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# The grandfather graph

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### • Introduction

In 1992 we conducted fieldwork in rural Bangladesh to study the interaction of the rural and urban spheres. The aim was to analyse the impact of the government's decentralised urbanisation policy. As part of the study we decided that we needed a simple method to show how people's occupations have changed in the past 40-50 years. This method would need to overcome a number of constraints, most of which will be familiar to readers of *PLA Notes*.

First, our time and resources were limited so we needed a method which would yield speedy results. Second, we were not aware of any previously-conducted baseline household survey for Faridpur District (our chosen study area) with which we could compare current data. Third, checking published regional data from the past against field evidence proved difficult for a number of reasons:

- A few respondents in Faridpur District had difficulty remembering their own household histories beyond about ten years. Some people do not even know their own exact age. Sometimes it was possible to jog people's memories by referring to a major political event or environmental disaster.
- Very few households keep records in this area, which has a high proportion of poor illiterate people.
- In a country with a youthful population profile, the collective memory in some villages may be relatively short. The scope for oral history of say, fifty years ago, is limited.

After some deliberation we decided to experiment with a simple method that we call the 'grandfather graph'. This is admittedly a rough and ready technique but it yields approximate results that have proved valuable.

### • Developing the methodology

David Mosse and Mona Mehta (1993) have written a very interesting paper about the use of genealogies to reconstruct communal history and establish a basis for the study of interactions such as marriage alliances and other forms of social reciprocity. They speak from the viewpoint of anthropologists working on an intensive micro-scale study. Many social scientists are also committed to longitudinal studies but they often find methodological difficulties when wishing to compare the results of sample surveys with larger scale official data such as a population census.

Thus in our Bangladesh study we used Rapid Rural Appraisal, followed by a sample survey of 310 rural and 187 urban households. Our respondents were heads of their household. We asked them their age (or an estimate), and to describe their present occupation and their economic and social relationship with urban centres. This exercise was repeated with reference to the year 1982, ten years before, if necessary taking the father's occupation where the respondent had been a minor.

Further information about family histories was then collected from those who could remember accurately. It was interesting to note the variability between subjects as to the length and detail of their recall. This did not seem to vary with any single variable, such as level of education.

Where memories were frail about specific years or even decades, we asked the household heads about the occupation of their fathers and grandfathers. This was almost universally known. It was then up to us to estimate the dates when these relatives flourished and we could then add the information about their occupations to our database.

## Results

Figure 1 shows generational bands for Bangladesh, assuming a generational average of 20-22 years. In reality this figure has increased over time as the age of marriage has changed. When most respondents referred to their grandfather's occupation they were thinking of a time at roughly the date of their own birth. We are fully aware of course that the grandfather's working life may have spanned several decades but we feel that our technique is nevertheless valuable as a snapshot characterisation of one point in the past.

Figure 1. Generational bands

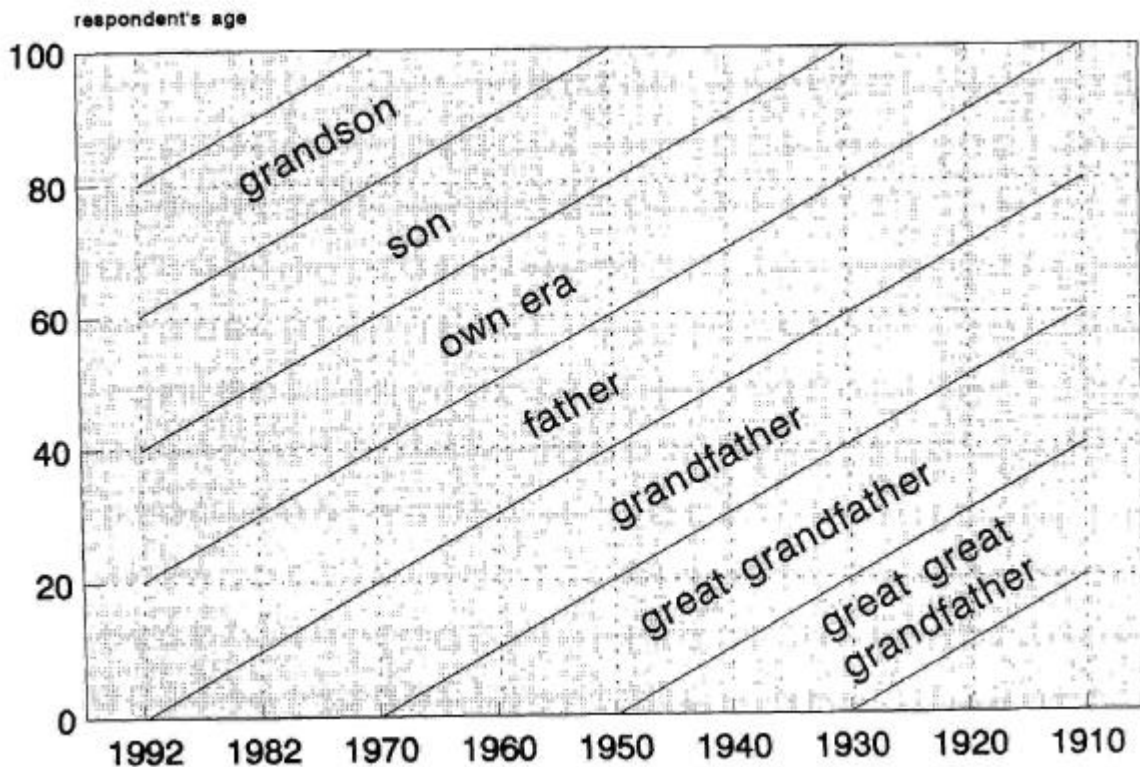
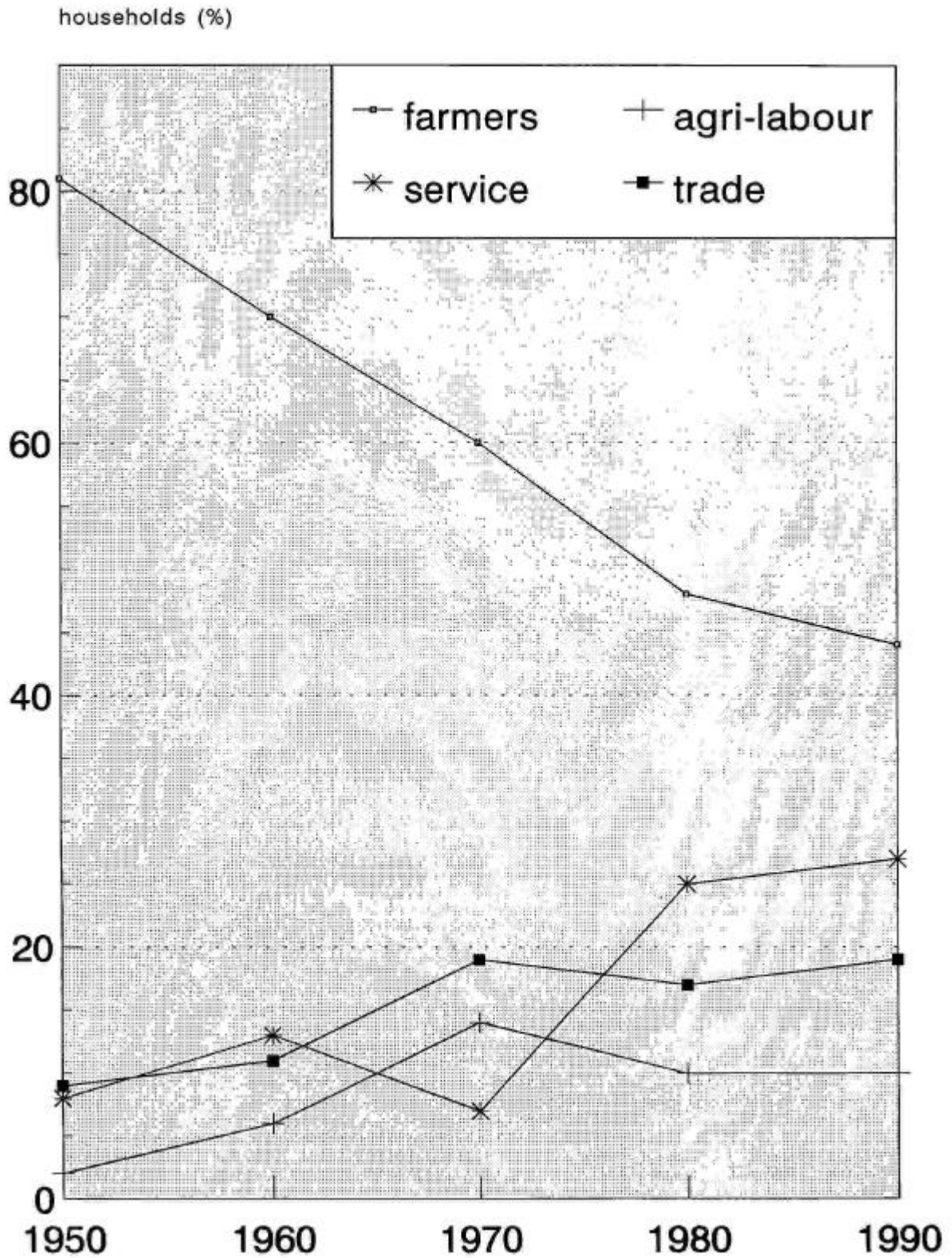


Figure 2. Grandfather graph



We rounded respondents' answers to the nearest decade in order to eliminate from our own minds any spurious impression of accuracy. Figure 2 shows the results for Faridpur District, with four classes of occupation. This is not the place for a detailed analysis, but suffice to say that the falling percentage who were farming on their own account is consistent with the story told by secondary sources. Agricultural labouring, trade and service jobs are also as predicted, including the disruption during the war of independence in the early 1970s when services collapsed and people sought income-earning refuge in labouring and petty trading in the informal sector.

Inevitably there will have been some inaccuracies in the compilation of Figure 2. Nevertheless, it has allowed us to produce a graph for sample households in Faridpur District that can be compared with official statistics. Although we used this method to understand the occupational composition of the rural economy, other uses could also include measuring aspects of economic, social, cultural or political behaviour.

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