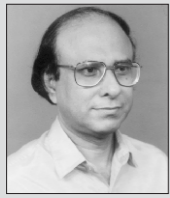


Ruling neo-liberalism, stumbling poverty reduction: I

This article looks at the state of play at the international level relating to concerns and strategies for poverty reduction around the world (Parts I and II) and reviews the prevailing situation in Bangladesh relating to poverty and poverty reduction strategies (Part III). Parts II and III will be published later.



QAZI KHOLIQUZZAMAN AHMAD

"POVERTY reduction" is the latest much vaunted "buzzword" in the international development parlance and has been doing its round as such from the late 1990s. It has come to occupy top billing in the agenda of the Bretton Woods institutions -- the World Bank and the IMF -- and the regional development banks. In 1999, the Bank-Fund duo called for a poverty reduction strategy paper (PRSP) to be formulated by each foreign aid (grants and concessional loans) seeking country. This new "aid conditionality" has been supported by all multilateral and bilateral aid providers. Many developing countries have finalised their PRSPs or (as in the case of Bangladesh) Interim-PRSPs (I-PRSPs), and there are others which are working on their PRSPs. However, some countries, notably India, rejected the call for preparing such a paper, dismissing it as unnecessary given that their own national poverty reduction plans and strategies are already in place.

Poverty reduction is also placed at the number one spot in the list of the so-called Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). This top ranked MDG of halving the number of poor people by 2015 was also endorsed by the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) held in Johannesburg (South Africa) in August-September 2002.

Even the World Trade Organisation (WTO) launched a development round of trade talks in November 2001 in Doha in recognition that poverty reduction is a critical need in the developing countries. The recently (10-14 September 2003) held WTO Ministerial in Cancun, though, brought into open that those proposals, as far as the north is concerned, were more rhetorical than commitment-based. There has been no progress in respect of the development issues envisaged in Doha such as special and differential treatment of the developing countries, implementation issues, technology transfer, and commodity issues (sharp fluctuations and long term declines in the prices of primary commodities on which dependence of developing countries is large indeed).

Again, in the UN conference on financing development held in March 2001 in Monterrey (Mexico), the developed countries made a commitment to make the best effort including transfer of adequate resources and technologies to help reduce poverty in the developing

countries. But, no notable progress in this regard has so far occurred. Moreover, official development assistance (ODA) from the OECD countries, which was only 0.33 per cent of their combined GDP in 1990 against the promised 0.7 per cent, further declined to around 0.22 per cent in 2001 (UNDP Human Development Report 2003, p. 290) and is likely to be even lower currently. For many developing countries, financial flows received in grants and concessional loans from bilateral and multilateral sources are outweighed by outflows of funds in terms of debt servicing and other transfers to the developed countries and multilateral agencies.

The above mentioned overtures of the aid donors to the cause of poverty reduction notwithstanding, the basic framework remains neo-liberalist, which found practical expression in the so-called Washington Consensus, orchestrated in the late 1970s, aimed at establishing an all embracing free market regime in the world through imple-

mentations around a declining trend and, also, often to chronic adverse terms of trade against manufactured imports -- i.e. overtime, manufactured imports (which the developing countries mostly import) become increasingly expensive in terms of exported primary commodities (which the developing countries mostly export). Also, their exports face tariff and non-tariff barriers in the developed countries. No progress has so far been made in the WTO trade talks in respect of access to the developed countries for non-agricultural exports of the developing countries. Movement of unskilled and semi-skilled people from developing to developed countries remains strictly restricted; indeed, easy movement of people is not a part of the on-going globalisation. This is obviously against the interest of the developing countries and, moreover, renders the on-going globalisation unfair and incomplete. Clearly, therefore, globalisation has been of limited benefit to the developing world while the lion's share of the wide-scale market expansion and tremendous wealth created in its wake has gone to the developed countries and their corporate sectors. Moreover, globalisation has created severe constraints on economic, social, and environmental progress for a large number of developing countries, and has in fact been constricting for many.

But, the USA, the UK, Japan, and the countries of South East and East Asia which came to be known as East Asian Tigers used interventionist measures, adopting industrial and trade policies as appropriate to protect their domestic markets and promote exports at the earlier stages of their growth and development. Only after attaining sufficiently strong techno-economic management bases and significantly high levels of income that these countries began to open up their markets. Also, China has been following a go-slow strategy in respect of reducing tariff barriers, keeping the directives of the Washington Consensus at bay.

It may be pointed out that Thailand, whose economy collapsed in

1997 in the wake of its accelerated globalization including fully liberalised capital market, has since embarked on a path of economic rejuvenation after retracting from fast track liberalisation and introducing certain interventionist measures. On the other hand, most developing countries around the world opened up their economies fast, while they were still very weak in economic, resource access, and management terms. Obviously, their competitive ability was poor and eroded further as a result of the jolting received from stronger foreign competitors. Moreover, most of these countries have only a few items, often all or most of which are primary commodities, that account for most of their export earnings. Globalisation for these countries means, therefore, that their markets are open to all kinds of imports -- capital, intermediate, consumer, even primary goods -- while they cannot increase their export earnings much as they simply do not have more things to export.

Moreover, they face steep competition in the export market, given that the same or similar goods and commodities tend to be exported by many other developing countries. Commodity exports have also usually been subject to price fluctua-

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The above analyses may be summarised as follows. Two fundamental trends now characterise the global order. One is the neo-liberalist globalisation seeking economic integration of countries of the world on the terms and agenda set by the dominant developed world, mostly spearheaded by such international agencies as the Bretton Woods institutions and WTO. The other is the accentuating disparity, in the wake of globalisation, between developed and developing worlds and between the rich and the poor within countries. In this global order, appreciable achievements in relation to development and poverty reduction have not only eluded most developing countries, but also many of them have experienced setbacks. The question now is: what is the prospect of poverty reduction, which is now at the top of the agenda of the international community, within the framework of the on-going neo-liberalist paradigm? Also, so far in this article 'poverty' has been used without qualifications, as if the term has a unique meaning. But, poverty has many facets and dimensions. In part II, these and other relevant questions will be addressed.

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It is now known that, as a result of implementing the reforms and pursuing globalisation, many countries, particularly in Africa and among transition countries, found their economies contracting, even collapsing. Many other countries, after years of implementation of the reforms, are still unable to accelerate their economic growth sufficiently or achieve significant reduction in their poverty levels. It is reported in the UNDP Human Development Report 2003 (p.3) that: "In the 1990s average per capita income growth was less than 3 per cent in 125 developing and transition countries, and in 54 of

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Major parties falter on democracy within

WEEKEND NOTES

JAMILUR RAHMAN

TWO news items must have drawn the attention of readers at the beginning of the week. Both the ruling BNP and the main opposition Awami League are well behind schedule when it comes to holding party councils.

The reports are interesting, if only because they give a detailed account of the state of 'internal democratisation' in the two major political parties. It is not precisely known how many times the two parties have blamed each other for not being democratic, and bemoaned the 'visible' lack of democracy in the enemy camp. The bemoaning often found expression in vitriolic attacks.

The parties are ready to go to any lengths to defend democracy. But missing the deadline for holding councils again and again is not an indicator of democracy being nurtured with care within the parties. Your home is the most fertile ground for sowing the seeds of democracy.

Superficially speaking, it is a minor lapse that can be overcome by fixing a new date for a party council. But the matter is not that simple. Lack of elections within a party for a long time in violation of its constitution allows the party to assume certain undemocratic traits. They go unchallenged and the democratic culture within the party cannot flourish. Then, the talk of democracy, a favourite pastime of political leaders, does not make any sense when their parties do not attach due importance to democratic practices.

The CPA conference began Tuesday without the participation of the opposition. That was not a big surprise in itself. The AL, after all, looked like having more interest in settling scores with the government than in accepting the invitation. There were some last-minute attempts by the CPA high-ups to coax Sheikh Hasina into joining the conference. She was not convinced.

Denis Marshall must be an unhappy man. He perhaps never thought that the invitation to join the meet was too heavy a load to the opposition. It is not easy to explain why the government and the opposition cannot even sit together in a meeting for some time. It is one of those inexplicable quirks of our domestic politics that aliens might find quite baffling. It is a real brain twister.

The AL has blamed the government for 'politicising' the show. Aren't people tired of hearing the same thing over and over again? They would expect the BNP to explain why it left the opposition out of the preparatory phase, and the AL to come up with more forceful arguments in favour of its decision. Politicisation is not a wholesome exercise, regardless of what is politicised, but when it comes in the form of an accusation it may sound a bit vague.

Matters did not end there. The AL was denied permission for holding a rally because it could pose a security problem to the CPA meet. The party's grumbling about the cancellation of the permission given earlier is well founded because the government did not see a similar threat in the Paltan Maidan rally of the ruling four-party alliance. The AL has interpreted the action as a bid to 'avenge' the CPA boycott, and hastened to add that it laid bare the 'autocratic' character of the government.

The two sides are trying to undermine each other with the tenacity needed in top-flight political encounters, but the image of the country has been a sad casualty.

Now, what are the other parties doing all this time? There is news about the Jatiya Party (JP). Its disintegration was complete with the emergence of three JPs after HM Ershad failed to keep the party together when it lost its position as a challenger to the big two. The latest news is that the party leaders are examining the possibility of reuniting, perhaps more out of a political expediency than a principled stand.

The thought that must have influenced the JP(s) leaders more than anything else is the success of electoral alliances formed by the AL and the BNP during the last two elections. However, it is still not clear how far the three JPs can go since the disintegration of the party had pushed some of its front-ranking leaders towards the 'main camps'. Their political identity was greatly overshadowed by their newfound rapport with either the BNP or the AL. It will be interesting to see how the JP leaders handle the situation.

They may also ask themselves whether the risk is worth taking, since even a reunited JP may not click the way the leaders would like it to.

Jamilur Rahman is an Assistant Editor of The Daily Star.

Ayodhya's voice

ASGHAR ALI ENGINEER

I visited Ayodhya recently along with the Magasaysay awardee Mr. Sandeep Pandey who has been working here for quite some time to bring peace to this strife torn town. It is so interesting to talk to people of this place. I had to hold a workshop on communal harmony for Ayodhya and Faizabad towns and Sandeep was helping us in this connection. We met a cross section of people to hear their voice.

The country hears only the voice of Sangh Parivar and their most aggressive members like Singhal and Togadia. The media also has no time to project the voice of people of Ayodhya. Perhaps it does not sell. What sells is the powerful voice of Sangh Parivar and this Parivar has convinced the world that it is most authentic voice of 800 million Hindus of this country.

The communal forces always tend to homogenise the whole community as if millions of people belonging to a community speak one voice and surrender their minds and bodies to one individual or one party or one clique of persons. It is this one individual or party or group which takes all decisions and others simply endorse it. No dissent is ever tolerated. It is violently suppressed if it ever raises its voice. Before partition Jinnah also projected himself as the sole representative of Indian Muslims. All others had to endorse his decisions.

The Sangh Parivar always maintains that all Hindus want to build the Ram temple at Ayodhya and that it is historical fact that a temple stood there and Babar demolished it and build a mosque in its place. It is a 'proven fact' and no one can question it. And the one who does, is an 'enemy of Hinduisim'. The communalists have sole right to understand and interpret history.

It is miracle of modern day propaganda through media that has converted a non-existent problem into the most potent one. What did not exist has not only become a powerful problem but has also become the cause of killing thousands of innocent people across India. It was on account of Ramjanamboomi-Babri Masjid problem that 59 people were set afire in Sabarmati Express in Godhra on 27 February 2001 and more than one thousand people killed most cruelly in retaliatory act in Gujarat from 28th February onwards that continued for more than six months.

And it was on account of this non-existent problem that BJP rode to power though it had repeatedly failed to do so before. Shri L.K. Advani's rath yatra in 1990 failed to lead to Ayodhya as planned but did lead to Delhi as intended. The rath may not reach Ayodhya in near future but it does help retaining Delhi. The raths in medieval period helped win wars so the modern Toyota rath led the BJP to power in Delhi.

The people of Ayodhya know this better than anyone else. They have paid heavy price for it and still continue to pay. And they have been as helpless so far as other people of India have been. They have silently borne the brunt of Sangh Parivar's aggression for years. They are, it seems, no longer prepared to do so. Every time the VHP leaders announce their programme of 'kar seva' or sant yatra or Ram Lalla darshan the people of Ayodhya have to shut their shops. Lakhis invade the town disturbing their normalcy and often inviting prolonged curfews. Every citizen of Ayodhya shudders to think of VHP programmes in their town.

Now again the VHP has announced its programme in Ayodhya on 17th October. Lakhis of 'Rambhaktas' once again will march to that town for 'Ram Lalla Darshan'. Everyone I met in Ayodhya told me that every time election is announced the VHP tries to organise its show in Ayodhya as if this is the only way for BJP to win elections. It is people of Ayodhya who pay price for the election anywhere in India. The BJP perhaps knows no other way of winning the election.

We met Mahant Gyanadas who is chief Mahant of Hanuman Garhi temple which is one of the most significant shrines of Ayodhya. The Mahant was sitting surrounded by his followers. It is important to note that the land for Hanuman Garhi temple was donated by the Nawab of Avadh and the temple was built by one of the Nawab's Hindu courtier.

I asked the Mahant whether he would like Ramjanamboomi temple to be built at the site of Babri Masjid. Gyanadas told me the temple can be built only when Hindus and Muslims come together to build the temple. Hindu-Muslim unity is more important than the temple. If they cannot agree to build the temple let us wait for court's verdict. It cannot be built by shedding human blood.

When Gyanadasji was saying this I was reminded of Maulana Azad's presidential address at the Ramgarh session of AICC. Maulana had said that 'even if an angel descended from heaven and declared that I have

brought the gift of India's freedom from heaven, I would refuse to accept it until Hindu-Muslim unity is achieved. For, if India does not get freedom it is India's loss but if Hindu-Muslim unity is not achieved, it is humanity's loss.'

The Hanuman Garhi's Mahant was also making almost similar point. If the temple is to be built it is Sangh Parivar's loss but if Hindu-Muslim unity is disturbed it is entire country's loss as well as loss for whole humanity. But who cares if humanity suffers as long as the Sangh Parivar can come to power. Mahant Gyanadasji is against VHP and considers it as anti-Hindu. VHP, he tells me, has no right to talk in the name of Hindus. Hindus have not elected them to represent them or to build Ramjanamboomi temple in their name. He also said that those who tore open the stomach of a pregnant woman and threw the foetus into the fire cannot even qualify as Hindus, let alone building a temple in the sacred city of Ayodhya in their name.

Sandeep had also convened the meeting of many other Mahants and some citizens of Ayodhya who have constituted an organisation called Ayodhya Ki Awaz (Voice of Ayodhya). The Mahants and other people of Ayodhya have floated this organisation in order to fight the VHP plan to convert Ayodhya into a battle ground for their war for power. They have suffered silently so far but can bear it no longer and have decided to fight it out peacefully and democratically. Ayodhya Ki Awaz has now become voice of all peace loving people of Ayodhya.

The meeting was attended by some important Mahants of Ayodhya like Mahant Bhawanath Das who was also Sarchan of Hanuman Garhi and is president of Samajwadi Sant Sabha. He presided over the meeting. Jugal Kishore Shashtri also took part in the meeting who is convener of Ayodhya Ki Awaz and also edits the weekly paper Ramjanamboomi. He counters the VHP propaganda through his paper. Shri Shashtri is quite vocal and committed to maintaining peace in Ayodhya.

Another Mahant, Madhuwan Das, a Mahant associated with Hanuman Garhi who is also a corporator from Ramjanamboomi ward was too present in the meeting. Mahant Girish Tripathi who has done his M.A. in political science from JNU also took part in the meeting. Badal Acharya who is son of Chief Mahant of Dant Dhawan Kund and is preparing to take over as Mahant himself and Rangesh Achari son of Rajasaba Mandir too came for the meeting. One Sadiq Ali, an activist who repeatedly suffered in Ayodhya is also actively associated with this organisation and was present in the meeting.

In his introductory remarks Bhawanath Das said that it was high time that we fought against those who go to the extent of setting fire to the Sabarmati compartment killing scores of innocent Hindus in order to organise carnage of Muslims so that they can win the elections in Gujarat. They would like to convert whole India into Gujarat, if they could. Now we must show courage and fight the VHP menace.

A concrete programme was chalked out for facing the situation on 17th October when the VHP is again trying to bring lakhs of its supporters to Ayodhya. All Mahants present in the meeting felt that since elections have been announced in the four states the VHP is again staging this drama and it should not get away with it every time. Everyone present felt that this committee should demand ban on the entry of outsiders like Singhal and Togadia and a memorandum to be submitted to the chief minister of U.P. to this effect. There was some difference of opinion whether they should demand ban on entry of so-called Rambhaktas. It was suggested that those who want to come for genuine Ram Lalla darshan should come in groups of four or five. However, Jugal Kishore Shashtri was of the opinion that those brought by VHP should not be allowed to enter Ayodhya at all on 17th October.

It was also decided that citizens of Ayodhya should resist entry of VHP supporters on 17th October and one person from every house in Ayodhya should take part in it. Suitable pamphlets and stickers would be published for mobilising the people of Ayodhya.

It is indeed heartening that many Mahants and other people of Ayodhya are girding up their loins to fight the VHP campaign, which has nothing to do with building Ramjanamboomi temple but only to keep alive this controversy for political purposes. The voiceless people of Ayodhya who have suffered for so long are now giving themselves an effective voice. The Mahants have also decided not to sit it out silently. They are preparing to throw gauntlet to the VHP at last.

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Edward Said: Palestine's intellectual fighter



HARUN UR RASHID

Accord of 1993 stating that the accord would be a failure. He was found right in his view at the end because he suspected that Israel did not believe in the accord. Yasser Arafat reportedly banned his books in the occupied land while the Jewish lobby in the US wanted to deprive him of his academic post by alleging that he was an anti-semitic.

Said was one of the most distinctive and original writers from the 70s to the 90s. His books illuminate the remarkable depth and breadth of his penetrating mind. His book *Oriental-*

(1981) and *Culture and Imperialism* (1993) threw down a challenge to the think-tanks and professional institutions. The first is an attack on the Western media covering the 1979 Islamic revolution in Iran and the second is a collection of essays on the perception of the East from Western writers. His last book *Out of Place* (1999) is a memoir that puts him both as a refugee and an "outsider". His enemies claimed that he was never a true refugee from Palestine because he was in Cairo at the time of dispossession of

published in Athens than in all the Arab capitals combined. This demonstrates the intellectual vacuum in the Arab world with attendant consequences on Arab people.

Said was critical to curtailment of civil liberties in the US after the September 11 attacks and found treatment of Muslims living in the US as humiliating. He opposed war in Iraq and was appalled at the looting of museums in Iraq soon after the US occupied the country. He wrote: "In the US, the hardening of attitudes, the tightening of the grip of

orchestra was proof of his desire for Arab-Israeli reconciliation. When Barenboim was refused permission to play in Ramallah (West Bank) by Israel, Said rearranged the venue of the concert in Morocco last month.

Most Western critics of Said believe that although he was ideally placed to explain East to West and West to East, he missed his opportunity because he suspected good intentions of the West towards the East. To support their position they cite the views of the Syrian-Lebanese poet, Adonis who has warned that there exists a danger in too strong a counter position between "East" and "West". While the West has moved forward since the Renaissance period, the East had its pinnacles during the Middle Ages. Islamic culture and civilization were at their peak when Europe was steeped in darkness. Muslims conquered Spain and ruled for centuries and knocked at the gates of Vienna in Eastern Europe.

Edward Said was an international figure and created a stir in the West by challenging the stereotyped version of the East. All his books are stimulating in their contents. Those Americans who associated the term "Palestinian" with bizarre headgear and swarthinness were in a shock when Said appeared in the literary circle as a witty, cultured scholar. His writings conveyed critical examination of human values for peace and prosperity for all. Truly Said secured a historic place as one of the creative writers of the world. Many believe that the Swedish Nobel Academy was poorer in the looting, pillaging and destruction of Iraq's libraries and museums.

Said had hidden talent as a pianist. Many visitors to his apartment had to wait to see him until he had finished playing music. He reportedly loved to play Beethoven's *Moonlight*. His friendship with Jewish musician Barenboim and their joint support for an Israeli-Arab

BOTTOM LINE

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ism (1978) has exerted a galvanising influence throughout the world. In these pages Said criticised Western view of Orient that had been rooted in colonialism. Oriental countries were seen as "barbarous" and sources of exploitation for amassing wealth. This view finds favour with that of Karl Marx when he stated that the British introduced railways, printing presses and the telegraph in colonial India, not out of their kindness of their hearts but were motivated by their commercial interests.

His other books *Covering Islam*

Palestinians. In this book he defended his position and believed in the right of return of Palestinians to their homeland, Palestine.

Like all serious academics, he wanted accuracy and was a tough master. He suffered no fools. He had no respect for sloppy journalism and had less patience with American TV anchors. He was very critical the way the Arab world imposed barriers to intellectual development. He was a source of admonition to the insulated Arab intelligentsia. It has been reported that every year more books are translated and

demeaning generalisation and triumphalist cliché, the dominance of crude power allied with simplistic contempt for dissenters and 'others', have found a fitting correlative in the looting, pillaging and destruction of Iraq's libraries and museums.

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Barrister Harun ur Rashid is a former Bangladesh Ambassador to the UN, Geneva.