

No skills to pay the bills

SHAVEENA ANAM

ZOHORA has always lived in extreme poverty and her life has been concocted by its standard ingredients; growing up in a house that couldn't afford to feed or educate her, marriage at an age too young, motherhood by 16, an abusive day labourer husband who eventually abandoned her, hard labour for low wages, hunger, sickness, depression and stress. But Zohora never gave up.

She laboured through the strenuous jobs, she quietly listened to the jeers of other villagers who degraded her for working in the field or in people's homes, she ate one meal a day so her children could eat two, she scrimped and saved and sacrificed to put her children through school.

Just last year, her son finished his SSC exams and Zohora thought that his education would allow him to find a more lucrative job. He had done exceptionally well in mathematics ... a bookkeeper for a shop perhaps? But their remote village in the North has no real job opportunities. He doesn't possess skills on any particular trade and they had no extra money for him to travel, live and work in a new city.

After months of looking, he was left with no choice but to join his mother doing daily agricultural labour for Tk 150 a day; low wages, constant hunger and no need for mathematics. Zohora's years of effort and hope were in vain, her son's small income does not do much to change their situation and when harvest season is over he will once again be bekar. Zohora still has to work in the fields and in people's homes for meagre amounts of money and she looks at her daughter Nimmi who she is struggling to keep in school in class 6, wondering whether the effort and money to educate her daughter is really worth it if she will eventually just have

to marry her off.

Zohora's pains can be echoed by parents all over Bangladesh, who struggle to put their children through school but end up disappointed because they were unable to find suitable employment afterwards. I would like to be able to tell Zohora to not give up on Nimmi; that putting her through school will really open the doors to newer, more secure opportunities, that she will be able to attain skills and gainful employment so that she could take care of herself and her family. But I cannot confidently do so.

Zohora's family and 25 million others like them have had to live in extreme poverty because they have been systematically excluded from the necessary information and opportunities; their inability to afford proper education and food compounded by their remoteness has made it difficult for them to attain good education, skills training facilities and earn proper incomes. Even if Nimmi stays in school, the paths out of poverty remain dotted with potholes and ditches into which she could fall and stay stuck.

The staggering population of the country is usually looked at as a weakness. Attempts at tackling any sort of problem seem never ending because of the sheer number of people affected by them. But Bangladesh's growing population could be the country's greatest strength if given the right opportunities. With the economy growing steadily at 6%, and the emergence of new innovations, companies, investments and ideas; there is a potential to create millions of jobs for the extreme poor. However, this does not seem to be happening.

According to recent statistics Bangladesh's population is estimated to be 171.4 million (!) and about 40% of that is underemployed. Every year, large numbers of youths enter

the working age, but due to deficiencies in skills and education they are unable to earn proper incomes. What is needed is a joint concerted effort by the government, NGOs and the private sector to ensure quality education, development of vocational skills and employment that is inclusive of everyone regardless of class or address.

There are already several skills development projects in place that have been significant to the lives of many. But they (as do most development initiatives) tend to exclude the extreme poor. They have literacy standards which most extreme poor are unable to meet, they are usually located in urban centres where the rural extreme poor usually cannot afford to travel to, and subsequent job opportunities are also typically in the big cities where the extreme poor have severe trouble meeting general living costs. And of course, other than the logistical obstacles in place, there is a lack of motivation of the extreme poor.

The right elements are in place. We have millions of extreme poor people in need of jobs and skills are who willing to learn and work, we have many companies that can hire thousands of skilled workers per month and we have a government that has pledged to eradicate extreme poverty by 2021. We need to address the gaps and connect the dots.

In order to address the situation as it stands, there have to be collective efforts in developing skills training programmes that are also inclusive of the extreme poor. Accordingly, initiatives to train them need to include monthly stipends, support for accommodation and some lenience on education standards.

However, what we really need is a restructuring of things as they stand. We cannot develop if we do not decentralise. We are intimidated by underemployment and rural to

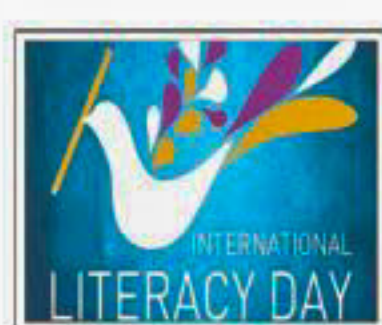
urban migration and in turn urban poverty; these issues can be mitigated if active steps are taken to decentralise skills and job opportunities.

The pull factor of jobs in cities has created a glaring need for low cost housing for the urban poor but politicians and industrialists will often argue against it saying it will attract more people. But, as we already know, the jobless, the hungry and the sick are going to migrate to cities anyway and then be forced to live in terrible living conditions in slums. Urban poverty and its connected issues can be significantly reduced if people are able to attend skills training programmes and consequent jobs if people can travel easily to them from their homes. This in turn would address high turnover rates and the demand for social housing, and reduce losses for both industries and workers.

We need patient planning for long term good rather than short term profit. And this is something that everyone from the industry top cats to the extreme poor need to be more aware of -- compromising on short term gains for long term solutions. Industries have to look at skills development not as a selfless act of charity but as an obvious solution towards long term good.

The world is watching us fall behind, bickering over non-sense and not concentrating our efforts on the right things. We need to show them we can get our priorities straight, that we don't want the poor in our country to just barely survive, we want them to thrive. Call me idealistic but it can happen; all we need is little bit of compromise from all parties along with some common sense and compassion.

Shaveena Anam is an Advocacy Analyst at shiree. E-mail: shaveena@shiree.org



Literacy in Bangladesh: Reading between the lines

SARAH COOKE

WHAT happens when someone is not able to read and write? They are not reading this newspaper for sure, but what else are they not doing? They are not running a business, nor helping children with their studies. The recently published 2011 Bangladesh National Literacy Assessment Survey reported that 38% of Bangladeshi people cannot read or write, over one in three, despite much welcome progress.

Yet the potential of such people to run a business, contribute to a company's success or nurture and teach children is as good as any of us reading this article, if they are offered the opportunity to learn. Consider the story of Fatima, a 19-year-old girl from Gazipur. Fatima was married at 13, was asked to stop going to school and at 16 gave birth to a boy. Her marriage did not last. After enrolling at a Brac Adolescent Development Club, however, she has not only brushed up how to read, write and count but also learnt how to run a small business. With a small loan she is now planning to open a beauty salon for women in her slum.

UK aid supports a range of activities in Bangladesh, providing literacy, numeracy and other life skills to children and young people as part of the primary education development programme and in partnership with Brac and other organisations.

Since 2010 Bangladesh has enrolled over three million children in primary schools through the primary education programme. This means that about 98% of school-age children attend school -- boys and girls. The programme also provides over 100 million copies of textbooks to primary schools. Right now a new set of teacher training books is under trial, which experts believe will help teachers improve the quality of classroom teaching. Bangladesh deserves credit for and should celebrate these successes. The UK is proud to be playing its part.

Now, the 38% figure I mentioned at the outset needs further analysis. As much as it tells a story, it also hides one. There is a stark variation in literacy rates between men and women, between rural and urban areas, and regionally. This needs immediate attention. In rural areas the gap between men's and women's literacy can be as much as 12 percentage points. Disparities between rural and urban areas are even greater.

The 2010 National Education Policy clearly states Bangladesh's intention to provide all citizens with a quality

education. The policy also aims to reduce regional and gender based disparities in education and has a section on women's education. Bangladesh, like other modern countries, wants to educate all women, to unleash their potential so that they can become confident citizens contributing to social and economic development. The draft Education Act, which is under consultation, asks for further investment in education in order to fulfil Bangladesh's constitutional obligation to create a nation free of illiteracy.

Successive Bangladesh governments have rightly prioritised education. The stipend programme for example, especially the one for girls at secondary and higher levels, has contributed hugely to encouraging girls to start and continue education -- a similar instrument might provide a way to further reduce regional and gender disparities. Of course actual education expenditure in Bangladesh has increased from Tk.120 billion in 2006 to Tk.192 billion in 2012. It is important that this continues, both domestically and to keep up with international competitors. Bangladesh spends 2.3% of GDP on education against an international average of 3.5% of GDP.

A combination of policy, donor funding, efficient aid instruments and NGO-led innovations have contributed to some good results in Bangladesh. I mentioned Brac earlier. Pre-primary education is another such example of NGO innovation in Bangladesh delivered on a larger scale through the government-led primary education development programme. The Underprivileged Children's Education Programme (UCEP), also supported by UK aid, provides essential vocational skills and employment services to young people in urban slums. In urban slums and remote areas like the chars of the Jamuna and haor areas of Sunamganj, NGOs provide much needed support to schools, teachers and communities, in addition to the services provided by the government. The government can help Bangladesh's vibrant civil society and NGOs as they try to reach children who miss out on official schooling.

Over the last two decades the UK government has been a committed partner in Bangladesh's journey towards a literate and just society. We will continue to support the ambition, and constitutional obligation, to bring the opportunity of education to every Bangladeshi.

The writer is Country Representative for DFID Bangladesh.

War drums beating again?

SHIFTING IMAGES



MILIA ALI

WHEN I was a child my grandmother once told me a story about the ancient drum-beating ritual performed by tribes or nations to announce a war. In my impressionable mind, I imagined the sound of the drums to be a repetitive, menacing thump -- quite unlike the sweet "bol" of the tabla or the intoxicating rhythm of the "dhol"! Over the past few days I have been hearing the disturbing sound of these "war drums" in my head. And, like many people around the globe, I, too, am bracing myself for another bloody conflict that might escalate into a full scale war in the middle-east or the world.

Last week, US Secretary of State, John Kerry, fired the first shot by announcing that there was conclusive evidence that Syria's Assad regime had used sarin gas in a chemical weapon attack against innocent civilians. Consequently, the proponents of war are making the case for "limited" US military strikes in Syria, which they believe will cripple Assad's powerful army. Personally, I am for zero tolerance when it comes to the use of chemical weapons. There is also no doubt in my mind that the Syrian government and Assad should be held accountable for their heinous and unacceptable actions (if indeed the evidence shows that they are responsible). The question is whether military action will yield a solution to the broader Syrian problem.

We all know that despite the precision of modern day missiles, rockets and bombs, air strikes will cause considerable civilian casualties, euphemistically described as "collateral damage." That notwithstanding, a greater concern is whether limited "surgical strikes" would deter Assad and bring him to the peace table. There are too many unknowns and imponderables in the Syrian quagmire. I shudder to think of the likelihood of a civil war escalating into a global conflict. Fortunately, the Rubicon has not yet been crossed and the option for looking at "other alternatives" for resolving the Syrian crisis is still open.

Readers might misinterpret my hesitancy toward a military strike as isolationism, or even appeasement. They might legitimately ask: "What IS the other alternative?" There are no definitive answers but analysts and peace activists are convinced that all avenues for negotiating peace between the rebels and the Syrian government have not been explored. The preponderant view in Europe, Asia and

probably in the US is that efforts be continued to seek a sustainable ceasefire and a political transition to a popularly supported government. Besides, it was apparent at the recent G-20 Summit at St. Petersburg that worldwide consensus for a collaborative peace effort would be easier to obtain than for unilateral US air strikes.

As a matter of fact, there is a group inside Syria that has been actively propagating a non-violent, pro-democracy struggle. The movement is supported by a substantive segment of the population. Since the western powers have not bolstered this movement, it has been somewhat marginalised. US military intervention at this stage would further demoralise and disempower the nonviolent resistance and could end up generating anti-American sentiments in the population.

For the hawks who are making the case for a "just war," it may be helpful to point out that history is replete with examples of supposedly "just" military actions that have ended in chaos, instability, and suffering. Since the example of the Iraq war has been cited too often it might be illuminating to refer to the ancient Hindu epic "Mahabharata." When the warrior Arjuna refused to fight his kinsmen, Lord Krishna told him that it was his "dharma" (duty) to take arms against evil doers, whoever they may be. Arjuna and his brothers were victorious, but the battle resulted in complex human conflicts. Legend claims that the end of the Mahabharata war marked the beginning of the Kalyug (dark ages) when mankind spearheaded toward the dissolution of morality and virtue!

In Islamic history, the battle of Karbala is often alluded to as a just war against Yazid, who had forcefully usurped the Caliphate that rightfully belonged to Prophet Mohammad's (pbuh) grandson, Hussain. Yazid invited Hussain to Kufa for negotiating peace. When Hussain reached Karbala, at the outskirts of Kufa, he and his handful of men were brutally massacred by Yazid's army. The treacherous tactics used by Yazid generated anger and protests and initiated the Shiite movement which broke away from mainstream Islam asserting that the prophet's descendants had been wrongfully deprived of the Caliphate. Thus, Karbala became the reference point of the greatest sectarian rift among Muslims -- dividing them into two sects: Shias and Sunnis.

The drums are beating once again to announce another seemingly "just war." But there is an occasional break in the rhythmic monotony, signaling impending peril. "Stop. Heed the lessons of history!" the drums seem to be saying. But is anyone listening to the feeble voice of reason?

The writer is a renowned Rabindra Sangeet exponent and a former employee of the World Bank. E-mail: shiftingimages@gmail.com

AXYDLBAAXR is LONGFELLOW

One letter stands for another. In this sample, A is used for the three L's, X for the two O's, etc. Single letters, apostrophes, the length and formation of the words are all hints. Each day the code letters are different.

8-12 CRYPTOQUOTE

AUT BYZLA LYFK IB PMASZYAQ
YL AUT XYLHIRTZQ AUMA
AUT RIOSPT WKIN MOLI
ASZKL AI AUT OTBA
— DTZZQ P. JZYFUA

By THOMAS JOSEPH

- | | |
|---------------------------|---------------------|
| ACROSS | DOWN |
| 1 Modify | 1 Inquires |
| 6 Badminton or baseball | 2 Single |
| 11 In a way, in slang | 3 Loyal |
| 12 Forbidden | 4 Catchall |
| 13 Get serious about work | 5 Gather, as wealth |
| 15 Take in | 6 Platter |
| 16 Lobe | 7 Spot |
| 17 Twisty turn | 8 Clarinet |
| 18 Bengal beast | 9 Bleachers |
| 20 Poultry buy | 10 A lot |
| 23 Caravan stop | 14 Fall behind |
| 27 TV's | 18 Poisonous |
| Trebek | 19 Swift |
| 28 Somewhat, in music | 20 Lynx or lion |
| 29 Lukewarm | 21 Saloon supply |
| 31 Blended | |
| 32 Like Superman | |
| 34 Feeling down | |
| 37 Scoundrel | |
| 38 Garden tool | |
| 41 Reagan-omics theory | |
| 44 Be in accord | |
| 45 Held power | |
| 46 Boarded, as a train | |
| 47 Canary chow | |

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S								O	A	P	Y
S	T	R	A	W	S	T	I	P			
I	T	H	I	N	K	P	O	S			
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A	G	I	L	E	I	N	F	E			
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- Yesterday's answer
- | | |
|----------------------------|-------------------|
| 22 Energy | 35 Ben |
| 24 Boston team, familiarly | Affleck film |
| 25 Glacier | 36 Tabloid fodder |
| 26 Lawn makeup | 38 Golf target |
| 30 Cloud over | 39 Was in debt |
| 31 Gauges | 40 Concludes |
| 33 Buddy | 42 Corp. bigwig |
| 34 Without a date | 43 Word on a bill |

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10		
11							12				
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20	21	22					23	24	25	26	
27							28				
29							30				
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41							42				
44							45				
46							47				

QUOTABLE Quotes

"Anger is an acid that can do more harm to the vessel in which it is stored than to anything on which it is poured."

Mark Twain

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School of Engineering & Computer Science
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 Dhaka-1229. Tel: 880-2-840 1645-52, 840 2065-76
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HENRY by Don Trachte

BEETLE BAILY by Mort Walker