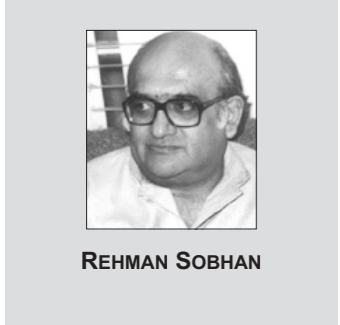


Poverty reduction and the need for local ownership



REHMAN SOBHAN

If, as has been claimed for the Bangladesh PRSP process, consultations were held with the deprived segments of Bangladesh's population, did our poor farmers, day labourers, workers, and women's group really advise our PRSP authors that they would like fertiliser prices to be raised, imports to be further liberalised, all state enterprises to be privatized, or interest rates to be raised? If such demands were not articulated in the consultative process or reiterated in discussions with members of parliament, civil society groups, or even local economists, how did these ideas find a place in the Bangladesh PRSP?

EVER since the PRSP process was initiated in 2000, civil society institutions including the Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD) have kept track of the process in order to establish local ownership over the exercise. The concept of ownership remains integral to the PRSP process because any strategy for reducing poverty in Bangladesh touches the lives of a large segment of the population and thus has to reflect their felt needs. The need for local ownership was fully recognised by Bangladesh's international development partners (IDPs) who made this into the cornerstone of their support for the PRSP process.

for its political unfeasibility. It however took the IDPs nearly two decades and billions of dollars of aid to realise that reforms could not be imposed on any country without ensuring the reform agenda was acceptable to the people and enjoyed the full political commitment of the government which was to carry out the reforms. In a recently completed in-depth study of economic reforms across close to 40 developing and transitional economies, carried out under the sponsorship of the Global Development Network (GDN), less than 6 countries could really be categorised as "successful" reformers where the reform process had proved both sustainable and effective. The failure to sustain the reform process was, amongst other reasons, attributed to the weak ownership over the reform process in most countries.

A critical measure of reform "failure" lies in the limited impact of the reforms alleviating poverty. IDPs have, however, attributed this to both lack of local ownership as well as weak governance over implementing reforms. This self-justifying perspective has discouraged the IDPs from any

serious introspection over the design of the reforms which could be held responsible both for implementation failures as also its limited impact on poverty alleviation. This myopia over the reform design and emphasis on policy ownership and governance has impacted on the design flaws of Bangladesh's PPSP, as indeed most PRSPs around the world. Bangladesh's PRSP has, in spite of the emphasis on local ownership, been compelled to incorporate the macro-economic model sponsored by the Bretton Woods Institutions (BWI), the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF), through their structural adjustment reform (SAR) program, into the core of the PRSP.

This has recommended the GOB to the standard pattern of reforms associated with the SAR from the early 1980s. The Bangladesh PRSP, along with PRSPs around the world, reiterates its support for the SAR package of macro-economic stabilisation, exchange rate flexibility, import liberalisation, privatisation, desubsidisation, financial sector liberalization, and

labour market flexibility. This reform package was essentially designed to enhance economic growth and had no pretensions about reducing poverty. The BWI merely argued that if growth was ensured through the SAR reforms then poverty would automatically be reduced.

The BWI approach to poverty reduction was unfortunately flawed both on theoretical grounds and based on empirical evidence. Furthermore, no finance minister could explain to his domestic electorate that poverty would be alleviated by reducing subsidies on fertiliser or privatising all state owned enterprises (SOE). The fact that the PRSP model should expect that aid recipient countries, ranging from Bangladesh to Bolivia, should reiterate their commitment to the SAR process, which had contributed to popular uprisings and electoral debacles for reforming governments around the world, raises some doubts about the credibility of the IDPs' commitment to policy ownership.

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day labourers, workers, and women's group really advise our PRSP authors that they would like fertiliser prices to be raised, imports to be further liberalised, all state enterprises to be privatized, or interest rates to be raised? If such demands were not articulated in the consultative process or reiterated in discussions with members of parliament, civil society groups, or even local economists, how did these ideas find a place in the Bangladesh PRSP?

Obviously the GOB felt a compulsion to genuflect to the policy compulsions of some of its key IDPs who had offered generous aid packages to support the PRSP. A further inherited design flaw in the Bangladesh PRSP is its preoccupation with growth targets. A more meaningful form of target setting would have been to set poverty reduction targets to be attained every year and to programmatically link this to the profile of public and private expenditure which would contribute to the poverty reduction. This could give the country a clear idea of how such expenditures would be targeted to realise the primary goal



of the PRSP, the reduction of poverty. In the current PRSP, the expenditure targets are not causally linked to the poverty targets. Bangladesh has committed itself to targets set as part of the internationally established Millennium

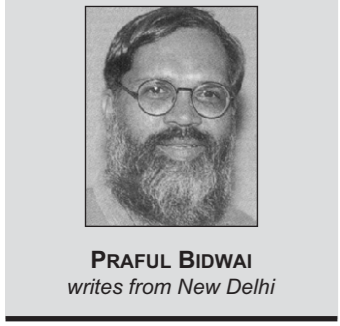
Development Goals (MDG) where some expenditure commitments have been made which are designed to realise these goals. A series of policy and programmatic interventions, including measures to improve governance, have been incorporated in the PRSP. Both are positive features of our PRSP.

We need to initiate a discussion on how far the GOB, during an election year is in a position to implement the policy commitments made in the PRSP. Obviously much will now depend on how far the government which is elected to office in January 2007 will not only embrace the PRSP but will politically commit itself to realise its policy perspectives.

This will involve securing the political commitment by both the newly elected parliament and the ruling party, preferably by making the support of the PRSP into a theme of the forthcoming election campaign. It will also demand an overhaul of the governance regime, which has, for some time, been in a state of progressive degeneration. How this transformation in the polity and administration will be brought about remains a challenging question. It is hoped that both the electorate and civil society in Bangladesh will continue to pose such questions during the life of the PRSP.

Rehman Sobhan is Chairman, Centre for Policy Dialogue.

Barking up the wrong communal tree



PRAFUL BIDWAI writes from New Delhi

The anti-cartoon protests do involve a religious angle. The cartoons are obscene, tasteless, without humour, and calculated to malign Islam. Involved here is not freedom of expression, but hate speech. Hate speech must be demarcated from poetic licence, even blasphemy. It's a crime and deserves to be punished. Those who accuse Muslims of "intolerance" because they question the "right" of some people to offend others through cartoons forget something. In a democracy, those offended have an equal right to protest peacefully. In India, all such protests have been peaceful. Hindutva apologists see fanaticism in the protests. But they rarely condemn Shiv Sena-VHP-Bajrang Dal goons who routinely burn books, attack exhibitions, and assault people on flimsy excuses.

polarise Varanasi failed. Leading the resistance were religious figures like Professor Veer Bhadra Mishra, chief mahant of the Sankat Mochan temple. Mishra sharply attacks Hindutva for its failure to "recognise the elasticity and assimilative character" of Hinduism. Varanasi has a centuries-old tradition of peaceful Hindu-Muslim coexistence. This isn't a case of two communities "living together separately," but of actively participating in each other's religious and social events to enrich composite life. Most Hindus are proud that a great artist like Bharat Ratna Bismillah Khan has played the shehnai at Varanasi's greatest temples all his life.

Recently, Hindu-Muslim bonds were strengthened by common interests in defending Varanasi's famous saree-weaving industry and tourism against disorder and violence.

The charge of growing Muslim "intolerance" derives from recent protests against the Danish newspaper cartoons depicting the Prophet Mohammed in bad light, demonstrations against Mr Bush's visit, and opposition to the UPA's capitulation to US pressure on Iran, as well as Mr Qureshi's disgraceful offer of a Rs 51-crore reward for killing the Danish cartoonists.

Mr Qureshi, incidentally, campaigned for Mr Narendra Modi after the Gujarat pogrom! He has been roundly condemned by countless Muslim leaders and organisations, including the normally-conservative All-India Muslim Personal Law Board. He must be sacked from the ministry and prosecuted. This hasn't happened -- but not because of Muslims. The other accusations too don't carry weight. The UPA's position on Iran has been opposed by large numbers of people of different faiths. The consistently-secular Left was at the opposition's forefront. To attribute it to religious affiliation is irrational, indeed tendentious. Recent opinion polls by Outlook and The Hindustan Times show that a majority of respondents, cutting across religious lines, believe that the Singh government has aligned India too close to the US. It's heartening that Muslims have taken to the streets in much larger numbers on secular issues than on religion-related issues including the Babri demolition and Gujarat carnage. This is not a sign of "intolerance," but maturity. Those who hold that opponents of the UPA's foreign policy are trying to "communalise" it are prisoners of a stereotype, which holds that Muslims can only relate to "identity" issues. The protests against Mr Bush were broad-based, and barring two, led by rainbow coalitions. Large numbers of Indians, across religious lines, joined them -- for

secular reasons. The anti-cartoon protests do involve a religious angle. The cartoons are obscene, tasteless, without humour, and calculated to malign Islam. Involved here is not freedom of expression, but hate speech. Hate speech must be demarcated from poetic licence, even blasphemy. It's a crime and deserves to be punished. Those who accuse Muslims of "intolerance" because they question the "right" of some people to offend others through cartoons forget something. In a democracy, those offended have an equal right to protest peacefully. In India, all such protests have been peaceful.

Hindutva apologists see fanaticism in the protests. But they rarely condemn Shiv Sena-VHP-Bajrang Dal goons who routinely burn books, attack exhibitions, and assault people on flimsy excuses. Hindutva's proponents wrongly think they've been gifted the "Muslim appeasement" platform. They cite the restoration of the illegal Migrants (Determination by Tribunals) Act in Assam, the Sachar Committee's now-scuttled proposal to survey Muslim representation in the armed forces, steps to preserve the minority character of Aligarh Muslim University, reserving 5 percent of government jobs for Muslims in Andhra, and the Banerjee Commission report on the 2002 Godhra tragedy.

The BJP is playing a dangerous game. Instead of helping unite the nation against the Varanasi bombings, it chose to divide. The BJP is divided over the "twin yatra." The VHP opposes it. And the RSS is lukewarm. Through the yatra, Mr Advani will shamelessly exploit majoritarian sentiment. The public is in no mood for such crude tactics. Yatra politics peaked in 1990. The BJP's later expeditions had no impact -- including Ekta Yatra (1991), Janadesh Yatra (1993), Su-raj Yatra (1996), Swarna Jayanti Yatra (1997), and Bharat Uday Yatra (2004). The people are interested in substantive livelihood issues. They are tired of greedy old men like Mr Advani stirring up trouble. The last thing any well-wisher of India should do is to taunt and isolate moderates, especially Muslim moderates, who form the community's bulk. The demand that they "speak up" presumes that Muslims instinctively support extremism -- a shameful prejudice.

Praful Bidwai is an eminent Indian columnist.

Voices from around the world

MUHAMMAD ZAMIR

An interesting collection of poems, this slim volume reflects the various facets of sensitivity that existed within the literary world in general and in the psyche of young poets in particular, during the later part of the sixties decade. It was a time of ferment, free love, political fervour, and protest. At the same time there was emergence of a gradual awareness that the need existed to implement human rights, to protect the environment, to prefer love to war, and to seek peace. These were elements that found expression in mainstream as well as fringe literature, in music, in songs and painting.

Hasna Moudud has been associated with literature for over forty years. This has included a period in the sixties when she studied and taught literature in the US. The collection of poems under review includes pieces written by the poet when she attended the Writers Workshop at the University of Iowa. There are also contributions from other poets from all over the world -- Japan, Brazil, Hong Kong, Argentina, US, Iran, Ireland, Philippines, Belgium, Poland, Taiwan, Chile, and Sweden. The result is quite a mix. The poetical pieces demonstrate that the writers are young and still involved with raw emotion. Some of the poems are alliterative. Others include metaphors and symbols with hints of Robert Frost.

"Four Letter Words" by Affonso Anna from Brazil, in stark simplicity, refers to that era's concern over the war in Vietnam. "Love was All" by Karen Hiesel from the US lovingly describes the passing away of an elderly woman. The poem is indeed very moving. I quote some of its lines: "Mother came home / without the antibiotics / because / love was all / grandma needed. / So we watched her / and she breathed / until the vein / in her neck / stopped / moving."

Similarly, a fragment of the poem by Paul Engle (to whom this publication is dedicated) entitled "On a Photograph of Mrs. Martin Luther King" will also captivate the reader. Engle philosophically writes: "The black, transparent veil protects / the brown veil of your face, and that protects / the red veil of your heart, and that protects / these people and this country as nothing else protects."

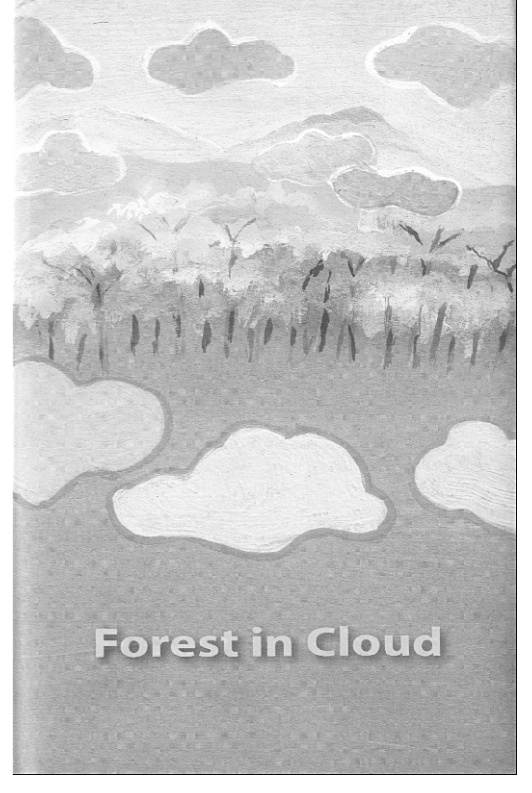
Lindolf Bell from Brazil in "The Poem of the Betrayed Children" highlights the eternal quest of the human spirit to find meaning within the surrounding chaos of life. Written originally in Portuguese and translated later into English, it captures the psyche of a parched soul. The poem "Death, You Need Only Forty-Two Seconds" by Mary C Ching from Philippines has been greatly influenced by the English metaphorical poet John Donne. This is interesting given the fact that death and life are so closely inter-woven in the mind of the poet.

Any review of this book will however be incomplete without reference to Hasna Jasimuddin's nine pieces in this collection. I have no hesitation in singling out "To a Girl in Iowa" as being the best of her entries. It was

Book Review

Forest in Cloud

Edited by Hasna Jasimuddin Moudud Academic Press and Publishers Library, Dhaka (2006)



interesting to notice the mix of East and the West in her work. There are also metaphors that reflect her passion for rural Bangladesh. "Dating in Iowa City" and "Love in Iowa City" also mirror the symbolic matrix life-style that she experienced during her association with the educational institutions in the US. "Forest in Cloud" is a departure from normal publications. It will add to the cultural horizon that exists within the English writing poetic community in this country.

Muhammad Zamir can be reached at mzamir@dhaka.net

Talking trash in Baghdad

ROD NORDLAND

SADDAM Hussein had a point when he described his trial as a "farce." In five months of proceedings, the Iraqi High Tribunal has managed only 17 actual court days amid tight security, hunger strikes and boycotts by lawyers. Assassins have killed a judge, a court employee and two defense attorneys. At one point Saddam's codefendant, Barzan al-Tikriti, the once feared head of the Mukhabarat intelligence service, came to court in his underwear. The ex-dictator himself complained of having guards watch him take his pants down to use the toilet during recesses.

Saddam's appearance last week brought a new low, with the prosecutor and defense lawyers screaming at one another, and the chief judge repeatedly hitting a red button that cut off the mike as Saddam declared himself not only president, but "commander in chief of the mujahid [holy warrior] armed forces." Finally the judge closed the hearing, threw out the press and shut down TV transmissions -- all as Saddam ranted on. Saddam's diatribes were better informed than



they had been in previous court appearances. Held in solitary confinement since his capture in December 2003, Saddam has had little contact with the world beyond his cell. His American jailers strictly purged his reading material of any news about events in Iraq. But since the trial began, Saddam has been allowed to see attorneys, and on Wednesday he

With months more to go, Saddam's only defense is to make a mockery of the entire proceeding. So far, he's succeeding.

made the most of the information he was getting, praising the resistance while calling on Iraqis to avoid civil war. "Let the people unite and resist the invaders and their backers," he said at one point. "Don't fight among yourselves."

The chief judge hit the red button and silenced the audio feed, but Saddam's speech was still audible in the courtroom. "The invaders and their supporters know they're on their certain way to being swept out, like the trash they are."

Lost in the chaos was the case itself. Saddam and his seven codefendants are on trial for the executions of 148 Shiites in the village of Dujail, in reprisal for a failed 1982 assassination attempt on Saddam as his motorcade passed by the village. Of all the accusations against Saddam, it's a relatively small one -- but one where the alleged chain of responsibility is well documented. By his own statements, Saddam has tied himself to the reprisals, saying in court on March 1 that he had

personally ordered the Dujail villagers tried -- and their orchards razed -- for an ambush that involved only 20 attackers. "Where is the crime?" Saddam declared. "Since when] is trying a suspect accused of shooting at a head of state a crime?"

The Saddam-era trial, before the Revolutionary Court in 1984, is the heart of the prosecution's case, which maintains it was a sham. Forty-six of the defendants were "liquidated under torture" -- before they were recorded as appearing at the trial. Eleven of the accused were minors, one as young as 12.

A few years after the trial, Saddam's officials discovered that the kids had never been executed because of their ages. "We recommend executing them in a secret manner," reads one document. There's an arrow from that sentence to the margin, where Saddam allegedly wrote "Yes. It is preferable that they are buried by the Mukhabarat." Saddam could well be executed soon after the Dujail case ends, without waiting for other cases

against him to proceed. The defense still has a chance to make its arguments, which could extend well into the summer. But once a verdict is rendered by the five-judge panel, "if any defendant were sentenced to any penalty, no matter whether it were the death penalty or imprisonment, that penalty should be executed within 30 days of the court's verdict," chief prosecutor Jafar al Musawi told Newsweek. Although there would be an automatic appeal of a death sentence to the court of cassation, that court has no backlog of cases, Musawi says, and an appeal "would only take days."

Many more cases involving Saddam could follow -- if he's still alive. Already, charges are being prepared in the poison-gas attacks against Kurds in Halabja, the wider Anfal massacres and the slaughter of Shiites after an abortive uprising in 1991.

But if Saddam doesn't hang for Dujail, the other 12 cases being prepared against him could, at the present rate, take more than a decade to try. Even many Iraqis unhappy with the American occupation wouldn't like that. "I think most Iraqis share the opinion that I have," said Ahmed Taha, 42, a Sunni primary-school teacher from

Babylon. "Let's get done with it and execute him." At one point in last week's trial, after Saddam quieted down and apparently agreed to address the Dujail charges, the judge pressed the green button to switch on his audio. But the defendant soon rounded on him: "If it were not for the Americans, neither you nor your fathers would have been able to bring me here."

It was then that the judge declared the trial closed to the public. Shia politician Ali al Dabbagh was in the visitors' gallery. "Saddam was trying to pass messages to the insurgents and encourage them to attack," he said. "The judge had to stop this." With months more to go, Saddam's only defense is to make a mockery of the entire proceeding. So far, he's succeeding.

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