

Roadblocks to poverty alleviation must be removed

Without mounting aggressive agricultural revolution oriented to increase the agricultural production in a land-scarce country as well as building an infrastructure for industrial base, poverty eradication programme will remain a distant dream. On the other hand, no effort in eliminating poverty or empowerment can yield dividend without literacy.

MD ASADULLAH KHAN

THE country is passing through a series of crises: unbridled corruption, terrorism and killing of political activists and businessmen, sexual harassment and killing of school and college going girls and housewives and so on.

Away from politics, economic expectation has turned into economic disappointment as the price hike of all essential items including food items has shattered the lives of the fixed income groups.

In rural areas there is desperate poverty and it's mainly because of bad politics and uncaring governments. According to 2009 Planning Commission report approximately 20 per cent of the country's 160 million people are living in extreme poverty. Government effort to eradicate poverty is half hearted and lacking in vigour and meticulous planning. Most of the NGOs working in this line seemingly lack of adequate skill, strategy and experience and have started projects with a business motive. And our experience over the years has made it clear that micro-credit has not played any significant role in alleviating poverty and making people self-reliant.

Rhetoric cannot fill the stomach. What the average people does care about is governance, the sort of governance that can make a real difference in their life. The successive governments were unable to provide this. Persons in authority seem to be busy in spreading their party links to grassroots level forgetting or even ignoring the fact that those at the bottom of the layer have failed to eke out a living or manage any type of work to stay afloat. Allow me to cite an example. Just a week before I was riding a rickshaw to cover a small distance from my house and the rickshawpuller I came across immediately after stepping out from my house was a boy, barely 14 years old. Frankly speaking, I had chosen him to have a conversation as to why he had taken up such a grueling job at such a tender age. The boy came from Kurigram. Battered by poverty and deserted by his father after his second marriage, this young boy Nasir along with his sick mother and younger sister moved to Dhaka to eke out a living. The question that looms large in the mind of sensible citizenry as to why Nasir and his likes should be doing such a grueling job at so young an age when he should be in a school learning the Three R's?

Seemingly, the governments since the post liberation days treated education, especially primary education, with contempt and neglect that has made us one of the most illiterate countries of the world. That's the reason why Nasir and his ilk are pulling rickshaws, grinding stones and bricks, picking food residues and plastics from roadside garbage dumps. Perhaps nowhere in the world you will see children of Nasir's age engaged in such grueling jobs to eke out a living.

In light of such a situation the country's hope of achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDG) seems to be a very daunting job. Unhappily, Bangladesh has fallen behind UN Summit declaration in 2003 on MDG on eight strategic aspects and it has prepared a wish list to achieve the target by 2015. The wish list includes bringing down the percentage of people earning less than a dollar per day to half the present number and increasing enrolment of primary education to hundred per cent, among others.

Despite the fact that the report card about enrolment of primary schooling is quite reassuring at least on paper: enrolment has scaled up from 73% to 82% in recent time and literacy rate up to class V climbed to 80%, the actual picture is still very depressing, especially the male / female schooling ratio remains abysmally disproportionate at 64:36.

There is something sickening about Bangladesh going into the 21st century although with ambitious projects to achieve MDG, but also with the largest number of hungry and illiterate people. With child malnutrition still remaining the highest in the global perspective and 35 lakh children in the age group 05-06

not going to school, as an NGO study reveals, Bangladesh will face really a daunting task to achieve the second target of the MDG. Sensible citizenry feel distressed as they see a report published in a Bangla daily in recent time that suggests that the government is going to purchase one VIP car in each district costing about 41 lakh taka to be used by the ministers and high dignitaries as and when they visit these district towns. It is time to think if we can afford such unnecessary luxury.

Without mounting aggressive agricultural revolution oriented to increase the agricultural production in a land-scarce country as well as building an infrastructure for industrial base, poverty eradication programme will remain a distant dream. On the other hand, no effort in eliminating poverty or empowerment can yield dividend without literacy. The visible scenario in the primary schooling is: dilapidated schools, demotivated teachers, irresponsible management and powerless parents -- a vicious cycle where hopelessness breeds further hopelessness.

But it has been agreed by all that literacy is the key to development, population control, healthcare and jobs. Government statistics say that there is an increase in literacy rates but it is so slow and non-visible that the absolute numbers keep on rising every year. In fact, the quality of our rural schools does not inspire much hope. In most schools, the headmaster is not watchful about what the teachers are doing, moreover in many cases the headmaster and teachers lack the knowledge, skill, motivation, personality and zeal to inspire a student towards acquiring a spirit to learn. Coupled with these the ludicrous



How long more to suffer?

content of the text books that are most unappealing and uninspiring has made the primary schooling just messy and futile exercise.

Corruption has invaded the very fabric of our nation with education sector becoming the latest victim. Even when the finance minister in a recent press briefing commented that corruption continues to be the biggest impediment to development vis-à-vis poverty elimination programme, precious little has been done to root out this malaise from different tiers of administration during the last 18 months. Presumably, the PMO (Prime Minister's Office) can't remain oblivious of the reports of scam, corruption and stunning apathy appearing in the press in pursuing development works. Shocking lapses of the agencies concerned and unforgiv-

able bad governance during the past regime now see Bangladesh sliding into a distress zone. With some honourable exceptions, most of the high-ups in the highest seat of the government seem to do little more than push files, cut ribbons and do other meaningless things usually at the behest of their officials.

If there is anything that the bureaucrats in the country fear, it is change. They think -- and they are probably right -- that speeding up governance or bringing in more people-friendly methods will reduce their powers. Changes hence happen only when they are forced through by politicians. But we need changes to alleviate poverty, politicians must make it happen.

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Don't the domestic workers deserve a status?

Simply amending or enacting laws cannot solve the problems of the unfortunate domestic workers. We have to be patient with them. They should be given enough time for learning household work, time for adjustment with the environment. We must treat them as human beings and not as sub-humans just because they are extremely poor and illiterate.

A.B.M.S. ZAHUR

WE have no specific laws to protect domestic workers because they are not included in our Labour Laws. In the past, domestic workers were not treated as labourers because their number was not significant, they were not organised and their age limit would have been equal to manual workers of other trades. Such a situation would have offered the opportunity to traders and industrialists to bargain heavily with the poor parents of the domestic workers. This could have resulted in further hardship to poor (particularly landless) rural people.

It is learnt that there are more than two million domestic workers in Dhaka and Chittagong. (Source: weekly Star of the Daily Star, November 12, pp. 31) Needless to say that it is time for the government to take appropriate step for treating the domestic workers as part of labour force.

It is true that there is a guideline

under preparation. However, it may take time. Even the law enforcement officers have little legal representation to rescue the victims.

Only a few among a very large number of violence towards domestic workers are reported to the law enforcement agencies. Crimes are not being committed by the uneducated. The perpetrators are learned people, ranging from teachers, engineers, physicians to even lawyers. It is perplexing as to how an educated man with decent background can behave like a monster. Some experts observe that there are certain factors, which can transform a person into a masochist. They are:

- Some passionately believe that they are superior to others;
- Some believe strongly in obedience and authority and consider that it is right to punish those who undermine them;
- Some receive psychological support from dividing their world into "us" and "them." Some of them even consider them as "sub-human," and



Bereft of any status.

● A torturer cannot differentiate between punishment and torture.

Teenage girls are often hired and made to work like bonded slaves. They do all the household work for a poor remuneration. They are often sub-

jected to, it is reported, verbal and physical as well as sexual abuse. Most of such workers do not have any family or people to look out for them, which ultimately result in their victimisation.

The investigations by law enforcing

agencies are often incomplete. Some physicians examining the victims submit false medical reports. In fact, without the help of the law enforcing agencies, human rights organisations or any other civil society organization, they cannot really do much.

Several civil society organisations and NGOs have worked together and it is reported that they submitted a memorandum and a code of conduct to the Ministry of Labour and Employment on January 9, 2008. No tangible action appears to have been taken by the said ministry during the last 34 months. It is not even known whether the matter has yet been placed before the concerned minister.

The memorandum states that a contract must be drawn up when a domestic worker is hired. Such contract will outline their duties, salary, hours of rest and relaxation, entitlement for leave, living quarters, education and medical facilities. The workers must be registered with the nearest police station upon employment and records have to be kept about them, their families, their permanent address and employer's name and address.

The said memorandum covered maternity leave, working hours, the government's responsibility to fix wages, to monitor domestic workers, issue legal ramifications for any kind of abuse towards these workers. It also suggests establishment of special monitoring cells where domestic work-

ers can lodge their complaints and a hotline they can call if they need assistance. It further recommends not employing any child below 14 as domestic help.

What appears to be urgent and critical at this stage is acting effectively on the memorandum and code of conduct prepared by the NGOs and civil society organisations after a close examination of the recommendations, keeping in view the socio-economic condition of Bangladesh. Whatever suggestions are found acceptable may be considered for the quick implementation. After all, it does not look well for a pro-people government to ignore suggestions from civil society organisations.

In conclusion, we may say that both the government and the common people should work together to remove this stigma from our social life. Simply amending or enacting laws cannot solve the problems of the unfortunate domestic workers. We have to be patient with them. They should be given enough time for learning household work, time for adjustment for their life style with the urban environment. We must treat them as human beings and not as sub-human beings just because they are extremely poor and illiterate.

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Air guards learn to spot jokes



IN locked-door meetings around the world, airport security staff are secretly being trained to spot jokes. The move is an attempt to fix the problems caused by the current global policy in which anyone who says the words "bomb" or "gun" must be arrested.

Regular readers may recall this columnist causing a stir at airports with sentences such as: "I've only just begun."

A man who made a joke at Boracay airport in the Philippines last week was charged with "Unjust Vexation."

Hey! It's us passengers who are suffering Unjust Vexation. On this page on Monday, we wrote about the UK's Paul Chambers who wasn't even at an airport when he texted a joke to his girlfriend and was arrested. Now thousands of angry people have texted Paul's message to their friends in a protest. Even celebrities are backing him (see Twitter message below from comedy actor Stephen Fry offering to pay his legal charges).

A shocking example of unjust vexation took place in South Africa last week.

A security officer at Bloemfontein Airport asked Charmaine Hugo, 50, what she had in her suitcase.

"Clothes and things," she replied, according to press reports.

They asked the same question repeatedly and she patiently gave the same answer.

When asked for the umpteenth time, she said, "Okay, a machine gun and a bomb." Anyone with the tiniest

sense of humor would have done the same.

She was arrested. Her lawyers and the prosecutors agreed that she was quite clearly not dangerous and had been simply pushed into making a joke by virtue of possessing a curious quality called "humanity." But airport police opposed giving her bail.

This sort of thing makes airport authorities look stupid and evil, which of course they are not (yes, I am waving a little flag that says "possible ironic tone here").

That's why there are discussions afoot about fixing the problem. A source tells me that the Canadian Air Transport Security Authority issued written instructions to airport screeners telling them that they were now allowed to differentiate threats from non-threats using the same words.

The use of the word "hijack" is illegal, the document says.

But if a passenger says, "Hi! Jack!" to

his friend, you don't have to arrest them.

But you should give them a stern warning. The document says, "Inform the person that he or she could commit a serious offence saying such words at an airport."

This is bad news for the UK, where Jack has been the most popular name for years.

Everyone in the UK has changed their name to Jack, including the monarch (now "Queen Jack") I guess the message here is that if you have a friend called Jack, you should always refer to him as "Jill."

Brief Guide To Jokes For Airport Security Staff:

- 1) Jokes often begin with "knock, knock." This is not a threat of assault.
- 2) Jokes often mention light bulb removal. No damage airport facilities are implied.
- 3) Jokes often raise the mystery of why a certain chicken crossed a certain road.

"The chicken is an avian suicide bomber crossing the runway to inflict maximum damage on aircraft" is not among the many answers to this question.

In the meantime, if your name is

Jack and you plan to visit Canada, call yourself Jill. That applies to you too, Queen Jack.

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