

## Thirty years of Bangladesh agriculture Performance and Prospects

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AGRICULTURE is still the mainstay of Bangladesh economy. The share of agriculture has declined from about half of total GDP during the 1970s to about one-third during the first half of the 1990s. During the 1990s, agriculture's share declined further from about 30 per cent in 1989/90 to about 25 per cent in 1999/00. Despite such declines, the economy is still predominantly agrarian. The sector still provides employment to more than 60 per cent of the country's labour force. If only rural areas are considered, the percentage of labour force dependent on agriculture will be even larger. Moreover, agricultural production provides critical linkages for the development of the rest of the economy. The performance of agriculture thus has an important bearing on employment generation, food security and poverty alleviation in the country. In other words, while the declining share of agriculture in national income is a natural process, the development priorities still need to recognize the primacy of agricultural growth in providing food and income security to rural households in Bangladesh. Within agriculture, crop and horticulture is the dominant activity. However, the share of non-crop agriculture including animal farming, forest and related activities and fishing has been increasing and together they accounted for nearly 43 per cent of agricultural value added in 1999/00, compared to about 35 per cent in 1989/90.

### Growth Performance of Agriculture

Bangladesh agriculture experienced a modest growth and a slow transition since independence. With wide fluctuations, agricultural growth averaged around 2.5 per cent and growth of output barely kept pace with growth in population. What is most striking the growth of agriculture declined considerably during the first half of the nineties. This can be attributed to a sharp decline in growth in crop sub-sector. The crop sub-sector grew at the rate of 2.4 per cent during the seventies and 1.8 per cent during the eighties, but hardly registered any growth during the first half of the nineties. A significant feature of agricultural

The intensification efforts need to be directed to rice cultivation through several options such as pursuit of a breeding strategy with focus on grain quality, shorter maturity and hybrid/super rice offering better prospects for increasing yields, adaptive research and effective research-extension linkages; and efficient water resources management. The strategic actions for diversification need to include: intensification of rice production to release land and other resources for non-rice crop cultivation; specific targeting of flood-free uplands, incorporation of non-rice crops in rice-based farming systems, promotion of agribusiness and agro-processing, and investments in transport and communication infrastructure and information network.

performance during the nineties is the rapid acceleration of growth in the second half of the decade. The average annual growth during the 1996/97-1999/00 period is over 5 per cent as compared to about 2 per cent during the 1991-96 period. While all sub-sectors experienced accelerated growth since 1996/97, the growth of crop and horticulture, the major sub-sector was significant 6.44 per cent in 1996/97 and 6.13 per cent in 1999/00. In fact, the average annual growth during the last four years is 4.2 per cent which is higher than any period in the past.

**Crop Agriculture:** Rice dominates the crop production in Bangladesh. It is, therefore, not surprising that the growth performance of the crop sector is largely dictated by the production performance of rice in the country. The trend growth rate of rice in the post-independence period is estimated to be 2.3 per cent, which can largely be attributed to growth in rice yield (2.2 per cent) during the period. The growth has been propelled by dissemination of HYV rice, specially in the boro and aman seasons. The share of HYV rice in total acreage was only 15 per cent during the seventies but it almost doubled during the eighties and claimed more than half of total acreage during the nineties. As a result, the contribution of HYV rice in total rice production more than doubled from 30 per cent during the seventies to about 70 per cent during the nineties. A comparison of rice production growth in different

sub-periods indicate that there has been a deceleration of rice production over the last three decades. The trend growth declined from 2.8 per cent during the seventies to 2.3 per cent during the eighties and further to 1.8 per cent during the nineties. What is more striking to note is the drastic deceleration of growth during the first half of the nineties, followed by a significant upsurge in growth in rice production during the second half of the decade. While the negative trend can largely be attributed to the absolute fall in rice production in 1994/95, the growth momentum achieved in recent years is due to successive bumper harvests in boro and aman seasons following the massive floods in 1998. As a result, the "food gap" (defined as total requirements not met from domestic production) has been eliminated and the country has achieved self-sufficiency in foodgrain production. How long this can be sustained, however, merit serious investigation. An indepth analysis of the resource base, technology choice, agronomic constraints and pricing as well as distribution policies of the government is called for.

Wheat, potato, vegetables and tea registered satisfactory growth over the last three decades. Of these four crops, the production performance of wheat has been most impressive with an annual growth of about 9 per cent over the period. This is largely due to growth in acreage and only partly due to

growth in yield during the period. The growth in production of potato has been largely due to growth in acreage over the last three decades. The production growth, however, has not been uniform over this long period. Vegetables and tea displayed robust growth over the last three decades, although the sources of growth were different for these two crops. Growth in production of vegetables is attributed to the growth in acreage, while the growth in yield has been largely responsible for growth in tea production. What is more significant, the production in vegetables maintained an upward trend in its growth rate due to sustained expansion in its acreage during the 1970s, the 1980s, as well as in the 1990s. Pulses registered negative production over the last three decades. This is most pronounced during the 1990s. The failure of production to grow is attributed to the decline in acreage not offset by corresponding improvement in yield. Both oilseeds and sugarcane display positive but insignificant growth over the last three decades. The growth performance of oilseeds, however, improved appreciably during the 1990s due to improvement in its yield. The same cannot be said, however, about sugarcane which registered steadily declining growth over time. The growth in jute production picked up significantly despite declining acreage due to vast improvement in its yield during the nineties.

**Non-crop Agriculture:** Non-crop agriculture includes livestock, fishery and forest production. Output of these sub-sectors have a higher nutritional and economic value compared to crop production. All animal protein is supplied by fishery and livestock sub-sectors. Moreover, depending upon land and climatic suitability, production and earnings can be higher per unit of land and water resources from non-crop agriculture if production, processing and marketing system can be effectively organized. The present production per unit of these resources is low and improved breeds and management practices can significantly increase the level of production.

The growth of non-crop sub-sectors has been impressive relative to the crop sub-sector. The fisheries sub-sector has performed well over the years to increase production which enabled Bangladesh to take advantage of the growing global demand for shrimp and fish. With increase in production, the country has faced new problems as well: dearth of fry, fish disease, problems with international phytosanitary regulations and social as well as environmental problems. In fact, despite substantial physical and biological resource base for fish production, the production of captured fish in the past declined due to several natural and man-made factors e.g. overfishing including indiscriminate fishing of spawners and spawns, destruction of breeding grounds by blocking fish migration routes, reduction of water areas by construction of flood control structures and drainage channels, and indiscriminate use of agro-chemicals and pesticides. However, several programs e.g. artificial stocking of open water with fish fingerlings and redesigning of water control structures to facilitate fish migration have improved the situation in recent years.

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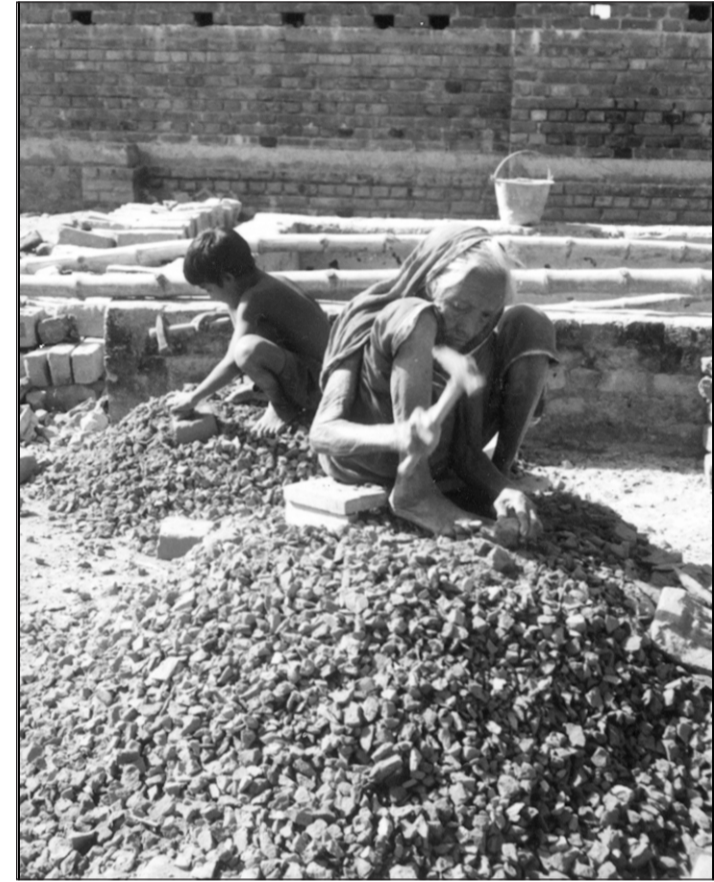
## Fighting poverty How to break the chains ?

ATIUR RAHMAN

FIGHTING poverty' has suddenly become the name of the game in almost all quarters of Bangladesh. The governments of all shades and colours have, of course, been giving lip services to poverty 'alleviation' strategy for many years, if not decades. The NGOs have emerged out of this concern and engaged themselves in 'fighting' poverty from varied perspectives. 'The partners' of development (more specifically aid-donors) have been pursuing this agenda since the then World Bank President McNamara pronounced his strategy of poverty alleviation in Nairobi during early seventies. Despite all these efforts poverty has been persisting all over the globe and, more importantly, in Bangladesh as well. And this has been persisting amidst significant improvement in some areas of growth particularly in agriculture and also even after greater allocation of resources to the social sectors. The question then has legitimately arisen: why this mismatch? Where have all those resources pumped in by both government and NGOs gone? Why can't we identify the blackhole? Is it corruption? Patronage? Systems loss? Transfer of public resources for private enrichment? Why the incidence of poverty is so pervasive in Bangladesh? What is more disturbing is that the incidence of hardcore poverty in significant proportion has been ridiculing all efforts at poverty alleviation. The emerging issue of ecological poverty arising out of serious degradation of environment is no less a matter of concern as well.

Given this background, the issue of poverty reduction (should have been eradication) has rightly been made central at the Paris Consortium meeting of development partners. What is more significant that this issue has been squarely placed in the context of malgovernance which Bangladesh has been sustaining for quite some time. The document which has been instrumental in posing the issue as such as "Taming Leviathan: Reforming Governance in Bangladesh" An Institutional Review (March 2002) prepared by the World Bank. This document identifies clear linkages between poor governance and persistent poverty. "Poor governance has a particularly harsh impact on the poor who are least able to fend for themselves lacking as they do both the resources and the knowledge to assert their rights. The instruments of governance are controlled by a self-serving elite whose behaviour is reinforced by deep-rooted social norms of dominance and subservience characteristic of a patrimonial society, reinforced over years of military rule. These 'chains of poverty' can only be loosened through initiatives that extend poor people's control over their lives and expand their access to assets and their entitlements from the state' (WB, *ibid*, P.14). No doubt, the emphasis of the development partners was sharply focused on the issue of governance, more particularly on that of law and order which has been compounding 'insecurity of poor people and women.' You may feel disturbed when outsiders point out about our dismal state failures or one may feel slighted when they dictate conditionalities like improving

People's own perception about the causes of poverty and ways forward must get priority attention from the policy makers. As yet, we have not come across an open debate on this vital initiative of the government between the members of the parliament of different parties either within the parliament or outside. We have not yet witnessed a fiercely fought media debate between the government and the opposition. We have not yet heard from the Prime Minister and the Leader of the opposition about their views on this plan. We have not yet come to know the commitment of all other ministers besides Finance Minister regarding their time-bound programmes and initiatives of poverty eradication.



Life is hard to sustain: Grip of poverty

PHOTO: STAR

governance (particularly law and order) for poverty reduction, but the fact remains that we have not done our own homework and prepared home-grown agenda for pro-poor development. If we did this we could have now established meaningful dialogue with them with regards to poverty reduction. Despite strong pressures from 'outsiders' and persistence of grinding poverty within, we still remain half-hearted and not fully committed towards finalizing a genuinely people oriented development strategy which could have taken poverty reduction as its central element.

The way we are currently preparing the poverty reduction strategy plan (PRSP) may beg many questions at the end of the day. As it is being approached, the on-going PRSP initiative remains adhoc, partial and consultant-centred. As such it cannot be claimed that effective people's participation has been taking place in the process. An acceptable PRSP must be derived from a meaningful dialogue between the people and the government. People's own perception about the causes of poverty and ways forward must get priority attention from the policy makers. As yet, we have not come across an open debate on this vital initiative of the government between the mem-

bers of the parliament of different parties either within the parliament or outside. We have not yet witnessed a fiercely fought media debate between the government and the opposition. We have not yet heard from the Prime Minister and the Leader of the opposition about their views on this plan. We have not yet come to know the commitment of all other ministers besides Finance Minister regarding their time-bound programmes and initiatives of poverty eradication. Where is the integrated matrix of public expenditure for say next five years which could be the guideline for the programmes to respond to the needs of the people that were supposed to have been prioritised by them in people's forum? The consultation with the secretaries of different ministries is welcomed but cannot be the basis for preparing guideline for poverty reduction strategy. What will be link between PRSP's matrix and the upcoming national budget or for that matter the sixth year plan? Appropriate allocation figures need to be committed by each ministry towards poverty reduction on appropriate projects/programmes as prioritised by the people themselves. The next year's budget will have to be a testing ground for PRSP exercise. We have been analysing national

budget from the perspective of the poor and know exactly how difficult it is to get people's prioritisation on public expenditure. I am not, therefore, sure if the government is prepared to undergo this rigour in terms of the entire process of budgeting, planning and designing the development agenda based on national consensus for meeting the challenges of poverty reduction with time-bound target to be achieved. Many countries have, of course, started this policy reorientation. Hopefully, the Bangladesh government is moving in this direction as well; for there is no other option left for us at this moment of time. We have missed many buses of opportunities in the past when people were prepared to participate willingly to get involved in this fight against poverty (e.g. immediately after liberation and as well as after the overthrow of military rule in 1990). It is high time that we better going. There are many successful examples of people's participation, particularly in the arenas of environment protection and gender-sensitive development. We should learn from these grassroots initiatives and prepare ground for a comprehensive policy drive for poverty reduction.

However, as I said earlier the on-going initiative for preparing a plan for poverty reduction has not yet become effectively participatory. Neither it is visible. Had it been genuinely participatory, the very discourse on poverty could have been more humane and down to earth. The contemporary poverty reduction strategy as prepared by 'outsiders' still centres around 'subsistence thinking' of the experts. That the poor too are humans and they too have dreams for decent living like any of those outsiders is not reflected in the conceptualisation of the on-going PRSP process. Apparently the issue of poverty is being narrowly conceptualized in terms of pulling a section of the people out of the poverty trap by providing them a 'dollar a day' type subsistence kit. Surely, there are millions others who may be tomorrow's poor and have the potential of joining the rank subsequently. While present initiative is slightly better than the conventional one as experts are at least getting out of their ivory tower, yet the attempt does not fully capture the reality of the disadvantaged. May be, the new attempt at capturing poverty under PRSP exercise will be able to reveal a few more dimensions of poverty, but not necessarily all its dimensions, particularly those related to voicelessness, powerlessness, physical in security, lack of self-respect and unfreedom related to socio-cultural and many other deprivations including lack of creative options. If these multi-dimensional elements of poverty have to be captured, experts and policy makers alike need to step backward and allow the people to come to the centre-stage to define their versions of poverty. The very struggle for survival through which the poor undergo everyday can be a case study of myriad-minded coping strategy of poverty reduction. Capturing people's perception is not so difficult as one may think. Many participation experts including the ones working with the World Bank have been revealing the difficult and unknown terrains of poverty reduction.

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Traditional rice-based farming

PHOTO: STAR

## The confronting of a rise and a decline

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Both guards and killers are available on hire. Human relationships are getting increasingly monetised. And money has become the God that everyone warships even in their failure to satisfy Him. Job satisfaction is unimportant today, what matters is the earning of money; and success in all professions including those of physicians and teachers is being measured not by professional or humanitarian achievements, but by money. Human beings are being cornered by inhuman being.

Consumerism rules. Those who are unemployed, and their number is increasing by the day, turn to extortion, hijacking, drugs and religion. Seeking the shelter of religion is being forced on the poor. For the rich religion is often a matter of display, and sometimes an investment for the future life. The process of dehumanisation is functioning without let or hindrance. The left elements, who were once respected for their idealism, are conspicuous by their absence.

Who is to blame for all this? Certainly the whole socio-political system is responsible. There is very little faith left among the people in the stranglehold they have been forced to live in. The recent rise in mob violence on alleged snatchers indicates, if anything, how cynical people have become in their attitude towards the law enforcing agencies, whom they would, perhaps, consider the last persons to hand over criminals to. The caretaker government has been adver-

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tised as a noble concept; those who do so seem to be oblivious of the fact that the adoption of this system of government is an admission of the shameful failure of an existing one to generate confidence in it in the matter of holding an election, although it claims to have the right to rule the state for five long years. Those who can not be trusted with an election want the people to believe that they can be trusted with the whole of the state power.

But it is really the political leadership that must be held responsible. The system continues to oppress the people because of the failure of leadership. The persons who run the state act as role models for others. What is more, their relationship with the people is being inevitably replicated in all spheres of life, not excluding the family. The political leadership today is blatantly unapologetic. They have betrayed the people. The question is not merely of misgovernance, it is more than

that; for those who have had taken over the charge of the state during the last thirty years have failed, one after another, to lead the people towards a better future. Indeed they have been guilty of plunder within the country and of opening the market to foreign producers, to the detriment of local production. What is more, they have been bent upon handing over our scarce natural resources to transnational companies.

The issue of gas and oil export is a case in point. While the people knew that the act would be suicidal, those who wield state power seem determined to commit this grave misdeed. We had our mirjafars in the past; but there were Sirajuddinowlas too; the Sirajuddinowlas of the present-day seem to have taken leave of the political scene. There is, however, another difference. The people today are not as indifferent to the affairs of the state as they were in

the past.

This public awareness is one of the few elements we can rely upon to grow, provided we have proper leadership. What we need in Bangladesh now are leaders rather than heroes. Heroes often care only for themselves; leaders are expected to be pathbreakers. And when even rowdies and rapists act like heroes, we have reasons to be doubtful about the usefulness of heroes.

The new leadership must be patriotic. But patriotism would not be enough; it would be necessary for the leadership to have a vision too, and that vision has to be of the building up of a democratic polity and culture in the country. Democracy, in that context, would mean more than the vote; it would include the guaranteeing of equality of rights and opportunities to all citizens, decentralization of government and rule by people's representatives at all levels. That leadership can emerge only when there are sustained and systematic movements towards the achievement of goals of democracy. In such movements all right-thinking persons would work together. Needless to say that neither the BNP with its allies nor the Awami League seem able to do the job. The singing of jeremiads like the one attempted in this essay would be unnecessary when, and to the extent that, popular movement based on people's agenda move ahead. Nothing should be clearer than that.

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## We won independence to build a just and free society

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The sickness may almost be taking the form of social HIV in that it is a feature of that disease that it destroys the capacity to fight back. While professing to uphold the Constitution, its core values are flagrantly disregarded. The foundation of the Constitution, namely, power belongs to the people, is not even rhetoric any more. The role of muscle and money has tended to disempower people. Arms and black money reduce citizens to helpless and powerless spectators, virtual hostages as the predatory elite concentrates power and abuses it for self-serving ends. It is an abuse of power to grant impunity to criminals - the mastans and godfathers - who terrorize ordinary men and women, practice extortion and commit rape and violence against women, and also against members of the minority Hindu and Christian communities. They thus negate the rule of law and the equal protection of the law which the Constitution promises to every citizen.

The overwhelming majority of our people, I believe, fully subscribe to the core values of our Constitution and as a nation we would wish to share pride in our heritage when we unitedly fought for freedom and justice, for a society where people of all faiths could live in harmony and the rule of law would protect life,

Today, thirty years later, we must do soul-searching to answer why the goal of a free and just society has eluded us. I suggest it is because self-serving predatory groups have emerged in society and seek to pursue their selfish ends by undermining the core values of our society. Nothing is sacred to them. The amassing of black money through corruption, the patronage of armed groups in order to support their pursuit of wealth and power has led to an erosion of moral values to the extent that securing power or riches by any means has created a sick society.

honour and property of each citizen. Why, then, do we have to witness a kind of divisiveness which not only paralyzes democratic institutions and in particular the National Parliament, but also undermines the integrity of our public service and law enforcement agencies as well as our educational institutions? Why do we have to resort increasingly to public interest litigation to challenge violations of the Constitution? Public interest petitions had to be filed in the Supreme Court to challenge, for example, the abuse of arrest on suspicion under Section 54 of the Criminal Procedure Code (which had led to

the death of the student Rubel in police custody). Abuse of this legal provision still continues; failure of the police to accept an FIR against the assailants of the courageous journalist Tipu Sultan, a kind of failure which continues in respect of offenses reported against vulnerable sections including members of the minority communities; the summary eviction of slum dwellers from their homes.

I believe that growing public concern for law and order, for violence against women and other vulnerable sections of society, represents a moral crisis. The core values underlying our Constitution

are under threat of extinction. I equally believe that the overwhelming majority still subscribe to those values. We must, therefore, overcome the artificially manipulated polarization of our society which prevents a united popular movement to vindicate the values of freedom and justice and to uphold the supremacy of the Constitution. We need to come together and translate our belief in a just and democratic society into practice. The meaning of independence is lost unless we can stop the predatory, the unscrupulous and corrupt few from denying our right to livelihood, to freedom and liberty. The fact that there is a multi-party system and that people may have different political affiliations does not at all justify citizens dividing themselves along tribal lines on such issues as the rule of law, effective law enforcement against the corrupt and the criminal and those who terrorize women and children and the weak and the vulnerable. In order that our Constitution can deliver to our people what they expect of it, namely, security of life and person, justice and freedom, people must unitedly stand up for its core values and demonstrate that power indeed belongs to the people.

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