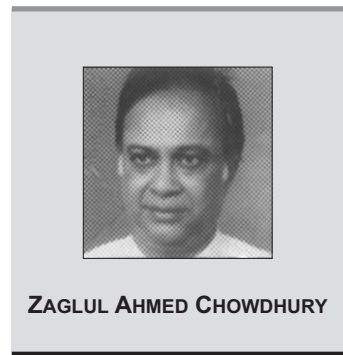


# Will poverty alleviation remain a far cry in South Asia?



ZAGLUL AHMED CHOWDHURY

RECENTLY, Bangladesh capital Dhaka witnessed unique meeting of great international personalities, who have earned laurels for their relentless efforts in the direction of poverty alleviation and uplifting the economic conditions of the toiling masses. Incidentally, these personalities are Bengalees, who have made us proud across the world in recent times for works that are extricably linked to socio-economic progress and such endeavours are seen as a kind of revolution for improving the quality of life of the vast multitude who are mired in abject poverty.

Nobel laureate for Peace for this year professor Dr Muhammad Yunus and earlier Nobel laureate for Economics Dr Amartya Sen shared dais in Dhaka on different occasions where they spoke on the various aspects of the poverty and economic related issues that are of paramount importance for the developing and poverty-ridden nations and also relevant for the developed countries in many ways because not that all of their people are free from acute economic problems. Internationally acclaimed founding-leader of BRAC, the world's largest NGO, Fazle Hasan Abed's joining hands with two Nobel laureates in their

commitment to fight poverty and illiteracy will undoubtedly further reinforce the daunting task that they have in their hand for a better world particularly for the economically handicapped and the less fortunate. All these three Bengalees spoke in same tune on the imperative of creating a more happy and healthy society by successfully fighting the main enemy "poverty."

This year's Nobel peace prize on

was Bangladesh's micro-credit "guru" professor Muhammad Yunus and his famed "Grameen Bank" that were chosen for the award setting at rest all such speculations. Indeed, such a prize for a critically important area like micro-credit for poverty alleviation is a fitting tribute to a great cause and this has added further impetus to the struggle for gigantic task of rural development and improving the life of the poor. The award has infused

of the rainbow ruling United Progressive Alliance (UPA) in India, announced that it was bringing back this slogan which its leader late Indira Gandhi coined and helped the party win resounding victories in the early seventies. Over the last three decades, India made remarkable progress in many areas ranging from information to nuclear technology, but progress in the field of "Garibi Hatao" has been disappointingly

successful administrator in the field of economy, while congratulating Prof Yunus said his country was following the concept and wants to enlarge its application. Other South Asian nations struggling to improve the socio-economic conditions of the vast multitude in the rural areas, are expected to be encouraged by the award.

The SAARC and the CIRDAP (centre for integrated rural development in the Asia and Pacific), which

is simply the tip of the iceberg and much deeper problems lie beneath. It is important that such problems be identified more accurately and concerted drives are launched to resolve them as far as possible with greater success. Amartya Sen, "the son of Dhaka" shot into prominence by his research and theory of hunger that he saw in most cruel form in this part of the world. Professor Yunus gave a new dimension in the direction of economic uplift of particularly the rural poor -- mostly women.

Fazle Hasan Abed has covered wider areas including removing literacy. When these three persons share the same occasion and call for strengthening the movement against hunger and poverty, this definitely gives a new stimulation to the big cause of uplifting the poor. Other persons and organisations too are engaged in the noble effort and all deserve commendation. This situation notwithstanding, much more remains to be done and especially in the South Asia where critical economic problems stalk most of the 1.4 billion people.

The Bangladesh capital was the venue for launching the SAARC in the month of December, 1985 and the forum has been a remarkable development in the region even though its progress has been somewhat sluggish and not upto the expectations. When eminent personalities met in Dhaka in the same month and called for facing the challenge of poverty with greater determination and planning, it should make bigger noise and impact not only nationally and regionally, but at the global scale for economic uplift of the down trodden.

Zaglul Ahmed Chowdhury is Chief Editor of BSS.

## MATTERS AROUND US

**However, euphoria over the Nobel peace award for Bangladesh must not lead to the impression that milk and honey would flow for the poor since still much needs to be done in the area of rural development and poverty alleviation. In fact, the poverty that is discernible is simply the tip of the iceberg and much deeper problems lie beneath. It is important that such problems be identified more accurately and concerted drives are launched to resolve them as far as possible with greater success.**

issues related to poverty almost synchronised the international day of eradication of poverty on October 17 as the coveted award was announced in the same week. However, the award in a critically important field like micro-credit for improving the economic life of the poor has added a different dimension since a large number of people across the world are victims of the curse of abject poverty. Unrelenting efforts to reduce the scale of poverty are being met with mixed fortunes, but there is hardly any option than continuing such efforts with greater vigour and determination both at government and the non-government level.

Speculations made rounds before the announcement of the Nobel Peace award that 2006 prize was likely to go to political leaders or statesmen and some names were also mentioned. But finally it

new enthusiasm in this seemingly Herculean but not impossible task. Some positive results are already palpable in recent years not only in Bangladesh but in some other countries as well as the product of micro-credit and other economic and social innovations.

The drive at national and international level for eradication of poverty is receiving greater attention following this year's Nobel peace prize and this impact can be seen in South Asia. It is just not a co-incidence that the largest political party in the biggest country of the region, close on the heels of the 2006 Nobel Peace award, has announced that it is reverting to "Garibi Hatao" (eliminate poverty) as its main political slogan as it felt this was genuinely aimed at ameliorating conditions of the masses. The Congress led by Sonia Gandhi, which is the main partner

scant. This is one reason which contributed to the defeat of the previous NDA government led by charismatic Atal Bihari Vajpayee in the last election when "Shining India" failed to attract the voters in the rural areas to the glittering urban development that is really spectacular.

The present Indian government is attaching more importance to rural development and poverty alleviation. Prime minister Dr Manmohan Singh and chairperson of the ruling UPA alliance Sonia Gandhi have profusely congratulated Prof Yunus on his winning the Nobel prize while praising the micro-credit progress of the "Grameen Bank". One may be inclined to believe that this award might have encouraged the Congress to revert to the "Garibi Hatao" slogan. Pakistan prime minister Shaukat Aziz, known as a

have already swung into the task of eradication of poverty with all seriousness, also find new encouragement in their work from this award as it has come this year to the region and in the field relevant to their work. Numerous non-government organisations working for uplift of the poor have been encouraged by the international recognition to micro-credit and other programmes that are aimed at bettering the life of the marginalised section of the society. But SAARC and others need to take up more action-oriented work to attain the objectives.

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## INNOVATIVE MICROCREDIT

# More benefit at less cost

MD. ENAMUL HAQUE

MICROCREDIT now has universal recognition as the most effective tool in poverty reduction. With its initiator and his institution winning the Nobel Peace Prize it requires no rhetoric on its success and credibility. It is now replicated world wide.

The idea of extending collateral-free loan was wonderful. The inherent weight of trust worked. It paid off and encouraged. The operation multiplied and enkindled growth from individual to individual and also institution to institution. In the process emergence of ASA,

among others, has been prominent after Grameen Bank.

The mission, apparently, is of helping the poor to change their lot, reducing poverty. Whatever, it involves some cost, even if it is kept at the minimum by standard, effort-fully, to provide as much possible benefit to the other (receivers) end. Here ASA went for innovating ways to reduce operation cost. It expanded its operation quite fast, faster than many others, across the country covering almost all districts. But it tried to keep the operation cost lower without affecting the quality of service, i.e. covering more mem-

bers per field office, only necessary number of staff and minimum furniture to avoid any redundancy, lean structure reducing overhead cost, decentralization to branch level, simple and transparent account and record keeping but strong monitoring and supervision.

All this has not only effectively reduced operation cost increasing members benefit but also led to the organisation's impressive success as the leading microcredit provider. It was able to reach assistance to 6.39 million members through 2,579 branches by September 2006. As such, it has been able to

distribute US\$ 5,427 million equivalent causing a US\$ 310 million equivalent outstanding with 99.93 percent recovery rate. It's a success story undoubtedly, whereby it is running a special programme of flexible loan to assist 0.19 million hardcore poor members.

ASA has been placed as the best microcredit provider in the world by Microfinance Information eXchange (MIX). MIX is an international research institution on microcredit based in Washington, USA. It works on benchmarking, monitoring, infrastructure development, etc of microcredit throughout the world and publishes analyses,

which are globally recognised.

By now several MFIs in different countries are replicating its model to be successful themselves. Simplicity, flexibility and cost-effectiveness are the keys to this success. The organisation aims at providing more benefit at less cost. And when more benefit can be provided at less cost, it obviously proves to be the most effective tool in poverty reduction.

This innovative approach to microcredit operation has been able to introduce a revolutionary change in its traditional and fundamental structure for better. The most uncommon characteristics,

among others, of this approach are -- no necessity of establishing any primary group for getting loan, no group guarantee and no binding for weekly installment, as usually in practice. The operator fixes the installments and other conditions considering the member's ability, competence, income cycle and other socio-economic status. This has enabled wider membership and as such wider poverty reduction sphere.

Md Enamul Haque is Executive Vice President, ASA.

# How effective the role of civil society can be?

KHAN FERDOUSOUR RAHMAN

THE United Nations once dealt only with governments. By now we know that peace and prosperity cannot be achieved without partnerships involving governments, international organisations, the business community and civil society. In today's world, we depend on each other", says UN Secretary General Kofi A Annan. Strengthening democratic institutions and supporting civil society are essential for ensuring both human rights and good governance. Hierarchical governmental system should be 'de-verticalised' into horizontal democratic institutions of governance. A democratic governance system is characterised by transparency of processes and accessibility to information.

The idea of civil society has become more prominent in political and development parlance over the past several years. This is mainly due to successive waves of democratisation, beginning from Latin America, across the Central and Eastern European countries and spreading through the developing world, including Africa and Asia. Political scientists and practitioners have come to the realisation that it is not just state institutions and policy initiatives that essentially ensure a high standard of democratic governance but also the civil society. The UN is increasingly both participant in and a witness to global civil society. The UN system has significant informal and formal arrangements with civil society organisations (CSOs), collectively known as non-governmental organisations

(NGOs). More and more, NGOs are UN system partners and valuable UN links to civil society. NGOs are consulted on UN policy and programme matters. CSOs play a key role at major UN Conferences and as indispensable partners for UN efforts at the country level. At the same time, the UN is helping to promote the emergence of CSOs in the developing countries.

Civil society comprises the totality of voluntary civic and social organisations and institutions that form the basis of a functioning society as opposed to the force-backed structures of a state (regardless of that state's political system). Civil society is generally viewed "as a sphere of association in society in distinction to the state, involving a network of institutions through which society and groups within it represent themselves in cultural, ideological and political senses."

The civil society was articulated during 1750-1850. Then it was disappeared for time being and revived in the late 20th century in the context of the demise of the communist states. It is also true that the term has been used differently by different social and political thinkers right from the days of Hegel and Marx. In Hegel's view, civil society was a sphere of contradictions that could be resolved in the higher institution of the state. The civil society includes the economic sphere and the social groups as well as the administrative and judicial institutions between the constitutional monarch and the family or the individual. The civil society in Hegelian state owes its existence to discretion of the government and lacks autonomy. The anti-liberal tradition takes on a meaning in

Marxist discourse which holds that the forces of production determine the social relations and the forms of the state. Marx saw it as conflict, which would take the form of class struggles leading to the overthrow of the state. It is said that in the later writings of Marx, the concept of civil society was largely replaced by that of capitalist mode of production.

Antonio Gramsci, an Italian Marxist, during the 1930s, conceived of civil society in a broader sense than that of society minus the state. His view was based on comparative theory of political changes through civil society. He argued that where civil society was weak as in

lence the state's monopoly powers of coercion to defend their own interests and welfare. Civil society's activities were originated in most countries to resist the arbitrariness and excesses of the government. Adam Ferguson made the radical assertion that a government, which represses the civic associations, is illegitimate. The civil society movements in the communist countries since late 1970s reasserted the liberal tradition. Initially, it directed its criticisms against bureaucratisation.

Civil society is the well-spring of the social capital, people working together for common purposes, which is essential for good govern-

ment acting voluntarily and without seeking personal profit to provide benefits for themselves or for others. The individuals are able to establish and maintain national networks through civil society or more precisely, through third sector. These voluntary associations also connect people with informal, loosely structured associations and consolidate society through altruism without obligation. Most discussions on civil society, which broadly includes NGOs involved in awareness-building, tend to point out that this has to be created first through collective initiative of individuals interested in

responsibility are cornerstones of any good organisation. The NGOs are primarily the service delivery agents. Some of them carry on advocacy of social policies and values which are difficult to isolate from the political and belief systems. NGOs or any other citizen groups engaged in public policy deliberations must be very clear about two things, i.e. mandate and stakeholders. Too often, various groups claiming to speak 'on behalf of the people', as alternatives to politicians and political parties. These generalisations, the 'we the people' type of claims are not just false and misleading, they can undermine the

accountable to an electorate. On one hand, that limits their mandate. They cannot claim overall representation. On the other hand, this kind of independence from the electorate gives them the freedom, flexibility, and space, which constitute the comparative advantages of NGOs in national and global governance. CSOs are needed not because they 'represent the people', they are needed because through them people get things better. Their roles in the society are manifold, i.e. monitoring, advocacy, defending human rights, use of international mechanism, and mobilisation.

### Bangladesh perspective

There is no need to import the western concept of civil society in our present socio-economic condition. The concept very well existed in our society through elderly 'madbar' people in various villages and through 'sarder' in 'panchayat system' in old Dhaka. Article 21 of Part II of our Constitution also ensures the duties of the citizens to go by the Constitution and the laws to maintain the discipline, to perform public duties and to protect public property.

Civil society means taking responsibility sportingly and voluntarily. NGOs including various think-tanks are having great role to play in terms of establishment of human rights, preservation of environment, women empowerment etc. Our civil society very well succeeded in banning polythene, removing 55,000 two stroke baby taxis from Dhaka city, enacting a new law to protect the water bodies and making new building construction rules.

As the politics is the rootless game of power, so the political society has grasped the civil society

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the East, there could be a violent assault on the state as in Russia in 1917. In areas where civil society was strong as in the West, this was not possible. He further argued that the institutions of the civil society were 'outer earthworks' of the society. It was through the same that the ruling classes maintain their dominance in the society. It was, therefore, necessary to transform civil society as an alternative powerbase of the subordinate classes. It was only through such transformation that it would be possible to challenge state power.

The civil society may also provide new forms generally arising out of social movements. Under this topology, collective actors in civil society characterised by mass mobilisation or participation can act as alternative powerbase to chal-

lence CSOs can fill the vacuum left by the slimmed-down state, and can advocate and monitor reforms that foster sustainable human development. UNDP considers collaboration with these organisations important because of their responsiveness, innovation, direct relationship with the poor, capacity to stimulate participation and articulate local views, cost effectiveness, local accountability and independent assessment of issues.

The civil society as organisation has emerged as a new paradigm which acts as agents for delivery of public goods and services. It refers to voluntary associations and organisations outside the market and state. It is very close to that of third sector, which consists of private organisations that are formed and sustained by groups of

good governance. This line of reasoning however is premised on the belief that civil societies created through such initiatives would act as a catalyst for change for the better. It also assumes that such initiatives must come from the so-called educated elite living in cities and organising seminars or discussions.

CSOs or NGOs, as the most active agents of civil society, have crucial advantages as well as serious weaknesses vis-à-vis government organisations and businesses. These can broadly be divided into the categories of 'legitimacy' and 'effectiveness'. The latter includes qualities such as flexibility, grassroots experience and mobility; while the former would include public trust, accountability and representation. Mandate and

## LEST WE FORGET

# Archbishop Theotonius A. Ganguly

HUBERT ARUN ROZARIO

REMEMBERING Archbishop Theotonius Ganguly is a venerable affair, because he is on the path of beatification and canonisation. My best impression of His Grace Archbishop Ganguly in my student days is whenever I met him he never lectured me to be a holy man or a better Christian, but there was clearly a special presence about him in goodness and what he did best was to listen to me with patience and loving care. Archbishop Ganguly came into our lives as Gift of God, to show us the way to imitate Christ and bear the witness of Christ in the different and unique circumstances of our ordinary lives.

Archbishop Ganguly had his unique way of transforming power of Christian love in a very poor country full of chaos and heat of our battle for independence. To most of us Archbishop Ganguly is consistently remembered as a quiet man of gentle presence and few words. As the first Bangali clergy doctorate, he could talk to us on theology and philosophy all day long, but he never did that except whenever he was teaching his class at the Notre Dame College. Nevertheless his example in life and actions spoke for themselves.

I remember Archbishop Ganguly in the days of our Liberation War when he was trying frantically to pass letters and money from Bangali workers in West Pakistan, specially from Karachi to their families in our remote villages of Dohar and Nawabganj Thanas, to sustain their livelihood and help their children to continue studies. At the risk of his life he wanted to give our distressed people protection and consolation in our battered country where death was everywhere. He did the miracle and a new channel was opened to communicate between their families and the workers in Pakistan and send money via London. I was with him helping in small way and reminding him each day not to take this risk as the general post office, would ultimately find out and he would be picked-up by Pakistani army. He just remained silent and I knew his silence was speaking to me loud and clear at his second floor office in Archbishop's House. As Mukti Juddha escalated conflicts throughout our country, the Archbishop took courageous and prudent actions to assist the freedom movement. He instructed all Christian hospitals and clinics to render loving care and proper treatment to our freedom fighters and our people.

Many Christian hospitals and clinics treated wounded freedom fighters throughout the border areas of Mymensingh, Jessore, Khulna, Sylhet, Rangpur, Dinajpur and Chittagong. In this noble service three Christian fathers and one sister was brutally killed by the occupying Pakistani army. He allowed and requested Parish Priest of Bhoberpara Catholic Church, Fr. Francis Gomes, now retired Bishop

of Mymensingh, to set up all logistics to the formation of Shadin Bangla Sarkar in Baidyanathpur, Kushiata, which was renamed Mujibnagar. The first cabinet of Bangladesh was set up at the church compound and the Independence Document of our motherland was signed on the dining table of the priest-in-charge, Rev. Fr. Francis Gomes. His timely actions and the vision of Bangladesh shone as the beacon of light and hope to all Bangalees.

I left for Melaghar Mukti Bahani camp in Agortalla in the month of May and before my departure I saw Archbishop Ganguly, he just asked me, "Do you realize that you are taking a most dangerous path?" I did keep silent, and then he softly said, "It is the most effective and glorious path to liberate our occupied country." He then put his hand on my head and just said, "God be with you, wherever you are posted." I felt strength in my soul and with that overwhelming love of Christ he bade me farewell. Guess what? In the course of the Liberation war, I met the present Editor of The Daily Star, my school friend Mahfuz Anam, in Kalyani camp, near Benapole border, where we were being brushed-up again and again for a special assignment, every day, by a great freedom fighter and officer, Major Manzur, later Lt. Gen. Manzur.

I had the privilege to work for the formation of "Trebeni Chatra Kalyan Sangha", "Suhrud Sangha", during my student days in Dhaka University. Many a time when I was overburdened with problems to organise our youth, I came to the Archbishop, told him about our shortcomings and difficult problems, and he put himself under our burdens. The fact is he always wanted to be with the youth in the field, in the difficult situations when nobody came forward to help them in our motherland.

Archbishop Ganguly worked hard during the Liberation war in extreme conditions. He traveled from village to village and spoke to our people. He spoke of hope and his homilies were simple and direct. He never cared for his comfort in order to share in the sufferings of our people in the hands of Pakistani soldiers. Till his death, he was always willing to take on the burden of the common people and tried to share their sufferings and anxieties.

Whenever I heard him speak, I had a feeling of peace, if I was worried and anxious, he took my fears and burdens, and in return he gave me the comfort of God. We were so honoured to have Archbishop Theotonius A. Ganguly as the head of our church in Bangladesh and to have him around us. For that we are forever grateful to God.

as well as the bureaucracy. Bureaucracy has been totally politicised by all the parties in power. Earlier the academicians used to be the head of the governing body of any educational institute, but now any chairman of governing body you see is a politician. Moreover Article 70 of our Constitution has enhanced autocratic rule, thereby establishing autocratic democracy and giving rise to dynasty. An MP becomes just obedient to a political party or head of the party. Here, the opposition is compelled to go out of parliament or even out of road. Under this situation it is still praiseworthy that our civil society has not yet completely surrendered to the politicians.

Civil society members may have political beliefs in mind, but that should not be expressed in their behaviour. Once it is expressed, then automatically the individual becomes politician, not remains as civil society member. Our civil society is weak, because few of our national politicians always take camouflage of professionals with an aim to divide them. But recently our civil society has strengthened them tremendously. For that our media also played a transparent role.

The importance of civil society in a democratic society cannot be overemphasised. Article 29 of UDHR states, "Everyone has duties to the community in which alone the free and full development of his personality is possible." CSOs, therefore, have a role to play in creating a favourable climate for treaty implementation and instigating implementation.