

## Selected extracts from November's issue of Forum

## Making the invisible visible

SANJAN HAQUE

By the time this piece has been published and circulated, the dust, leftovers, decorations and fanfare of Extreme Poverty Eradication Day will have been swept up and discarded. The grand announcements will have been made, oaths pledged, ideas shared and applause long faded. What comes after the microphones are stowed away and flashbulbs have been tamed is what really matters and what the event's theme making the invisible visible is all about. The argument for observing such a day seems rather baffling when one imagines every think tank, inter-governmental organisation and even the Bangladeshi Government is resigned to the fact that chronic and extreme poverty are inevitable, beyond our control or even a God-given curse. Then why, one might ask, spend large sums of money organising a conference in lavish surroundings with international and national dignitaries when such resources can be diverted to help the very people the conference hopes to address? It's rather simple: the extreme poor are seldom recognised by the political elite; government policies seldom, if ever, reach the economic bottom 10 percent of the population, and state safety net programmes fail to mitigate their poverty and often confuse them with

the moderate poor. There are a number of other reasons but essentially, high-profile events like this year's Extreme Poverty Eradication Day provide a platform to reach the highest levels of government and advocate for change.

On 17 October 1987, over 100,000 Parisians gathered to honour the victims of extreme poverty, violence and hunger. It was in this same city that the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was signed in 1948 and UN member states proclaimed that poverty was a violation of human rights with the affirmation that all humanity was required to unite to fight this plague in all its guises. In 1992 this belief was institutionalised within the UN through a resolution adopted by the General Assembly which invited "all states to devote the day [17th October] to presenting and promoting, as appropriate in the national context, concrete activities with regard to the eradication of poverty and destitution". This resolution provides the space for intergovernmental and non-governmental organisations to assist states in undertaking the necessary activities to properly observe the day.

The purpose of such a day is not only to highlight the obvious truth that Bangladesh remains mired in institutionalised chronic poverty but also to look beyond dehumanising facts and stamp a human face on the extreme poverty faced by nearly 40 million Bangladeshis. The UN resolution, which

gave life to this day, accepted all the frailties of contemporary poverty reduction strategies and provided the space for state and non-state actors alike to promote and plan a road out of poverty.

A shift in donor attitudes and approaches over the past decade has resulted in new policies which include building government capacities and providing frameworks through which both state and non-state actors can dispense public goods. This has resulted in an improved governance framework for aid distribution and created a space where state and non-state organisations play a more cohesive role in the overall development agenda.

Bangladesh's commitment to poverty reduction is highlighted by the government's election manifesto, which emphasises the need to eliminate poverty & inequality and maintain economic stability over commodity price hikes.

Bangladesh is likewise committed to achieving the UN Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), adopted at the turn-of-the-century UN Millennium Declaration. The MDGs set targeted time bound and specific goals for extreme poverty reduction throughout the world. The first goal -- popularly referred to as MDG 1 addresses the eradication of extreme poverty and hunger and remains the biggest challenge for the Government of Bangladesh.

For too long the political elite have

been indifferent to the needs and the policy requirements of the extreme poor. The failure of the state to provide public goods since independence led to the flourishing of non-governmental organisations and presently social businesses. The initiatives undertaken by these, and a range of other sectors, have failed to inspire the political elite to push for effective long-term policies to lift the extreme poor out of poverty. Raising awareness among policy-makers, ensuring bureaucrats are provided with specific targets and charging state machinery with the necessity of tackling, extreme poverty head on is an absolute policy imperative for the Bangladeshi political elite.

Here a distinction must be made between the moderate poor and the extreme poor, who make up nearly 40 million people in Bangladesh. The popularity of micro-finance institutions to provide credit to the poor, much highlighted by the international accolades heaped on institutions like Grameen Bank, diverts attention from the failure of such institutions to reach the extreme poor. Not only does this highlight the frailties of the micro-credit scheme, it brings to light a fact that both civil society and government are ambivalent about admitting. The simple truth remains that a bank will only lend collateral-free loans to individuals with the greatest probability of repaying the loan; the extreme poor, with no fixed assets



and intermittent income generating ability, fail to fulfil the banks' criteria for receiving such loans.

Bangladesh's second Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper, Moving Ahead, identifies the effects of longstanding institutional frailties that have led to the widening economic divisions between urban and rural areas, rich and poor, east and west, and Bengalis and adivasis. The widening poverty gap between the eastern (Dhaka & Chittagong Divisions) and western regions (Barisal & Khulna Divisions) highlight historical deficiencies in developing human & infrastructural capacity

and the intransigence of the political elite to institutionalise effective social safety net programmes. A closer look at these widening gaps reveals various pockets of poverty located throughout Bangladesh: inhabitants of char areas, hill tracts, the coastal belt and indigenous populations throughout the country are continuous victims of extreme poverty.

For the full version of this article please read this month's Forum, available free with The Daily Star on November 2.

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## An extreme poverty manifesto

JOE DEVINE

In 1996 I was carrying out research for my PhD on NGOs and poverty reduction in rural Bangladesh. One evening, after a long day trekking round aimlessly trying to find people to interview, I was sitting on the office veranda of a local NGO that had kindly offered me hospitality. It was a beautiful evening with one of those Bangladeshi sunsets that leave you breathless, even inspired. As usual, a number of people had gathered at the front of the NGO office hoping to be able to speak to the NGO leader or his senior staff. From among the crowd, an elderly woman slowly made her way towards me and asked if I could help her by talking to the NGO leader on her behalf. This was not an unusual request and I had become quite used to telling people that I neither worked for the NGO nor had the gravitas to influence its leaders. This time however the elderly woman ignored my response as she persisted in trying to get my attention. Those next to me on the veranda tried to gently move her away by asking her to join the queue of people at the front of the NGO office where 'she might be attended to'. Again unconvinced, she stubbornly held her ground. There was something admirable about her persistence and I began to chat with her.

Not surprisingly, like many of the others

congregating outside the office, she had travelled some distance to ask the NGO for help. Like many others, she was at pains to show how vulnerable and poor she was and how the weight of constantly having to face severe hardships was overburdening her. There was no need of course for her to explain this, her poverty was obvious; written on her face and carved probably forever into her flesh. But what was surprising about this woman was the way she talked of her poverty.

As she recounted the list of things that were going wrong in her life and tried to convince everyone of her need for help, she continued to utter the phrase *amar keu ney* a phrase that was to radically alter the way I came to think about poverty in Bangladesh.

I quickly noticed that the phrase also struck a chord among my Bangladeshi colleagues sitting beside me that evening. It felt as if this woman could no longer be simply ushered to the back of the queue (which had grown considerably longer as our discussion evolved); the condition of *amar keu ney* meant that she somehow deserved to be treated in a different way from the others.

In my company that evening were a number of NGO workers who were extremely dedicated and hardworking. I asked them to explain what *amar keu ney* meant and what, if anything, it told us differently about the lives of poor people.

In the end, it was the elderly lady herself who came up with the clearest answer. In her view, most of the people in the queue were genuinely poor and she went on to explain how all poor people have little money and are probably in debt; have restricted employment opportunities and work for very low wages and in poor conditions; possess few assets of any value; suffer from long term health problems; sometimes experience real hunger; cannot afford to send their children to school. But, she argued, her poverty was different.

While the poor are constantly exposed to different hazards, shocks and crises, they somehow manage a basic level of security in life. In other words, despite many setbacks, they survive. Her poverty was very different. Her ability to reach a basic level of welfare was fundamentally undermined by the fact that she could no longer count on anyone to help her out nor was she important enough to still count in the political calculations of others. To all extents and purposes, she was abandoned and excluded, and this rendered her poverty so much more severe and life threatening.

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NADEEM RAHMAN

On November 5, 1605, Guy Fawkes was caught with thirty-six barrels of gunpowder, attempting to blow up the House of Lords in the Palace of Westminster, during the State Opening of Parliament. The plot was to assassinate the King of England along with almost the entire British aristocracy. Since then, in adherence to tradition and the true spirit of British democracy, parliament has never been opened on the November 5 (except once), and the Houses of Parliament are ceremoniously searched by the Yeomen of the Guard, as a precaution against traitors and religious zealots. Parliament was subsequently opened on November 9, when His Majesty did not miss the opportunity to wax eloquent on "the divine right of monarchs" to rule, and the infernal "Catholic question".

The King was not alone in anti-Catholicism. Even those reluctant to accept his divine credentials were one with him on this issue.

What is perhaps not appreciated enough, however, is the realisation that the gunpowder plot was nothing less than an act of war -- a religious coup d'état which, had it succeeded, would have proved as thoroughly comprehensive as France's infamous reign of terror, and far more devastating than America's 9/11. England might have been a part of the Pope's domain. In spite of this, or rather as a consequence of its failure, history cannot

credit the gunpowder plot with England's civil war, Cromwell's Commonwealth, or the Glorious Revolution. It stands alone, foremost on the list of lost causes.

Ironically, Guy Fawkes, "that brave bad man," who was the inspiration for the Devil in Milton's *Paradise Lost*, has of late acquired something of a cult status. In 2002 he was ranked 30th in a list of Britain's 100 greatest, and among Yorkshire's 50 greatest. In a strange twist of fortune, Guy Fawkes, who was once demonised as Britain's best known traitor, is today celebrated as "the only man ever to have entered parliament with honest intentions".

Not surprisingly, Catholics were not the only irritants to early English society. The Edict of Expulsion of 1290 expelled all Jews from England for over three hundred and fifty years, until it was formally revoked in 1656. It was immensely popular at the time, and countless colourful anti-Semitic myths have emanated from that formative era. Indeed, well before the expulsion of Jews from Spain and Portugal and long before the notorious Nazis, England was the first country in Europe "to require Jews to wear a marking badge." But the Jews never produced a Guy Fawkes of their own -- on the contrary, the virgin Queen's personal physician was a Jew, who is believed to have inspired Shakespeare's Shylock. The quiet comeback of the Jewish community culminated in Benjamin Disraeli's assumption of office as Prime Minister of Great Britain. Although a convert to Anglicanism, he was nevertheless

essentially of Jewish origin.

Be that as it may, November 5 has come and gone for four hundred years since that fateful night, and sectarian differences, indeed religion, is no longer the great divide of the British body politic. Great Britain, which has always been a multi-ethnic, multi-cultural realm, finds itself once again, in the twenty first century, under siege by yet another non-Anglican faith. Despite the diligent Yeomen of the Guard, since then, religious zealots abound and the sinister Catholics are replaced by British radical Muslims, who have sprung from British soil, and made no pretence of loyalty and bore no allegiance whatsoever to King and Cool Britannia. These "revolutionaries" are a new species of "crusaders," whose hearts and minds belong to a world apart from the middle gentry of merry England.

Increasingly, this scenario can be seen throughout Europe, indeed the world. Muslim militants have become an unwelcome phenomenon even in Muslim cultures. Not since the "Hashisheens" despatched by "the old man of the mountain," from whom the punishing word "assassin" is derived, has history witnessed such a deluge of dedicated executioners, on a global scale.

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## Catalysis for a new Dhaka

KAZI KHALED ASHRAF with MASUDUL ISLAM

A city can build itself to death, and that is perhaps the most appropriate description of Dhaka's so-called development.

Dhaka is basically being built/killed in two ways: by developers and builders whose only concern is maximum economic profit and who could care less about spearheading an environmental and social degradation; and by designated policy-makers whose myopic and miserly visions do not go beyond making regulations and land divisions, and hold no answer to the complexity of the urban landscape. But whatever gets built, little or not so little, has an impact. The fact is despite the perception of our economic limitedness, Dhaka is a city of prodigious and furious building activity, and all that impacts the balance of the ecological, social and economic life-system.

The time is ripe for a radical transformation of Dhaka. We know now where the problems are and how acute they are, but the big question is: are we prepared with alternatives? An urban transformation of Dhaka needs to recognize a few key conditions for the city and its regions. The most important is: Dhaka is part of a dynamic hydrological landscape, and for that reason Dhaka should be developed

as a hydrological city. Unless we have evolved into superior dry creatures (and it is only the farmers and fishermen in the delta who are destined to stay wet), we will be retaliated by an unforgiving mother nature in multiple ways. The deluge of the 1980s, the lesser floods each year, the climatic changes, the record rainfall of July 28, 2009, are some of nature's way of saying, I shall return. And yet for all that is wrong and all that is calamitous, Dhaka can still be a laboratory for showing a balanced urban dynamic.

I am obsessed by the Google image of Dhaka. The satellite view opens up a whole new realm of geographic imagination revealing things about the city unlike any other medium. I gaze at it endlessly, I scan left and right, zoom in and out, and the city that appears before me never ceases to amaze me. I see a city, or potential of a city, that is largely concealed. Patches and parts of the city appear that is not available from a ground reality, which in turn offer a whole new opportunity for imagining the city's future.

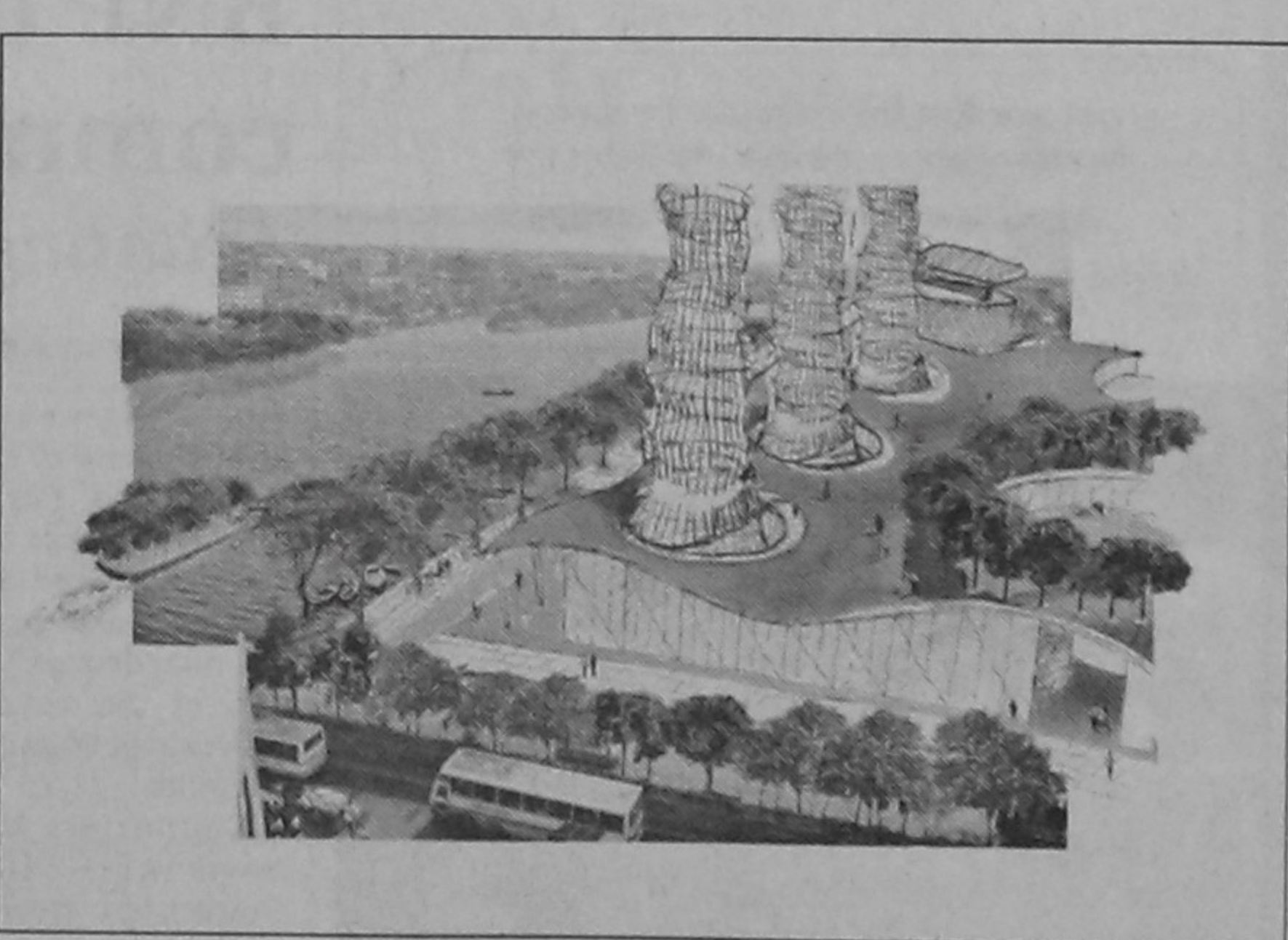
The Google map makes a few things more apparent than other medium for observing and mapping Dhaka: What should be the perimeter of the city? What will happen at that edge? What will happen beyond that edge? What will be the relationship between two sides of the

divide? Dhaka cannot grow infinitely in every other direction, swallowing up wetlands and agricultural land with mind-numbing speed and greed, and throwing off balance a precious ecological and hydrological system. If not, then, how will be the population growth and the appetite for urban land solved? That is the challenge. The brilliance for urban designers and planners will be to show that sustaining and enhancing Dhaka's geographic life system can address growth.

In the meantime, without a vision, Dhaka hobbles and limps in its urban "growth." I have walked the banks of Buriganga and Turag, that is, wherever it is walkable, sailed down and up the rivers, stood amidst the anarchy in Gabtoli and other points on the western embankment, and I looked and looked but nowhere, absolutely nowhere, have I seen any sign of an intelligent, civic or decent treatment of the water's edge. Nowhere did I find an evidence of a language for developing the riverbanks a plan for a spatially efficient and aesthetically organized system and also something that is economically sustainable. I have seen garbage and effluence spewed out, shops and shacks tumbling over each other with their back to the river, grown-up men standing and urinating into it, but no sign of a design intelligence. And to

think we are a people of land and water, and of rivers and ghats! While we do not have to make a Venice out of our urban rivers (on the other hand, why not?), we don't have to make them into drainage and urination canals either. While some portions of Dhaka's riverbanks are being cleared of encroachment and pollution, the operation should be partnered with an equally vigorous action: what are the sustainable models of urban space, usage and architecture for the riverbanks?

A satellite view of Dhaka clearly presents the immensity of the water system that rings Dhaka and penetrates it like a vascular tissue. The satellite view also makes it obvious that amidst that watery landscape Dhaka is surrounded by a region of undefined settlements, some of which are established, while many others are in the throes of a helter-skelter evolution. They are both a product of planning callousness and development abuse; that is, whatever planning exists for some of those areas is poor both in conception and implementation, and whatever development goes on is short-sighted and simply troubling. I hold the view that a condition of dystopia is also an occasion for imaginative renovation. Such sites of urban disarray provoke a strategy where pockets of intervention can be identified, and a new integrated plan may be proposed that combines the social, eco-



nomic, ecological, transportation and regional within the framework of the existing city.

Dhaka has not seen projects that can be described as projects prone to catalysis, that is, sites because of their critical location and multiple vocations harbor the capacity to induce far-reaching and multi-level impact on the city. The recent initiative with Hatirjheel bears the promise of being such a "catalytic" project. The administration involved is to be

thanked for taking that on as an opportunity to create designed urban spaces, reorganize infrastructure and reconstruct some of the old wetland in the heart of the city.

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