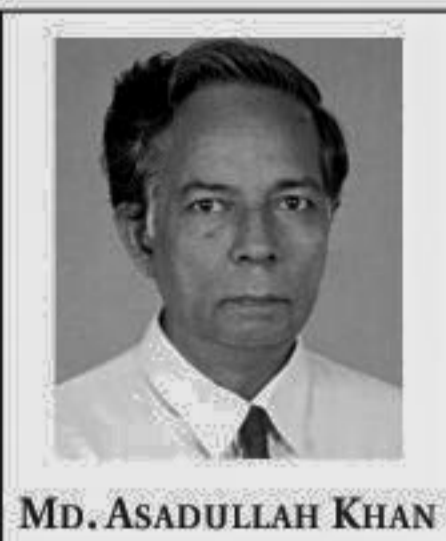


BITTER TRUTH

# Poverty alleviation: A critical review



Md. ASADULLAH KHAN

**B**ANGLADESH remains bogged down in abysmal poverty that thwarts development in all sectors. In rural areas, there is desperate poverty mainly because of bad politics and uncaring governments. Government efforts to eradicate poverty lack vigour and planning. Policy makers indulge more in rhetoric than taking action. Only when such pronouncements are replaced by serious analysis and bold action will the government discover what has gone wrong in the past years. Given that the time at the disposal of the government is very short and the task is colossal, it has to shake off the past, abolish the corrupt practices and begin a process of renewal.

Poverty is not simply disparities of income. It goes well beyond that to include education, health, nutrition, risk, vulnerability, crime, violence, and powerlessness and absence of voice. Reducing poverty, therefore, is about bringing social transformation, which needs a comprehensive framework and multi-dimensional approach.

Most of our political leaders and officials in the administration seem to believe that "if you do nothing, nothing will happen to you." The past years have seen a pathetic lack of leadership and clumsy attempts to plug breaches, sometimes with promises only. True, the world outside Bangladesh has changed so much with economic liberalisation jumpstarting the economies of these countries, but there is a disturbing corollary in this country -- scams, stunning apathy, rapid crumbling of national infrastructure of schools, healthcare, roads, railways and civic amenities, with consequent deterioration of investment climate.

We have wasted 41 valuable years experimenting with system and methodology either in education sector or development dynamics. Whether it's at the top of the administration or at the lower level of bureaucracy, successive governments have been fond of instituting commissions, allowing the problem to fester without looking at the solutions that lay near at hand. Technology has changed, expectations have soared and lifestyles have altered, but our governments over the years have put their thoughts of the big changes on hold.

The PM, while addressing a meeting of the secretaries of various ministries immediately after assuming power, asked the officials to transact business through e-governance but our dilly-dallying about incorporating fibre optics and submarine cable have taken us away from the information superhighway.

The problem has now come to light when the expatriate ministry, in a bid to lighten the financial burden and avoid harassment and hassles of the job seekers in Malaysia, adopted a digital method of registering their names from the

respective upazilas, in a sense, from their homes. Education, especially primary education, the most vital sector in the literacy drive, has not yet created any impact in the developmental index of the country. No effort in eliminating poverty or empowerment can yield dividend without literacy. And we must not feel complacent if our children have learnt the "three Rs."

Learning the "three Rs" does not meet the requirement of any job in the 21st century. On the other hand, the government continues to experiment with introducing unified system of education without making any effort to bring the English medium, Bangla medium and madrassah systems in one stream. This was done without any brainstorming or diagnosing of the ills the prevalent system has generated. Nowhere in the world can we find such a discriminatory, divergent and messy system running parallel with the early stages of schooling, one for the elite class and the other for the poor.

Unsurprisingly, English medium schools and madrassahs have sprung up in the nooks and corners of the country, sidelining the traditional system of schools. If our education system, either at the primary or secondary stage of schooling, has failed to generate the desired fruits, the fault

## The success of poverty alleviation programmes vis-à-vis the development of the country lies in mobilising the domestic resources and formulating pragmatic strategies. To attract global market, the entrepreneurs should go for product diversification

lies somewhere else.

The system of elementary and secondary education in the country started breaking down ever since government grants started dwindling. Today, there is immense chaos with little hope on the horizon. The system has turned into battle of contending dooms -- poor quality teaching, uninspiring textbooks, dilapidated school buildings, high dropout rate, and shrinking academic facilities. The objective of literacy drive must focus on the poorer people to empower them, provide them with security and create opportunities for them. Education brings both opportunities and empowerment.

The most shocking aspect of the economic rejuvenation and structural reforms that have moved at a snail's pace can be attributed to rising inequality in income distribution, which has stood in the way of overall rate of poverty reduction. Moreover, the gains from education, healthcare, and other social indicators needed to be pursued more vigorously in combating poverty. There has to be a radical change or improvement in the distribution of income that the state generates from various sources, because the benefits of growth may not reach the poor in

absence of a proper and equitable distribution of income. Economic growth is meaningless unless it leads to social development. True prosperity is that which benefits the last man in the last row.

The performance of the public sector has remained notoriously bad till now despite so much importance attached to it. Procrastination in implementing projects, inefficiency, corruption, delivery quality and poor services remain beyond rectification. Could we not, after passage of 41 years of liberation of the country, make a comparison between our country's economic record and that of the countries in East Asia? They had done better because they followed wiser economic policies; they placed country above self, party and politics; they improved efficiency and curtailed red tape. At a time when we talk glibly about the strength of democracy and its uninterrupted march in the coming days, there is no greater shame than the fact that nearly half our people in villages live in appalling misery.

What prevented us from making investment in roads, bridges, electricity, cottage industries, expansion of tourism facilities, and the sort of agro-industries that would have created jobs in the farthest corners of Bangladesh? Job scarcity and homelessness due to recurrent natural disasters in the remotest part of south western and northern regions forced these people to move to the pavements and slums of big cities.

In almost every part of the country, rural people possess craftsmanship and artisan skill that would have helped them produce goods and services which the consumers in cities and even foreign countries could buy if the villagers had access to roads, public transport and markets. With cell phones now readily available, roads and electricity are the most essential tools to meet the challenges of the 21st century.

The success of poverty alleviation programmes vis-à-vis the development of the country lies in mobilising the domestic resources and formulating pragmatic strategies. To attract global market, the entrepreneurs should go for product diversification, such as handicrafts, leather goods, artificial flowers, toys, Jamdani sari, quality silk clothes, computer software and other accessories. But the growth of domestic industries and export capability depend on an environment free from political warfare, violence in the streets and factory premises, and social tensions.

People are increasingly getting fed up with the venality of some politicians, economic deterioration, social tension and mounting violence spawned by joblessness and shrinking resources and conflicts on party lines. A major challenge for the administration is how to stem the eroding public confidence in government. What is needed is probity on the part of the leaders running the statecraft accompanied by tough and consistent enforcement of laws.

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# Insiders reveal more confidential rules about Asian movies



Nury VITTACHI

**W**ATCH out. Asian movie screens are about to be overrun by suspiciously good cops. I heard this from someone who wanted only to be identified as Movie Industry Source of Truth, or MIST.

"Asian filmmakers wanting to get their movies into China have to follow secret directives to fill them with positive messages about angelic police officers," he said. This is because the Chinese government has decided that everyone in the movie industry is motivated by a deep urge to instill moviegoers with respect for men in uniform. (One day, someone's going to have to tell them the truth. Volunteers please line up ahead of me.)

Let's continue the movie theme that has been running here for a few days.

MIST revealed that there are actually four versions of the crime thriller *Infernal Affairs*. In the Hong Kong original and the US remake, the bad guy gets away with his crime. In the mainland China one, the bad guy is led off in handcuffs by good cops. Industry people are waiting to see which ending is chosen for the Indian version, currently being shot in Mumbai.

Naked Ambition was a feeble comedy about guys who make a fortune publishing pornographic magazines. The same footage appeared in cinemas in mainland China, re-edited to tell an even feebler tale about how evil men in the vice trade were caught by, you guessed it, good cops.

Asian film expert Paul Fox told me that the lure of getting on to cinema screens in mainland China is causing movie makers to try "to fit into the cookie-cutter standards of mainland regulations."

The bad guy who meets the good girl in *One Night in Mongkok* was from mainland China. But in the version released in China, he was a foreigner. This is because, as everyone knows, there is no crime in China. All 1.3 billion citizens are good cops or something similar.

New films in the region and further afield are now often co-financed by mainland China film commissions or production houses, so only one version is made: the one where all problems are solved by good cops.

Think about recent Asian movies.

The crime movie *Overheard* is about crooked financiers being caught by good cops struggling with temptation. The sci-fi epic *Kungfu Cyborg* is about a robot (who works as a good cop) who finds himself in a love triangle between a man and a woman (both of whom are good cops).

Since nearly all moviemakers have their eyes on China, it's only a matter of time before *Winnie-the-Pooh*, *Ice Age 4* and *Hannah Montana 2* all climax with a group of noble armed cops from Beijing crashing through the doors and arresting everyone.

Terrified that no one will want to see such films, some East Asian moviemakers are having secret meetings to find solutions. One cunning plan is to set more stories in the colonial era, so that all evil can be blamed on Europeans. If these secret rules kill creativity in the East Asian movie industry, rival moviemakers will prosper.

Indian movies remain free of political censorship, I heard from Tokyo-based film fan Chaminda da Silva. "But the trouble is Indian movies are all destroyed by the insertion of six songs, ten fights, and fifteen-minute deathbed speeches," he said.

What a choice. To paraphrase a famous quote: When it comes to Asian movies, the hero of the film really is the poor schmuck in the audience who sits through it.

For more, visit: [www.mrjam.org](http://www.mrjam.org)

# Promote Social Businesses in Bangladesh

SHAZIA OMAR

**O**NE thousand eight hundred extremely poor women in Rangpur are not only lifting themselves out of poverty but also contributing to our national foreign currency earnings through the export of their goods to high-end shops in Canada, Australia, France and England.

These women should be recognised as national heroes! Previously destitute, deserted by their husbands, raising their children on barely one meal a day, with no education, these women had no means to earn a living. The indigo-dyed bed sheets, scarves and shirts they learnt to hand make in a bamboo-mud hut factory on the side of a dirt road in Rangpur now fetch attractive prices in the global market and allow them a chance to live as human beings. This colourful and innovative solution to extreme poverty is one with great potential for replication and expansion as the global market for indigo products is far from saturated.

Rangpur, where people have long faced struggles with seasonal hunger, offers very few job opportunities for illiterate, asset-less, landless women. With these women in mind, CARE set up a social business called NCVI -- Nijera Cottage and Village Industries (NCVI). NCVI trained these women to make indigo dyes and also gave them shareholder status in the company. The practice of transferring ownership to workers is one that needs to be promoted in Bangladesh, where cheap labour is often exploited. How long can a nation prosper on the bleeding hearts of its poorest women? If we are to eradicate extreme poverty, equitable practices must be promoted. NCVI is a good example of a promising social business.

However, there are challenges within this model. The women entrepreneurs who own NCVI lack the manage-

rial skills and marketing capacity to run their business alone. CARE, now under the funding umbrella of shiree, manages NCVI. shiree, also known as The Economic Empowerment of the Poorest, is a £65 million partnership between the governments of UK and Bangladesh, which aims to reduce extreme poverty in Bangladesh.

Women consumers around the world appreciate the eco-friendly, pro-poor products and are willing to pay high prices that make this production worthwhile despite the shipping costs involved, if the design is extraordinary. Continuous product development is necessary to hold on to market demand. Here again, NCVI women require extra support. They lack the exposure necessary to invent designs that appeal to European tastes.

Apart from business, our heroes face a plethora of other challenges. A few months ago, I led a group of seven Members of Parliament to Rangpur and Nilphamari to visit communities of extremely poor women, to explore how national policies may be able to better support them. Extremely poor women, such as Kajali, an NCVI entrepreneur, were keen to avail the opportunity to demand support from their parliamentarians.

Kajali's husband left her some years ago to search for employment in Dhaka. She now lives with her elderly mother and disabled son. Kajali said: "We need power to run the fans in our factory. We need social safety net coverage for the elderly and the disabled. We need access to free and good quality health care. The days I am ill, we have no money to eat, and one minor illness can wipe out all my savings."

The MPs on the trip were impressed by the hard work of the NCVI women and themselves purchased several items to carry home as a reminder of their

responsibility to these women. (Albeit, at a much haggard price, a fifth of what it was truly worth!)

We wait to see whether or not the MPs actually ask the government to institute policy or budgetary changes to benefit these women. We wait to see whether or not the MPs learnt from NCVI's success so that they promote similar establishments in their constituencies. We wait to see whether or not the MPs make the most of their positions of power to serve their people.

It is entirely the responsibility of the government to establish proper infrastructure and power to encourage business growth in the northwest. Without adequate incentives and an enabling environment, these regions will remain depressed. There will continue to be a dearth of jobs for the growing population and exacerbated conditions of poverty and urban migration.

Even if the government shows signs of administering strategic job-creating changes in the north, industrial expansion will take time. In the interim, it is possible to facilitate alternative income generating opportunities, such as cottage industries like NCVI.

Distributing khas land or unused sandbars to the poorest to grow crops and earn a livelihood can help. Projects such as Practical Action Bangladesh have demonstrated great success in helping extremely poor people climb out of poverty through sandbar cropping, a simple technology that makes use of dry riverbeds during the winter.

Extremely poor women have the strength and determination to earn their own living but we need to provide them with a means to do so. Donors, NGOs, the government and the private sector, all have a role to play.

Last year, NCVI exported \$70,000 worth of products. Each woman working there earns between Tk.1,800-

6,000 per month. Setting up the factory cost approximately Tk.140,000 lacs, apart from the space which belongs to NCVI and was purchased with support from donors. Can we expand the potential of this home-grown solution to poverty?

Perhaps other donors, non-resident Bangladeshis or the Export Promotion Bureau could help NCVI find new buyers and expand its market.

NCVI is a cottage industry owned by the beneficiaries, women who were previously extremely poor, but they are made to pay income tax since they are now "company owners." There are no laws or regulations that govern social enterprises, though other countries such as the UK and USA have separate laws, thus a new policy is needed. Who will lobby for such policies?

Professor Yunus, Rehman Sobhan and other prominent thinkers in our country have been espousing the value of social business models where workers are also shareholders. In such a model, company owners can choose what percent of their profits they want to share. It need not be a huge percentage. The sharing in itself would represent a shift in mindset towards a space more progressive and pro-poor. Profit sharing is the only just way to go about in large businesses such as those of RMG companies.

The governor of Bangladesh Bank speaks of his love for the people. We hope he will use his current influence to support the institution of pro-poor policies, quickly. We hope other NGOs searching for solutions will learn from leaders such as CARE and PAB. We hope private sector companies or wealthy individuals looking to help our nation will step up and replicate job-creating initiatives such as NCVI. We hope our heroes will not be left out on their own without the support they deserve from those who are able to give it.

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