

On the frontlines against extreme poverty

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JAMAL KHETRAN

I am of the firm conviction that any programme to eradicate poverty in the villages and towns of Bangladesh can only be successful if the participant communities take the lead role in determining their own needs and identifying local solutions. Community development workers are integral members of developmental activities, especially those underway in the poorest and most underserved communities. I am using the term "community development workers" to refer to people alternatively known as outreach workers, community mentors, community representatives, and natural leaders.

There are perhaps tens of thousands of community development workers on the job 24/7 in villages, urban neighbourhoods, homes for the physically challenged, rehabilitation centres, community based organisations, work sites, clinics, and hospitals through Bangladesh. Many work in short-term funded projects addressing targeted issues, such as grant-funded basic literacy or health awareness campaigns. Some are volunteers, and many are paid, often claiming the lowest salary amongst all project staff.

As intermediaries between project designers and the communities where the projects will most likely be implemented, community development workers facilitate and bridge the gap between design and actual requirement, thereby improving the quality and cultural competence of development efforts.

As the frontline members of develop-

ment delivery teams, community development workers empower communities in managing their own affairs. They help build individual and community capacity for holistic and sustained efforts for the betterment of their own lives through increasing knowledge, building solidarity and self-sufficiency, and serve as technical support and informal counsellors providing social support.

My experience of working in the villages and towns has shown me that these frontline workers are crucial to the quality and cost-effectiveness of development activities. They do this by tirelessly assisting individuals and groups with self-management of scarce resources, building resilience to economic/social and environmental shocks, and helping with navigation of the numerous stakeholder environment with its complex stakeholders.

Furthermore, I have observed that, with development programmes still being top down and highly prescriptive, community development workers are vital to efforts which restructure the delivery of inputs, and are often innovators who customise project delivery on an individual or group-centred basis, offering service which is accessible and compassionate and somewhat reduces the risks associated with the limited imagination/ability of the project designers.

As community development workers are part of the community, they are able to develop peer to peer relationships of trust with the individuals, rather than provider-client relationships. It is often these relationships, rather than specialist expertise, that contribute most impor-

tantly to their ability to communicate openly with individuals, especially on issues related to attitudes and behaviours.

Fortunately, donor organisations such as UKAID are highly supportive of community designed and led development, and development literature published since the '90s enshrines these lessons. It goes without saying that efforts to improve people's lives must begin where the people are, that human beings are what development is all about, and that the community is the building block of national growth.

For example, in the projects supported by shiree, a UKAID funded programme, the community development workers have played a key role in mobilising community support for selection of the most deserving and poorest families within their respective communities. In all cases, they have raised the awareness of issues related to poverty through house visits and convening meetings for sensitisation on important project activities that will support the communities' efforts at eliminating the worst forms of poverty.

At project areas in Rangpur, the community development workers have organised meetings, utilising common spaces to deliver water and sanitation awareness messages as an entry point to build community ownership of the economic aspects of the project that will require group solidarity later on.

While this has been instrumental in introducing the project to the area, the mobilisation and group formation in the communities has led to improved health conditions in the villages served by the project, and has increased awareness of low-cost and self-help options replicate the same activities in nearby communities.

Many of the more mature groups formed under the shiree programme, after having shown off their newly acquired tea stall or power tillers, narrate



SHAFIQ ISLAM/RIK NEWS

their experiences after getting organised as groups. They describe how the community development worker acted like a catalyst, and that the group has given them confidence and recognition.

They say that prior to becoming involved in the group they were only busy in petty labour or domestic activities, with no savings, or prospects for the future. Now they had hope, having realised the power of collective enterprise and returns from income generating activities undertaken. Many individuals have said that they no longer feel abandoned and alone, and that with the support of their own institutions which are sufficiently capitalised, they can dream of a better tomorrow.

While specialist contributions are very

important to any effort aimed at improving the economic well-being of participating communities; leadership and group development roles also play a critical role for the support of participants who have recently acquired skills and assets through project interventions.

I think that community development workers' contributions to improving access to development opportunities and changing behaviour, and outcomes, while recognised as pivotal to the success of projects are often not valued sufficiently, notably for their cultural competence, and mediating complex project cycles for the betterment of underserved communities.

Though, there are many community development workers working in the villages and cities of Bangladesh, there

are still not enough of them. In the five years remaining to fulfil the commitments made under the Millennium Development Goals, and the many more years it will take to eradicate extreme poverty completely, many more of these people will need to be involved if these worthy goals are to be met.

Therefore, I applaud the work of these unsung heroes and recommend that these frontline practitioners be given increased recognition, expanded training opportunities, with related certifications and career pathways that serve as an incentive to attract more people to take up mission.

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A natural leader

SYED ASHRAF ALI

SHAKESPEARE has aptly claimed: "Some are born great, some achieve greatness, and some have greatness thrust upon them." Indeed, natural leaders can be counted on one's fingers.

Sher-e-Bangla A.K. Fazlul Huq, the indomitable champion of truth and justice, was an out and out natural leader. Sher-e-Bangla did not fade away gradually. He died in the fullness of his glory. He was a patriot, an idealist, a man of action, a dreamer of dreams.

A study of his life will show that "the elements" were so ingrained in him that Nature might stand up and say to all the world, "This was a man!"

Like a genuine natural leader, he had always been wedded to his ideals, and in his ardent natural desire to realise them, he lighted upon truths that "perish never." He took up a cause and worked for it with sincerity and devotion befitting a natural leader.

His towering frame overshadowed everyone and everything around. But more than that was the vision and the deep humanity that came through and left an indelible impression. "Alone amidst the dazzling galaxy in the political firmament of Bengal," in the memo-



Sher-e-Bangla A.K. Fazlul Huq

rable words of Hussein Shaheed Suhrawardy, "was he capable of rising to the occasion in the hours of crises, rising higher and higher till he attained the full stature, while others looked smaller and smaller till they sank behind his great personality."

A man with amazing foresight, he had the courage and conviction to demand a separate Bengali army in British India. In a letter to Sir John Herbert, the governor of Bengal, he wrote: "I want you to con-

sent to the formation of a Bengal Army consisting of a hundred thousand young Bengalis comprising Hindu and Muslim youths on a fifty-fifty basis. There is insistent demand for such a step being taken at once, and the people of Bengal will not be satisfied with any excuses. It is a national demand which must be immediately conceded."

He also pointed out in the same letter: "Administrative measures must be suited to the genius and traditions of the people and not fashioned according to the whims and caprices of hardened bureaucrats, to many of whom autocratic ideas are bound up with the very breath of their lives."

A natural leader with dauntless spirit, he never cared a button for his personal security to bring a person to book, whatever might be the rank and status of the person concerned. Even the British governor of Bengal was reprimanded in writing by him.

In February 1943, he made a statement in the capacity of chief minister of Bengal on the floor of the Bengal Legislative Assembly regarding the then government's policy on Midnapore Affairs. The governor of Bengal, in a letter to Sher-e-Bangla, demanded: "I shall expect an explanation from you at your interview tomorrow morning of your

conduct in failing to consult me before announcing what purports to be decision of the government."

The letter offended Sher-e-Bangla, and in a befitting reply the Tiger of Bengal roared: "Dear Sir John, In reply to your letter of the February 15, 1943, I write to say that I owe you no explanation whatever in respect of my conduct in failing to consult you before announcing what according to you is the decision of the government; but I certainly owe you a duty to administer a mild warning that indecorous language such as has been used in your letter under reply should, in future, be avoided in any correspondence between the governor and his chief minister."

He did not even hesitate to rebuke the journalists for their passive role and cowardice. Reminding them of daredevil journalists like Maulana Mohammed Ali Jauhar, Motilal Ghosh, Surendra Nath Banerjee, he declared on the floor of the Bengal Legislative Assembly: "They were lions in their own days and we have the descendants of the lions of Indian journalism in our midst today. But the difference between the two classes of lions is very significant. Those were lions whose roars used to reverberate from Bengal across the seven seas to the home of the British

nation, but in the case of the present lions they are as docile as lions in a circus show. The roar of the lions of old used to make thrones tremble, but most of the present lions know how to crouch beneath the throne and wag their tails in approbation of government policy." No other politician in the history of this subcontinent had the guts to scold the journalists in such a forceful language.

But it was not only this indefatigable spirit and indomitable courage which marked him out from the average run of leaders in the unusually brilliant and colourful Indian political firmament, his brilliant wit and remarkable sense of humour, occasionally ably supported by his thorough grasp of mathematics, together with unparalleled ability to gather up complexity and transmute it to simplicity, also endeared him to the masses.

When Dr. Nalini Ranjar Sircar, himself a renowned parliamentarian, urged the chief minister to change the angle of vision regarding a particular ticklish issue, Sher-e-Bangla retorted with his inimitable sense of humour: "The angle of vision of my esteemed friend may be either acute or obtuse but never the right angle."

A highly skilled parliamentarian, Sher-e-Bangla managed to keep cool, calm,

and collected even when irritated or annoyed to an extent beyond measure. While facing a bitter opponent and critic during a budget session in the Bengal Legislative Assembly, Sher-e-Bangla was irritated by the peculiar gestures of the hostile member.

The honourable MLA was urging the chief minister over and again to rise to the occasion and face the music. He was harping on the same tune, and it was enough to try the patience of a saint. The Tiger of Bengal interrupted and said: "Mr. Speaker, I can jolly well face the music but I cannot face a monkey." All were dumbfounded as none expected such a crude remark from a seasoned politician like the great Sher-e-Bangla.

The member concerned, in high dudgeon, demanded immediate apology and withdrawal of the objectionable and unparliamentary remark of the chief minister. But cool as cucumber our beloved hero replied: "Mr. Speaker, I never mentioned any honourable member of this House, but if any honourable member thinks that the cap fits him, I withdraw my remark."

This was our beloved Tiger of Bengal -- a friend, a companion, a colleague, a leader of the suffering millions.

Syed Ashraf Ali is a former Director General of Islamic Foundation, Bangladesh.

4 funny failed suicides



THERE was a huge argument going on in the cafe when I arrived. On one side was a guy trying to lose a few kilos. On the other was an amateur nutritionist. (Have you ever met anyone who is not an amateur nutritionist?)

The dieter had combined two different diets. In the mornings, he did the low-carb one where you eat loads of steak, and in the evening he did the food pyramid one where you eat loads of carbs. "I get more variety that way," he explained.

The nutritionist, a vegetarian, was appoleptic. "The two diets will cancel

each other out," she thundered. The dieter was aggrieved. "But it's more balanced than your diet," he said.

I decided to step in before violence broke out.

But what to say? Fortunately, a fourth person was present -- and he had the perfect explanation. This gentleman was a reporter researching an article on suicides. He told us the remarkable story of Yang Jun 30, of Guangdong, China. Depressed after his divorce, Yang decided to kill himself. For safety, he used two methods at once. He downed 50 sleeping pills and then climbed up the Haiyin Bridge in Guangzhou.

But before he could fling himself 150 feet (46 meters) down into the murky waters, he fell asleep. "I couldn't make up my mind which was better, an overdose or jumping. So I decided to use both. However, I was feeling very sleepy by the time I got to the top and the next thing I knew I woke up in hospital," Jun told the press.

The reporter's cuttings collection was fascinating. On an item from the UK Daily



Mirror last week, the headline said: "My suicide failed, says S&M husband Mike Roberts."

Of course it failed. If it had succeeded,

he wouldn't be saying anything, would he?

Another cutting was about a suicide bomber attack in Jakarta last week. Happily, he was the "right sort" of sui-

cide bomber. The only person he blew up was himself. A nice little self-solving problem.

I told the journalist about a technique used to stop suicides in southeast China. They cover bridges in butter to make them hard for citizens to climb (this is not a joke). The buttered individuals simply slide to the ground where guards arrest them. How does one grab a person covered in butter? How do they get the stuff off? Not sure. I expect they roll them around on giant slices of bread.

He told me about a suicidal guy in Wales who blasted himself with a shotgun recently. But he survived. So he pretended that a mystery gunman had attacked him. Had the truth was revealed, he said he had lied out of "sheer embarrassment" at his failure to kill himself with a large weapon. He didn't mind being dead, but being embarrassed -- well, that was too much to ask. (This is a Guy Thing.)

If I were going to commit suicide, I would eat myself to death. Two diets at once: a nice way to go.

On other matters ... I guess everyone looked up "Jully Black" on Google after Fardel's recent comments that he knew a real live singing star. Lo and behold, he's telling the truth. She is a singing star.

One of the reports said: "According to a piracy report by IFPI, the international music industry body, there were 2.8 million illegal file swapping requests for her music in the first two weeks of her album's release in 2005." At the same time, Black reportedly "struggled to sell 15,000 copies of the same album."

I guess that reflects on our discussion about fame. If people are downloading her tracks, she has fame -- but she doesn't get the big bucks that people may expect to come with it.

From the book industry, I can testify that lots of people find they have a choice of fame or fortune: they often come separately. For proof, check out the Booker Prize winners whose work is out of print because no one is buying any copies.

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