

Defeat the Prophets of Doom

by Mohammed Farashuddin

"Our goal must be to reduce these disparities across and within countries, to bring more and more people into the economic mainstream, to promote equitable access to the benefits of development regardless of nationality, race or gender."

In one sense, Asia is where the poverty is. According to one estimate made by Dr Mahbubul Haq, out of the 1.2 billion poor of the world, as many as 800 million are located in Asia. Bangladesh accounts for at least 60 million of the poor. There may be an additional shame in that the ranks under the poverty line have increased during the period 1972-1997, i.e. independence instead of reducing the number of the poor people has been through an increase of them. According to another estimate, there are now roughly 60 million people languishing under abject poverty compared to 50 million or so immediately after the independence was achieved through a prolonged and bloody but glorious war of liberation. And yet there are so many success stories on poverty alleviation claimed both by the government and the non-government organizations. True due to the successful interventions against poverty — NGO programmes being the most noteworthy amongst those — a significant proportion of the poor has graduated out of poverty. The fact that there are a larger number of the poor in 1997 compared to 1972 is an evidence that the rate of movement out of the poverty line is lower than the rate of increase of those who join therein by birth, deprivation and other causes.

It is perhaps useful to define poverty for a common understanding of what it is. Poverty is a state of economic, social and psychological deprivation occurring among people or countries lacking sufficient ownership, control or access to resources to maintain acceptable living standards. It is the way the Ottawa-based North-South Institute defined poverty in its Report on Rural Poverty in Bangladesh in 1985. Poverty is thus a multi-dimensional phenomenon; its measurement in mere numbers always leaves a major gap. Poverty, however defined or measured, remains a very cursed, demeaning and debilitating state of condition of a human being nobody would like to be in.

Of the various standard definitions of poverty, we would use the narrow but convenient to quantify poverty line concept. In this definition, a minimum calorie intake requirements are determined for an able bodied adult individual. Those who are unable to have 90 per cent of the minimum requirements are

said to be under absolute poverty. Persons who do not have access to even 80 per cent of the minimum are described being under extreme poverty. The limits suggested by Dr A R Khan in 1987 are 2122 kilo cal for absolute poverty and 1805 kilo cal for extreme poverty. The exercise is taken a step further by determining the non-food requirements (housing, cloth, medical service etc) of an adult able-bodied person as a percentage of the Kilo calorie food requirement. The aggregation of the food and the non-food requirements as expressed in money terms constitutes the minimum income level needed to purchase the irreducible minimum consumption basket. That income level is the so-called poverty line.

A recently conducted Household Expenditure Survey (HES) in Bangladesh shows a modest improvement in poverty situation in Bangladesh by head count since the early eighties. The incidence of national poverty declined from 52.3 to 49.7 per cent during the period 1984-92. The declining trend in income-poverty seems to be continuing as a large scale survey funded by World Bank and conducted by BIDS shows the proportion of people in poverty in rural areas of Bangladesh fell from 26 per cent in 1987 to 23 per cent in 1994. However, how much of reduction in rural poverty is due to in-migration to cities is a major point to inquire into. Moreover, despite the decline in percentage terms, the ranks of the poor are on the increase in absolute numbers.

No doubt, the emerging concept of participatory development with the active involvement of the human beings at the centre piece of any development process is a good news. But this is also a formidable constraint in the development process itself because of the extremely low level of human development in place in many developing countries. According to UNDP Human Development Report 1997, Human Development Index (HDI) of Bangladesh puts the country at the 143rd position amongst 174 countries. Its HDI value at 0.365 compares unfavourably with that in Sri Lanka (0.698), Pakistan (0.442), India (0.436) and Myanmar (0.451); it compares favourably only with the HDI value in Nepal (0.332) and Bhutan (0.307). The profile of human deprivation reveals that 47.5 per cent of the people were in come-poor while 76.9 per cent

of the people were capability-poor in Bangladesh. The report shows 52.85 per cent people were without access to health services, 63.35 per cent were without proper sanitation and 26 per cent of the children were not attending primary schools. On some other indices, a definite improving trend is visible: for instance, life expectancy at birth improved from 40 years in 1960 to 56 years in 1993, infant mortality declined from 156 to 106 during the period 1960-93, underweight children under 5 as a proportion to all children declined from 84 in 1975 to 66 in 1990, adult literacy rate increased from 24 per cent in 1970 to 37 per cent in 1993 and the gross enrollment ratio for the ages 6-23 marginally increased from 30 per cent in 1980 to 32 per cent in 1990. The data provided by government show an even better picture in these social indicators in 1995 with life expectancy at 58 years, gross primary enrollment ratio at 82 per cent, adult literacy at 44 per cent and infant mortality per thousand live births at 78.

Poverty alleviation measures generally proceed from a realization that it has two distinctive dimensions. There is one level of deprivation of income or assets which is the primary cause of poverty. The other level of the poverty dimension is concerned with power and participation, the absence of which perpetuates and even aggravates poverty. Paul Streeten in his 'Poverty Concepts and Measurement' tried in 1990 to establish a link between these two dimensions of poverty alleviation. He cites good working conditions, freedom to choose jobs and livelihoods, self-termination, an assertion of traditional and religious values, empowerment or access to power and the opportunities to join and participate in development activities as the key elements in such a linkage. He acknowledges the difficulties in measuring these aspects but still warns against the adverse consequence of ignoring them.

In Bangladesh, as the number below the poverty line swells, as landlessness and assetlessness is reinforcing the process of pauperization, and as more than half the people

suffer the ignominy of being illiterate, the urgency for vastly enlarged and meaningful programmes of poverty alleviation has never been higher. Each government in the country is compelled to put poverty alleviation at the top of the agenda. Despite some weight in the skepticism of some notable scholars and writers, the poverty alleviation programmes do seem to be moving in the right direction. Whether or not the efforts are commensurate with the magnitude of the problem is another matter. Another question that looms is what is beyond poverty, that is for those who graduate out of poverty what are the avenues to sustain the status of not being poor and to improve upon it. It is perhaps well known that several government supported programmes implemented by the Bangladesh Rural Development Board and the government-non-government cooperation under the stewardship of Palli Karma Sahayak Foundation (termed by the World Bank as a model in GO-NGO cooperation) have been undertaking several very successful programmes and projects aiming at poverty alleviation on the one hand and empowerment through skill acquisition of the landless and assetless on the other. And who does not know of the significant work that is being done by Grameen Bank, BRAC, PROSHIKA, ASA and others in organizing, motivating, training and providing microcredit without collateral to fight out of the vicious cycle of poverty. The questions that are being asked in this respect are:

a) Are these programmes alleviating poverty or creating indebtedness; why are there more in the ranks of the poor now compared to 25/26 years ago?
b) Are the poor managing their own programmes?
c) What about the sustainability of the programmes themselves?
d) What is beyond poverty line?

Unfortunately, beyond case studies, there are no systematically undertaken surveys showing concrete results of the poverty alleviation programmes. In other words, there are no scientifically collected and collated data to show the number

of people that have graduated out of poverty line specifically attributable to identifiable poverty alleviation programmes. On the other hand, there are plenty of people who complain that the NGO or government programmes of which they are beneficiaries have put them into perpetual borrowing situation. Again there is no conclusive evidence to fully justify such a conclusion although some work has suggested borrowing more to just repay past loan sows the seed of destruction for poverty alleviation microcredit programme.

What, however, is very clear is that the overall poverty alleviation programmes are managed in most cases by people external to the locality. The poor form themselves into groups for ensuring social dynamics and providing group collateral but they do not hold the key to the management of the NGOs they belong to. Very often local elite/educated who usually reside in urban areas start an NGO aiming at poverty alleviation in his/her locality. He/she or they do occasionally or even frequently visit the programme/project areas but are not resident in poverty. Also in the management committees of such programmes/projects, the poor are not in command or in majority (Grameen Bank is an exception) or in ownership of the organization. Thus participation in the sense in which Paul Streeten would like to see is generally absent. As a result, the leadership, self confidence and ultimate sustainability would continue to elude the poor. There is room for serious rethinking on the management content of the poverty alleviation programmes.

With ownership and management is also linked the financial viability of the poverty alleviation programmes. It also depends on what is happening in the world around us. As is clear now, the quantum and quality of official development assistance would slowly but surely decline. ODA's place would be taken by Direct Foreign Investment (FDI) which is highly competitive and the poor may not be able to access. On the other hand, all the microcredit programmes have tremendous savings potential by the poor. Not everybody believes anymore that the poor have lower propensity to save. The poor have the capacity and willingness to both repay and save particularly from the incremental income; 98 per cent or so repayment rate or 10 per cent or so savings by the microcredit beneficiaries, more than three fourths of whom are women, should prompt a re-doubling of efforts to increase the savings of the poor beneficiaries. In this process, they may acquire skills and organization to fight out of poverty and then take on sustainable programmes themselves.

Based on the work in the poverty eradication area, I have ample reason to worry about two specific groups at the two ends of the vast poor population in Bangladesh. At the bottom end a fifth of the poor or 10 per cent of the population are sick, illiterate and disillusioned about life and living. They are not bankable even for microcredit as they cannot in their present state of health and psychology deploy resources for income generation and repayment. They usually reside at the most remote ends of the country and even the NGOs are not most keen to reach them. What they need is really social transfers or consumption support initially. We should seriously search for a combination of vulnerable group feeding type grant programmes with income generating type microcredit programmes. The programme should come as a package

phasing food assistance, healthcare and education in the past round to be followed by income generating type credit. Motivation should occur throughout. This is the only instance where a grant element is not only desirable but also highly necessary.

At the other end of the poverty spectrum are those who are skilled and dynamic at the graduating point out of poverty level. They disqualify for microcredit and are not espoused by the banking system to provide funds to undertake micro enterprises. There is a need for immediate linkages between the poverty alleviation programmes and the commercial banks or specialized institutions to help create micro entrepreneurs out of the successful poverty fighters. The other linkage that is a crying need of the hour in

Bangladesh is the backward linkage of the relatively big capital intensive industries with the small even micro enterprises of relative labour intensity. Such linkages, if successfully emulated from wherever they succeeded would lead to creation of millions of wage jobs and self-employment to ensure a healthy, robust, dignified people in a peaceful society in Bangladesh.

I am sure many readers would like to seriously ponder over what the World Bank President James D Wolfensohn had to say in the Bank-Fund Annual Meeting Address in September 1997 in Hong Kong. In respect of what he called the Challenge of Inclusion, Mr Wolfensohn said, "Our goal must be to reduce these disparities across and within countries, to bring more and more people into the economic mainstream, to promote equitable access to the benefits of development regardless of nationality, race or gender." We can thus no more afford to have a North South Divide. We must instead have an East-West Alliance as a solid foundation to synthesize the values, potentials, productivities and requirements of the East with the rigour, discipline and technological capability of the West to fight the common problems of hunger, disease, illiteracy, environmental degradation, violation of human rights including violence against women and all forms of discrimination towards a prosperous, equitable and peaceful world. Poverty in any part of the world should be a shame for the entire world which is now but a common village.

It is time to defeat the prophets of doom and the iconoclasts to usher in an era of life, optimism and vibrance to ensure that the twin, meaning the East and the West, shall meet. In Bangladesh, the poor have already demonstrated their will to fight against poverty to restore a dignified living on a sustained basis.

The author, an economist and educationist, is the Vice Chancellor of East-West University.

Investment in Education

A Changing Scenario

by Dr M Zakir Husain

Basic education is supposed to give core skills to all with skills to continue to learn. But basic education in many schools is failing to educate many in core skills; students are not learning to learn.

ARE we aware that a revolution is imminent, if not already present? Information technology and global communication present a challenge to the traditional investment pattern in education. As more and more people take charge of what they do, when they work and for whom they work, there are emerging implications on public and private investment in education, the government's role and that of the society at large. In the wake of the twenty-first century, the individual and not the organisation or the institution is emerging as the focus of importance.

In the decades to come, full time employment in factories and places of production will decline (and it is already happening in the industrialised countries), and self-employment will be on the rise. So will there be a rise in service-related work and mobility of the employed in the workplaces. More personal skills will be demanded as the traditional organisational skills will begin to lose importance. That is the future scenario. Are societies and governments particularly in the developing economies fully preparing to face this emerging challenge?

By definition, a market economy does not tolerate inefficiency and waste; it champions efficiency and optimises market driven use of resources including the human resources. What the established present pattern of investment in education does is to fund institutions and not students. Invest far more for fewer in higher education and far too little in basic education for the many. Basic education is supposed to give core skills to all with skills to continue to learn. But basic education in many schools is failing to educate many in core skills; students are not learning to learn. To compound this, the higher education institutions are ill-equipped and unable to supply the skills demanded by the market that is rapidly changing and requiring ever newer skills. Many universities pattern over remain slow to learn, to adapt, and to change.

If the above scenario is generally true, there are two major issues governments and societies need to address and do so urgently. First, make higher investments in basic education

to secure core competence for most of the population. For that to happen, new resources will have to be found and some resources will have to be shifted from higher education. Second, open higher education to private sector funding and help build a stronger infrastructure to educate and supply the market with a work force with higher skills according to its employability rather than according to what is produced by the institutions of higher learning. Production-driven employment by the state and private sector will be a thing of the past.

What is socially and economically justifiable and rational is for the state to create and support open opportunities for learning the core skills to all and facilities for higher education that funds the learner and not the institutions of learning. The net rate of return would probably be higher that way. If that means fewer higher education facilities, so be it. After all, the waste inherent in producing a larger mass of unemployable higher graduates is far better redirected to create equal opportunities for many to acquire core work and life skills. It is from that baseline from where higher education and skills are better acquired alongside work and employment.

It is interesting to extrapolate the above argument in medical and health professional education. As modern societies develop, individuals take on greater role and responsibilities. This includes their rights and responsibilities to protect and promote their own health without relying on mystical or miraculous power of the physician. They would then depend less on institutional services if and when they are in ill health. Highly educated and skilled professionals are then needed more for fewer conditions of ill health and more appropriately for macro policy and population based public health programmes that are beyond the scope of the individual.

Primary healthcare, by definition and practice, is equitable access to essential healthcare including curative care. It connotes additionally that people take charge of their own health as their right and responsibility and act in families and communities to do what needs to be done to promote

health and prevent diseases. It stresses grassroots level healthcare largely where people live and work and is largely managed by health workers including professionals with core skills of prevention, promotion and not merely of cure or palliation. Investment in education of many health workers in core skills of primary healthcare will arguably give better and more equitable opportunities for many to be employed either self-employed or state employed.

Arguably, it would yield greater health outcomes and benefits. Should then investment in primary healthcare and education of workers to provide that care be a higher societal and governmental priority than investment in higher medical education that is production-driven and not market driven? Should public funds be invested more in personal income and profit driven higher education and less in employability driven and benefit driven core education? Obviously there is a major policy implication for governments and societies in this.

Evolving new knowledge and information in public health and medicine is already challenging the conventional wisdom that medical care by highly skilled physician is the single determinant of good health. In reality, it is not even an important one. In the emerging market economy, the governments will have a changing role. It has to facilitate and not necessarily run good healthcare establishments. It has to invest more and profitably where the returns in healthcare are the highest. It also has the concurrent obligation to create and support greater and wider opportunities for health workers to acquire core skills and not specialised skills by the few that bring more personal benefits in the healthcare market place. In the new disposition, governments take charge of education and training of health workers needed for primary healthcare without necessarily employing all or most of them.

The future will see employability and not employment as the pattern where people have the freedom of choice as to where they work and for how long. Life-long permanent institutional employment will be on the decline.

Tom and Jerry



James Bond



Metropolitan

What's on today

Annual Ananda Mela: A 3-day long annual Ananda Mela organised by Officers' Club Mahila Committee will begin. Time: 11 am. Venue: Officers' Club.

Discussion meeting: A discussion meeting on ATDP's (Agrobased Industries & Technology Development Project) Experience in Agribusiness Promotion will be held. Time: 3 pm. Venue: Hotel Razmoni Isha Kha.

Rotary Club of Dhanmondi: The weekly meeting of the club will be held. Time: 5:30 pm. Venue: Dhaka Club.

Rotary Club of Jahangirnagar Dhaka: The weekly meeting of the club will be held. Time: 5:30 pm. Venue: Chaklader House, 394, Moghbazar, Madhubag.

Seminar: A promotional seminar on Export Credit Guarantee & Insurance organised by Shadhran Bima Corporation will be held. Time: 10 am. Venue: Hotel Purbani.

Workshop: Legislative Advocacy and Participation of the Society Project, Bangladesh Legal Aid and Services Trust, and Ain O Shalish Kendra, Madaripur Legal Aid Assoc will jointly hold a workshop on Human Rights Commission for Bangladesh. Time: 3 pm. Venue: CIRDAP auditorium.

Envoy of Iran calls on FM

The Ambassador of the Islamic Republic of Iran to Bangladesh Mohammad Saadegh Fayyaz called on Foreign Minister Abdus Samad Azad at his office yesterday, reports BSS.

He hoped that the OIC Tehran summit would contribute immensely in furthering the cause of Islamic ummah.

Foreign Minister Abdus



A procession of the disabled in the city yesterday to mark the International Day for the Disabled.

CCHRB holds seminar on Dec 10

By Staff Correspondent

Coordination Council for Human Rights in Bangladesh (CCHRB) will hold a seminar on 'Patience in Politics and Human Rights' in the city on December

10 in observance of World Human Rights Day. The seminar will be held at 3 pm at Children Auditorium of the National Museum, says a

press release.

Besides, CCHRB also plans to bring out a rally from Central Shaheed Minar to Jatiya Press Club at 8:30 am on that day.

Tributes to Mostafiz

By Staff Correspondent

Speakers at a discussion meeting yesterday paid glowing tributes to the memory of former Minister for Foreign Affairs Lt Col (Retd) ASM Mostafizur Rahman.

The meeting organised by Mostafizur Rahman Memorial Council was held at the main auditorium of the National Press Club in the afternoon.

Prof AQM Badruddoza Chowdhury, MP, the deputy leader of the opposition in parliament, addressed the memorial meeting as the chief guest while former Finance Minister M Saifur Rahman, MP, was present as the special guest. The convenor of the organisation MM Rezaul Karim presided over the meeting.

Recalling the memory of Mostafizur Rahman, Prof Badruddoza said that as a foreign minister Mostafizur Rahman played a significant role in building a brighter image of the country abroad.

He said Mostafizur Rahman was a true patriot and devoted himself for the interest of the country.

Turning to national politics, Prof Badruddoza said that the government of Sheikh Hasina was resorting to the politics of

oppression to remain in the power.

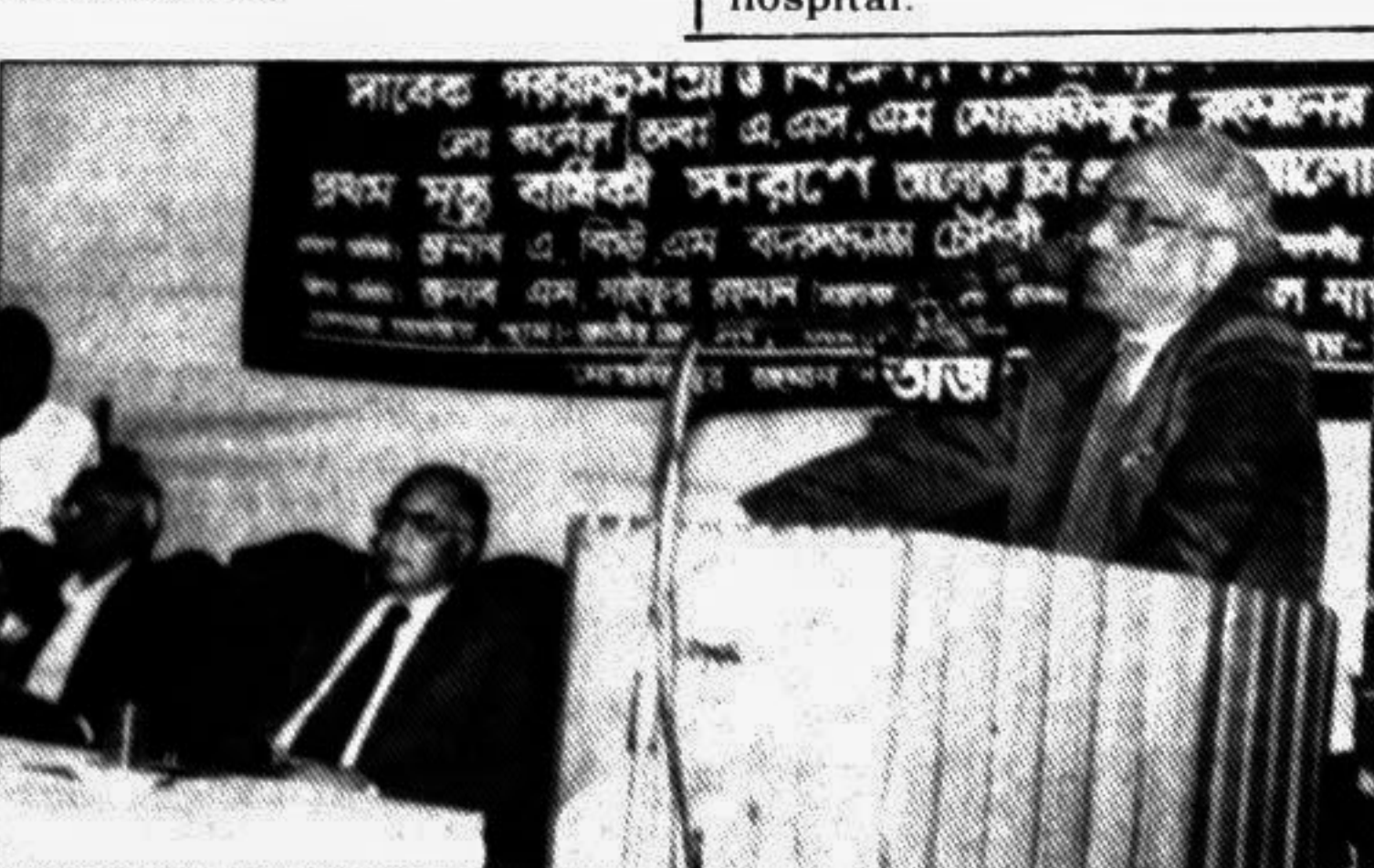
Turning to the just signed CHT accord, he said that Bangladesh was going to lose its sovereignty over the hill areas once the accord was implemented. He said the accord in contrary to the Constitution.

Earlier, a photography exhibition on late Mostafizur Rahman was held.

Dr Amanullah hospitalised

State Minister for Health and Family Welfare Prof Dr M Amanullah was admitted to the Institute of Cardiovascular Disease (ICVD) Tuesday after a serious heart attack, an official handout said yesterday, reports BSS.

Minister for Food and Agriculture Mota Chowdhury, State Minister for Labour and Manpower Abdul Mannan, Brig M A Malek and BMA secretary general Dr Mostafa Jalal Mohiuddin visited the minister at the hospital.



Former Finance Minister and BNP leader M Saifur Rahman speaking at a memorial meeting organised in observance of the first death anniversary of former Foreign Minister A S M Mostafizur Rahman at the Jatiya Press Club yesterday.