

INTERNATIONAL DAY FOR THE ERADICATION OF POVERTY

Creative solutions to poverty

Shameran Abed, Senior Director of the Brac Microfinance and Ultra-Poor Graduation programmes, talks to Naznin Tithi of The Daily Star about Bangladesh's progress in reducing extreme poverty and the challenges ahead, how Brac's Ultra-Poor Graduation (UPG) programme has fundamentally changed how we look at the ultra-poor, the importance of innovation, women as agents of change, and what the Covid-19 crisis has taught us.

The goal of SDG 1 is to end poverty in all its forms. What are the biggest challenges we are facing in this fight?

Bangladesh has made remarkable progress in reducing extreme poverty over the last few decades. Between 2000 and 2018, the proportion of the population living below the international poverty line, currently measured at a purchasing power parity (PPP) adjusted rate of USD 1.9 a day, dropped from 34.5 percent to 11.3 percent.

Much of this success can be attributed to sustained macroeconomic growth, increased government investments in public services, a thriving private sector and a vibrant civil society—all doing their part. Having said that, it is important to understand that the people who are below the poverty line are not homogeneous. There is great heterogeneity in terms of their vulnerability. Take the ultra-poor for example. The people in this subset of extreme poverty are not only living below the poverty line, but they have multiple additional vulnerabilities that make their poverty and deprivation more entrenched and therefore more difficult to address. In our joint efforts to end extreme poverty in our country by 2030 (goal of SDG 1), it is this group that deserves special attention.

Also, given this particular point in time when we are in the midst of a global pandemic, I must also mention that we are seeing a major setback in terms of some of our hard-fought gains of the last couple of decades. Many people living just above the poverty line threshold have fallen below due to a loss of livelihoods, and are now referred to as the “new poor”. For some, this setback will be temporary and we are already seeing recovery in certain sectors. For others, it will be more long-term. The impact of Covid-19 that we are seeing has exposed the fact that even after all these decades of development progress, the lives and livelihoods of poor people are still fragile. Therefore, we not only need to improve existing social safety nets to be more inclusive, adaptive, and comprehensive, we also need to invest much more on building resilient livelihoods that are better able to withstand



Shameran Abed

future shocks that will inevitably come.

Brac has been working for a long time to alleviate extreme poverty in the country as well as in other parts of the world. Tell us about Brac's Ultra-Poor Graduation (UPG) programme which has been recognised worldwide? What are the criteria for graduation?

Brac designed the ultra-poor graduation programme 20 years ago because we saw that the poorest households required an approach that went beyond single-focus interventions like health, education, or microfinance. An ultra-poor family typically has no assets, no education, no skills, irregular income that they cannot depend on, and limited access to clean water, health and public services. Furthermore, they are marginalised within their own communities and therefore have no one to turn to for support.

For these households, their level of vulnerability means that they need support to address all of these factors in one go. Brac's ultra-poor graduation programme combines elements of social protection, livelihoods, financial inclusion and social inclusion in order to address the multiple vulnerabilities

faced by the ultra-poor. We don't only provide the assets and the training, but a suite of wrap-around services that together helps to address the multiple layers of vulnerability of the ultra-poor. To us “graduation” means reaching that point of self-reliance and resilience where they are able to sustainably increase their income, consumption, assets, and savings. It means going from despair to hope.

The programme—which costs about USD 500 per household—only lasts two years, but the impact goes well beyond that. Researchers from the London School of Economics found that seven years after entering the programme, 92 percent of participants had maintained or increased their income, assets and consumption. Abhijit Banerjee and Esther Duflo, the MIT economists who won the Nobel Prize last year, led multi-country evaluations that identified graduation as one of the most effective ways to break the poverty trap.

Approximately 20 million people are still trapped in poverty in Bangladesh. What types of assistance are needed to ensure that the ultra-poor people can break out from poverty and move towards sustainable livelihoods?

I think we can take heart from the fact that Bangladesh has been able to make tremendous gains on poverty reduction since independence. We have shown that between government, development partners and civil society actors, we have the commitment, resources and the know-how to lift massive numbers of people out of poverty.

Of course, there are evolving phenomena such as the increasing urbanisation of poverty and the havoc on lives and livelihoods wreaked by the adverse impacts of climate change, that will continue to throw up difficult and stubborn challenges. What we need now is a commitment to work together, to make bold investments on human capital and to leverage the comparative strengths of the development organisations and the government to make a sustained push to end extreme poverty by 2030. We are among the few large countries in the world that has the ability to achieve

the SDG 1 target. We should not let this opportunity slip away by not effectively leveraging our knowledge and resources.

According to the Planning Commission (PC), the recent nationwide closure of all economic activities for two-and-a-half months doubled extreme poverty in Bangladesh, raising the number of the country's ultra-poor from 10.5 percent of the population to 20.5 percent as of June. How would you evaluate this finding?

It is clear from what we are seeing on the ground and hearing from our research partners that Covid-19 has had a dramatic and systems-wide impact. According to a recent study by Brac Institute of Governance and Development (BIGD) and Power and Participation Research Centre (PPRC), three indicators of vulnerability underscore the impact seen: i) a steep drop in income; ii) extreme uncertainty of livelihoods; and iii) a contraction in consumption. Our research and field experience suggest that the urban poor have been more severely impacted. This is of particular concern because social protection programmes in Bangladesh have mainly focused on the rural poor. The study also suggests that the economic shock has caused 77 percent of vulnerable non-poor from the informal sector to fall below the income poverty line.

There are several lessons that we must take away from this crisis, but two I would like to mention in particular. First, we need robust urban social protection programmes that can be quickly and efficiently deployed; and second, we need a stronger focus on building sustainable and resilient livelihoods for people in poverty. The amount of money the government already allocates each year for social security programmes can be much better spent through more effective targeting and better programme design that build resilience instead of dependence.

How important is innovation in eradicating extreme poverty from the country? Can you give us some examples of innovative approaches to fighting poverty?

Poverty cannot be addressed without approaching solutions creatively and from different angles. Every major success we've had can be traced back to a culture of innovation and learning. These range from going door-to-door to teach mothers how to make oral rehydration saline themselves during the 1980s, to teaching digitally illiterate women to save more securely and conveniently using bKash.

The graduation approach, for example, is considered to be one of the most exciting innovations in development in the last 20 years. For a long-time people thought that the ultra-poor were too weak and vulnerable to be economically active, so they were treated as passive recipients of aid. But simply being in a cash transfer programme does little to build agency or improve poor people's participation in more sustainable development activities. The graduation approach has fundamentally changed how we look at the ultra-poor, from passive recipients of aid to active participants in their own development.

How important is agency and security of women and ending violence against women to achieve SDG 1?

Promoting gender equality is at the core of everything we do. Our founder used to continuously remind us that we cannot talk about real development until we can change a culture that systemically subjugates 50 percent of its people. He would tell us in the last years of his life that gender equality remained the unfinished agenda of his life's work. Ending violence against women and building agency are extremely important, but not enough. We have to tear down the many economic, social and cultural barriers that have been artificially erected by patriarchal societies everywhere, which prevent women from utilising their full talent and reaching their full potential. At Brac, we believe that women have to be at the very centre of development, as agents of change of their own lives, in their families and in their communities.

The full text of the interview has been published in the online version.

World Bengali Literature Conference 2020

Virtual US meet celebrates yearning for Bangla literature



ASHFAQUE SWAPAN

LAST year, when about 150 people—a substantial chunk from out-of-state—gathered in Atlanta for a convention, the event had an intriguing twist: The first ever World Bengali Literature Conference, as the event billed itself, focused exclusively on Bangla literature.

While expat Bangladeshis love cultural soirees, the accent is pretty much exclusively on the performing arts.

North America-wide annual ethnic Bengali jamborees are a big deal. The North American Bengali Conference (NABC), popularly known as Banga Sammelan, is run by West Bengal expats. Each year, it draws over 5,000 attendees. Virtually the entire cultural glitterati of Kolkata is airlifted to the event. Its Bangladeshi cousin, the FOBANA (The Federation of Bangladeshi Associations in North America) annual convention, is smaller in scale and a bit more chaotic in nature.

But here's the funny thing. Literature gets short shrift in these mega events. NABC flies in top Bangla authors from Kolkata and dumps them unceremoniously at minor sidebar events in seminar rooms while all the action takes place in the humongous auditoria.

The North America Bengali Literary Society, which hosted the event for the second time (on October 10-11), can make a legitimate claim that its event is something of a trailblazer with its exclusive focus on Bangla literature. Its conventions are beginning to settle into a pattern of panel

discussions sandwiched between sessions of writers reading out their own work. A massive commemorative volume of poetry and prose, *Hridbangla*, was published in a 500-plus ebook format.

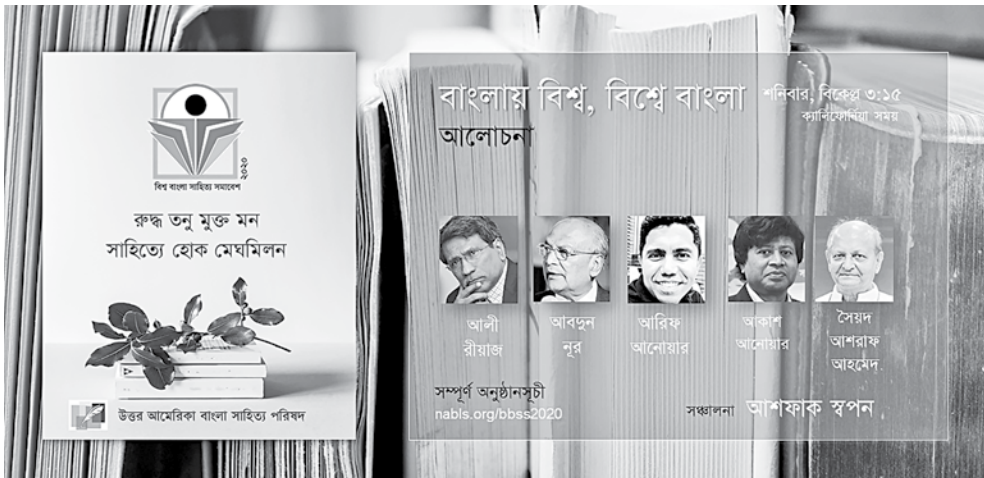
NABLS is a group of North America-based Bangla writers and literature aficionados. Ekushey Award-winning Bangla fiction writer Jyotiprakash Dutta and his spouse, Bangla Academy award-winning author Purabi Basu, are the key leaders, assisted by members like science writer and former NASA scientist Dipen Bhattacharya and author-lyricist Sezan Mahmud.

The pandemic forced organisers to move online this year. While it deprived the online convention of the bonhomie and camaraderie of a physical convention, it had its upside, nonetheless.

Heavyweight participants from London including Bangla scholar Golam Murshid, fiction writer Shahaduzzaman, poet Shamim Azad and former UNDP economist Selim Jahan added a lustre that organisers would be hard pressed to muster at a physical convention.

One of the more affecting sessions drew participants who had joined in from outside the United States. One participant joined in from a remote town in the west of Brazil, another and his wife joined in from Tehran. A filmmaker-poet joined in from Paris. All are amateur writers, and their luminous joy at being part of this event lit up the session. It was a stirring reminder that the Bengali word for literature, *shahitya*, after all, comes from the word *shahit* (being together).

As discussion panels dealt with literary topics, reading sessions, with an eclectic mix of amateur and established writers for authors, had an open mic feel about it.



Promotional poster for one of the sessions at the virtual World Bengali Literary Conference 2020 held on October 10-11. Due to the pandemic, the conference was held online.

I moderated a panel with an expansive topic: “The world in Bengal, Bengal in the World” (*Banglai bishwa, bishwa Bangla*). My panellists had formidable intellectual heft. Ali Riaz, a distinguished professor of political science at Illinois State University, is a popular, prolific commentator on Bangladesh politics. For over four decades, World Bank veteran Abdun Noor helped develop manpower and education policies in 45 developing countries. Noor is also a novelist. Syed Ashraf Ahmed, a scientist, sits on the editorial board of five international scientific journals. He writes extensively in Bangla. Melbourne, Australia-based Akash Anwar is indefatigable in his mission to promote Bangla education throughout the world through the two organisations he has founded, Bangla Academy Australia and

Bangla Academy International.

The star attraction of the panel, however, was 40-something author Arif Anwar. *The New York Times* called his 2018 novel “The Storm” “a fascinating, ambitious work.” Bengali writers writing in English are not new—authors like Bharati Mukherjee, Amitav Ghosh and Amit Chaudhuri are widely recognised in the West. What's exciting about Anwar is that he represents a breakthrough for Bangladeshi authors.

Anwar also presented a fascinating counterpoint in the panel discussion. Riaz, the political scientist, laid out the premise that the cultural passage for the Bangla diaspora is particularly fraught, and expats need to avoid the false binary of being either Bangladeshi or American/British/Canadian. What they need to do, Riaz said, is

to develop nuanced, multiple identities that embrace both. While Noor gave a fascinating overview of how diaspora Bangla speakers have preserved their culture in far-flung parts of the world, he added a cautionary note that we were losing our younger generation. Ahmed, the scientist, emphatically agreed.

Anwar, on the other hand, presented an inspiring epitome of Riaz's vision. Here's a *New York Times* acclaimed author, whose fluent Bangla, rich in Bangladeshi cadence, could fool you into believing he lives in Dhaka, not Toronto. Yet it's hard to run away from the fact that Anwar is the exception that proves the rule: the loss of Bengali cultural identity in the second generation of the diaspora is a harsh reality. Anwar, meanwhile, made a plaintive appeal in Bangla: It isn't enough for Bangladeshis to be proud of authors like him. They need to go out and buy his books so authors like him can eat—and continue to write books that tell the story of the Bangladeshi diaspora.

After the event was over, the gush of self-congratulatory celebration of the organisers, a staple of pretty much every expat event here, was a bit overwrought if understandable. After all, whatever its limitations, organisers pulled off a complex, two-day online event with substantive sessions virtually without a hitch.

However, the broader conceit of the organisers of a sustained future for Bangla literature outside its land of origin is a poignant fallacy. The passionate love for Bangla, on the other hand, that powered the extraordinary hard work that went into putting together the event, is quite real, and deserves affectionate admiration.

Ashfaque Swapan is a contributing editor for *Siliconer*, a digital daily for South Asians in the United States.

JEAN-PAUL SARTRE
(1905-1980)
French philosopher and author.

Once you hear the details of victory, it is hard to distinguish it from a defeat.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

1 Relaxed

7 Gear parts

11 Mariners

12 Lead on

13 Cautioned

14 Open space

15 Ed of “Up”

16 Appellate judge, often

17 Capone's foe

18 Reduce in rank

19 Revered one

21 Tie the knot

22 Nation's center

25 Young fellow

26 Bond component

27 Vigor

29 2014 Russell Crowe role

33 Derby prize

34 Cecil's cartoon pal

35 Pressing need

36 Grapevine talk

37 Uncool fellow

38 Eventually

39 Turns right

40 Yellow-stone sight

DOWN

1 Egyptian city

2 Make fun of

3 Brings in

4 Memory loss

5 Soothsayer

6 Complete

7 Assert

8 Wilder play

9 Welcomed

10 Blackened

16 Viola's cousin

18 Eccentric

20 Pulls along

22 Tribute VIP

23 Ugly building

24 Legal forgiveness

25 Explorer Vitus

28 Tears apart

30 Caravan stop

31 Cartoon genre

32 Keyed up

34 Radius, for one

36 Band job

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10-10

YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

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BEETLE BAILEY

BY MORT WALKER

BABY BLUES

BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT