership, and education influence their response.

Methods:-

The study used a mixed-method approach to neutralize the weakness of each form of quantitative and qualitative data, as well as to enhance data accuracy and validity. To obtain comprehensive insights into the research problem, a questionnaire survey and focus group discussions conducted concurrently. In accordance with Creswell and Creswell (2018) the study falls within the framework of convergent mixed methods approach¹. Based on secondary information and the availability of peasants who have similar characteristics to those in other parts of Bangladesh, two villages were selected, namely Ratoil and Chanduria, of Chanduria union in Tanore Upazila, Rajshahi. In addition, the villages are conveniently located. A pre-test of the questionnaire was conducted with 30 peasants (about 10 percent of the total sample) from a nearby village that closely resembled the characteristics of the final sample to assess the clarity of the questions and to establish validity. The study employed purposive sampling to ensure that the sample was representative. The household was analyzed as a unit of analysis, and household heads were interviewed as respondents. Household heads were chosen as respondents because, (i) they have precise control over household resources, access to services, and decision-making; and (ii) this study was designed to maintain a standardized reference point throughout.

Since the meaning of peasantry has different connotations, a set of four criteria were established here to categorize, identify, and select the sample, as well as to ensure consistency among respondents: (a) the respondent must primarily be a small-scale farmer and practice agriculture for subsistence; (b) the household head must own land

¹ Creswell and Creswell (2018) discuss three primary forms of mixed method approach – convergent mixed methods, explanatory sequential mixed methods, and exploratory sequential mixed methods. Convergent mixed methods provide researchers with a holistic understanding of the research question by simultaneously collecting both types of data. Moreover, it allows investigators to draw inferences from both forms of information.

between 0.50 and 2.5 acres²; (c) total farm-land ownership (owned plus sharecropping, leased, and/or other arrangements) does not exceed five acres; (d) at least 25% of production must be reserved for household consumption.

In both villages, a rapid baseline survey was conducted to identify and map respondents based on the above criteria. To collect accurate, sound, and reliable information, and to reach saturation point, 287 HH heads (103 from Ratoil and 184 from Chanduria) were interviewed using a pre-tested survey questionnaire. The questionnaire is designed to be used as part of a mixed methods approach, and it contains both closed-ended and open-ended questions. Various parts of the questionnaire contain relevant questions on specific topics to get accurate responses. Three focus group discussions (FGDs) with smallholders were conducted simultaneously to gain a deeper understanding of prestige based social status.

As the data are collected via a mixed-method approach, it combines a quantitative approach (figures) with a qualitative approach (text analysis based on the findings of FGDs) to analyze various aspects and variables. Tables and figures are generated, classified, and presented in accordance with the sociological analysis of the 'typological procedure'. In this way, it was possible to select certain characteristics of variables and reject others. Concerning self-appraisal of prestige-based social status, this study examines how peasants rank themselves in the current social hierarchy. There were five levels of response for the aspect - 'very good', 'good', 'neither good nor bad', 'bad', and 'very bad'.

A higher income allows households to absorb losses and enhance their resilience to the effects of hazards. It also facilitates the overall well-being and development of the household. It is important to note that the total household income is calculated by considering all sources of income for the household. This excludes income received in kind or income derived from irregular sources. In this case, the classification of income is not based on the income and expenditure analysis of the calorie intake method. The categorization was determined based on discussions in the group. As a result of the discussions, it has been established that an increase in household income of 50,000 taka may have a positive impact on household welfare. There is a general tendency for households with more land to be less vulnerable. As a result of the ownership of farmland, the respondents were divided into three groups: (i) less than 1 acre; (ii) 1 acre to less than 2 acres; and (iii) 2 to 2.49 acres of farmland. In addition to owning farmland, households also participate in sharecropping and rent land cultivation. Thus, households with more land are expected to produce more, resulting in a greater income. This section is divided into five categories, such as cultivating less than 1 acres; 1 to less than 2 acres; 2 to less than 3 acres; 3 to less than 4 acres; and 4 to 5 acres of farmland.

A household head with a higher level of education has a greater chance of accelerating their income and achieving a higher level of prestige. A higher level of education is also associated with a greater sense of wellbeing. As a result of the study, five categories of respondents' educational qualifications were established: (i) illiterate; (ii) primary educated; (iii) Secondary School Certificate (SSC) passed; (iv) Higher Secondary Certificate (HSC) passed; and (v) graduate and above (higher education). In Tables, the totals represent the sums of respondents from each village in the column-wise total, while in the row-wise total, the totals correspond to the sums of each attribute.

Results:-

Prestige-based social status of the peasants

It is depicted from the table that most the respondents reported their social status as being between 'good' and 'very good' (Table 1). For instance, approximately 62% of the peasants rated their social status as 'good' (53.70%) and 'very good' (7.70%), respectively. A further 38.40 percent of respondents are neither at the top nor at the bottom of the social status ladder. People who claim to be in the middle compete with others in the community. It is expected that they will be treated with respect by those below them, and they owe status to those above them. It is noteworthy

² Based on the classification of small farmers in the Agricultural Census Report by the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, 2022, and the Agricultural Extension Manual (4th ed.) by the Department of Agricultural Extension, Ministry of Agriculture (MoA), GoB, 2018. This study excluded the lowest tier of farmland ownership (0.05 - 0.49 acres) since the incidence of poverty at this level is greater than 10 percent in the HIES Report of the BBS, 2019.

that only 3.80% of respondents ranked their social status as 'bad' or 'very bad'. When it comes to this distribution, there are no obvious differences between villages.

Table 1:- Self-rated prestige-based social status of the peasants.

Attributes of prestige-based social status	Study village (% within study village)		Total
	Ratoil	Chanduria	
Very bad	0	2	2
	0.00%	1.10%	0.70%
Bad	3	6	9
	2.90%	3.30%	3.10%
Neither good nor bad	31	69	100
	30.10%	37.50%	34.80%
Good	58	96	154
	56.30%	52.20%	53.70%
Very good	11	11	22
	10.70%	6.00%	7.70%
Total	103	184	287
	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%

[Source: Field survey 2022]

Relationship of prestige-based social status of the peasants with household income, ownership of farming land, and educational level

As shown in the Table 2, income and social status attributes are bridged in several dimensions with some exceptions. A considerable number of peasants (total 99 out of 287) who considered themselves 'good' in social status earn below BDT 250 thousand a year at the HH level. A significant finding of this study is that despite belonging to a lower income group (between 100 and 150 thousand Bangladeshi Taka), 32 peasants (20.80%) consider their social status to be 'good'. However, about 36% of respondents who consider their social status to be 'very good' are primarily from the highest income bracket. Conversely, respondents who posit themselves as 'neither good nor bad', 'bad', and 'very bad' overwhelmingly reside in lower income groups.

Table 2:- Prestige-based social status of the peasants in relation to total household income.

Total income of the HH	Prestige-based social status of the peasants (% within social status)					Total
	Very bad	Bad	Neither good nor bad	Good	Very good	
50,000.00 to <100,000.00	0	1	19	14	0	34
	0.00%	11.10%	19.00%	9.10%	0.00%	11.80%
100,000.00 to <150,000.00	0	1	23	32	0	56
	0.00%	11.10%	23.00%	20.80%	0.00%	19.50%
150,000.00 to <2,00,000.00	1	3	23	28	6	61
	50.00%	33.30%	23.00%	18.20%	27.30%	21.30%
2,00,000.00 to <2,50,000.00	1	0	17	25	3	46
	50.00%	0.00%	17.00%	16.20%	13.60%	16.00%
2,50,000.00 to <3,00,000.00	0	2	8	11	2	23
	0.00%	22.20%	8.00%	7.10%	9.10%	8.00%
3,00,000.00 to <3,50,000.00	0	2	4	12	3	21
	0.00%	22.20%	4.00%	7.80%	13.60%	7.30%
More than	0	0	6	32	8	46

3,50,000.00	0.00%	0.00%	6.00%	20.80%	36.40%	16.00%
Total	2	9	100	154	22	287
	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%

[Source: Field survey 2022]

The relationship between social status and total farmland is illustrated in the Table 3. In a similar fashion to the relationship between income and social status, despite not having a large farmland, a significant proportion of respondents claim to be of 'good' or 'very good' social status. As an example, 30 peasants (19.5%) with less than one acre of farmland (owned, share-cropped, or leased), and 62 peasants (40.3%) with one acre to less than two acres claim their prestige-based social status as 'good'. However, 83 peasants (83%) who fall into the 'neither good nor bad' category own less than two acres of total farmland. In most cases, peasants who claim their social status as 'very good' own agricultural land that is greater than two acres in size.

Table 3:- Prestige-based social status of the peasants in relation to total farming-land.

Category total land farming	Prestige-based social status of the peasants (% within social status)					Total
	Very bad	Bad	Neither good nor bad	Good	Very good	
Less than 1 acre	0	3	31	30	3	67
	0.0%	33.3%	31.0%	19.5%	13.6%	23.3%
1 to less than 2 acres	1	4	52	62	6	125
	50.0%	44.4%	52.0%	40.3%	27.3%	43.6%
2 to less than 3 acres	1	1	10	40	7	59
	50.0%	11.1%	10.0%	26.0%	31.8%	20.6%
3 to less than 4 acres	0	1	3	13	2	19
	0.0%	11.1%	3.0%	8.4%	9.1%	6.6%
4 to 5 acres	0	0	4	9	4	17
	0.0%	0.0%	4.0%	5.8%	18.2%	5.9%
Total	2	9	100	154	22	287
	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

[Source: Field survey 2022]

The Table 4 displays a somewhat different picture when only owned farmland is included. According to the survey, 59 of the 100 peasants who claimed neither good nor bad social status own less than one acre of farmland. It is reported that all 11 peasants who scored their social status as 'bad' or 'very bad' own less than two acres of farmland. Yet, 45.50% and 27.30% of respondents claim their social status to be 'good' or 'very good', respectively, despite owning farmland in the lowest tier.

Table 4:- Prestige-based social status of the peasants in relation to total farm-land owned.

Farmland owned by the respondent	Prestige-based social status of the peasants (% within social status)					Total
	Very bad	Bad	Neither good nor bad	Good	Very good	
Less than 1 acre	0	5	59	70	6	140
	0.00%	55.60%	59.00%	45.50%	27.30%	48.80%
1 to less than 2 acres	2	4	33	53	9	101
	100.00%	44.40%	33.00%	34.40%	40.90%	35.20%
2 to 2.49 acres	0	0	8	31	7	46
	0.00%	0.00%	8.00%	20.10%	31.80%	16.00%
Total	2	9	100	154	22	287
	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%

[Source: Field survey 2022]

The Table 5 shows that none of the respondents who attained highest education score them lowest. Besides, respondents who score them in the middle of the attributes and 'good' are mostly from primary passed or below of that. There are 14 respondents out of 23 with higher education levels who rate their occupational status as good to very good. There is also a similar trend among those who have passed the Higher Secondary Certificate (HSC). Nevertheless, 17 out of 47 respondents who passed the Secondary School Certificate (SSC), and 31 out of 97 respondents who passed the primary examination consider themselves to be in a middle status - neither good nor bad.

Table 5:- Prestige-based social status of the peasants in relation to educational qualifications.

Educational qualification of the respondent	Attribute of social status as peasant (% within social status)					Total
	Very bad	Bad	Neither good nor bad	Good	Very good	
No education	0	1	20	15	2	38
	0.00%	11.10%	20.00%	9.70%	9.10%	13.20%
Literate	0	2	16	36	4	58
	0.00%	22.20%	16.00%	23.40%	18.20%	20.20%
Primary passed	2	3	31	56	5	97
	100.00%	33.30%	31.00%	36.40%	22.70%	33.80%
SSC passed	0	2	17	23	5	47
	0.00%	22.20%	17.00%	14.90%	22.70%	16.40%
HSC passed	0	1	7	14	2	24
	0.00%	11.10%	7.00%	9.10%	9.10%	8.40%
Higher education	0	0	9	10	4	23
	0.00%	0.00%	9.00%	6.50%	18.20%	8.00%
Total	2	9	100	154	22	287
	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%

[Source: Field survey 2022]

Discussion and Conclusion:-

Various studies have shown that higher incomes, land ownership, and educational levels are associated with achieving the highest degrees of satisfaction with their occupations (Coleman, 1988; Leonardi and Nanetti, 1993; Lin, 1999; Putnam, 2005). While there are differences in income, land ownership, and educational attainment among peasants in the same occupational group, most view their occupational status as satisfactory and good. Most of the peasants from the study area claim to be 'good' or 'very good' in terms of their social status despite having a limited amount of land to farm, low income, and low educational attainment. The study reveals that approximately 62% of peasants rate their social status as 'good' (53.70%) and 'very good' (7.70%), respectively. The number of respondents who rate their social status as 'bad' or 'very bad' is only 3.80 %. Apart from that, there is a significant number of peasants (38%) who are neither at the top nor at the bottom of the prestige-based social status hierarchy. A challenge for individuals in this group is to elicit a commitment to change their lifestyle. In contrast to their superiors, they possess only limited power and are often competing with peers to win the respect of their inferiors.

It is pertinent to mention that in some cases, objective well-being is positively correlated with perceived social status. About 36% of peasants who consider their social status to be 'very good' are in the highest income bracket. Low-income groups and those who own less than two acres of farmland are more likely to fall into the 'neither good nor bad', 'bad' or 'very bad' category. There is also a positive correlation between peasants' occupational prestige and their level of educational attainment. This distribution does not appear to differ significantly between villages. It is noteworthy that the FGD respondents indicate that they score highly in their occupational status because they are not completely dependent on the market for their daily needs, especially food. Many of the participants in the FGD expressed pride in storing a substantial amount of extra food grains for entertaining their guests and relatives each year. Villagers and neighbors invite them to participate in different ceremonies and festivals as well. In many cases, they are called upon to assist in the mitigation of local problems. They are also self-sufficient and rarely require the assistance of others in managing their living arrangements. Despite having some heterogeneity in terms of income, education, and occupation in the study villages, peasants are still referred to as sons of the soil, which implies that they are homogeneous in most respects.

In conclusion, although some differences exist, income and ownership of farmland do not appear to be strongly correlated with the prestige-based social status of the peasantry in the study area. Education, however, plays a significant role in the subjective perception of prestige-based social status. Overall, it is more likely that peasants would regard their occupation as more prestigious in a setting where they cultivate their own land, grow their own food, and provide food for others.

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