

Extreme poverty: Special measures or solved by growth?



GEOF WOOD

In material development terms Bangladesh has changed a lot, and has made much progress since I first arrived just over 44 years ago. It has been a remarkable story of institutional innovation, significant globally as well as for millions of poor people in the country. The indicators of this progress are well known and herald a transition into middle income country status. Yet there remains significant, enduring poverty in the country, including extreme poverty. If we consider a broader category of vulnerability and insecurity, then well over half of the population could easily become poor again, given the risks faced by the country. There are two stand out observations from this scenario: first, that arrival at middle income status is being accompanied by increasing inequalities and frustrated aspirations; second, that poverty reduction so far is no guide to the difficulty of tackling remaining poverty, especially extreme poverty.

Two new books, launched in Dhaka on October 24, bring renewed attention to this difficulty. UPL has just published *Aiding Resilience among the Extreme Poor in Bangladesh*, edited by myself and colleagues from University of Bath, UK and BIDS. And in 2017, Practical Action Publishing produced *Extreme Poverty, Growth and Inequality in Bangladesh* again edited from Bath, BIDS and the Planning Commission.

The UPL book, based on original studies and careful fieldwork, starts from a shared premise that extreme poverty is significantly different from being moderately poor in the society, especially in terms of social isolation and exclusion from supportive networks of kin and social capital within communities, often reinforced by the prominence of female managed extreme poor households in a patriarchal society. It also challenges the "graduation" perspective (often only temporary) in favour of resilience goals when considering poverty reduction, and suggests that asset transfer approaches are unlikely to be effective on their own and need to be accompanied by social protection measures on the principle that increasing people's security encourages productive risk taking. But the challenge is how to mobilise and improve the capabilities of an inherently dispersed and

diverse category of needy people? While poverty is typically explained in terms of class inequalities and exploitative relations, extreme poverty is more idiosyncratically connected to the detailed circumstances of a household and its livelihoods trajectory. And any gains to those households arising from public policy initiatives need to be protected and sustained—this is the resilience question, pursued in the book through themes such as: targeting and threshold analysis; the challenge of protecting gains, especially using examples of land transfers; social protection, food insecurity and impact of cash transfers on the psychology of security and risk taking; implications for resilience of ill-health and disability; gender analysis of interventions and

response to growth. "Leave no-one behind" is essentially a Pareto optimum or "trickle down" perspective, beloved by the neo-liberal west, which suggests that poverty eradication can be painless for the comfortable classes as it is solved by growth. "Sharing the well", by contrast, acknowledges the problem of growth with inequality and again argues that a deliberate political settlement is required in which the proceeds of growth are shared more fairly by redistributing the rewards to labour and citizenship. The book concludes by questioning that growth can absorb the growing labour force into those forms of employment which can adequately support secure livelihoods, and thus considers basic and citizens' income approaches, and their

living. This capability requires the anticipatory pre-empting of risk or hazards through preparation, as well as having a capacity to respond to shocks. Both aspects of resilience require successful relationships which are so essential to the socially isolated extreme poor.

If such relationships cannot be established, the pursuit of resilient livelihoods among the extreme poor becomes yet another unethical self-help fad, through placing the sole responsibility for action on the shoulders of the poor alone who are least able to bear it. A step beyond "business as usual" is thus required. Given that our data also indicate higher elements of idiosyncrasy in the explanation of being extreme poor, a three tier, interconnected policy levers framework is proposed to aid

And, as an innovation, micro-level engagement with idiosyncratic problems of families, almost like "social work" intervention, engaging with abnormal dependency ratios, learning difficulties, other disabilities, morbidity and other chronic weaknesses, desertion.

But we should accept two problems. First, if all meso level interventions are refracted through the meta level prism of inequality, rent-seeking preferentialism, clientelism, gender and ethnic discrimination, backed up by violence, then in a sense there is huge wastage of effort and resource. Secondly, it has been surprising that the long acceptance of multi-dimensional poverty has not translated into multi-dimensional policy and practice as it affects poor people living in poor conditions. Poor people whose livelihoods depend upon informal support from kin, neighbours and patrons, find it almost impossible to connect to the remote, compartmentalised state, purportedly offering services and help. There is a social and cultural disconnect. To fit with this cognitive experience of dependency and restricted agency, they need an accountable, multi-sectoral, one-stop shop to replace their unaccountable informal patrons.

Governments therefore have to be persuaded that national level compartmentalised ministries exist to mobilise the expertise and resources to back up a structure of implementation on the ground, (i.e. "one stop shops" staffed by "poverty social workers"), which fits more accurately with the cognitive experience of poor citizens. In this way, the plea is for governments to organise themselves in ways which imitate the emic lives of the poor.

This third, micro-level, of engagement burrows down to much more personalised information about a family, entailing customised support. A powerful lesson from our data is that no two extreme poor families are alike in their trajectories, their composition and the challenges which they face. Thus extreme poor families cannot easily be reached through generic policy and practice. Insecure households require much more individualised support through the blend of assets transfers, social protection and overcoming social isolation. With its tradition of development innovation, can Bangladesh, as it approaches middle income status, again be a pioneer by adopting such a reform to its practices?

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SOURCE: TAISGADEALARA.COM

women's asset preferences; and a strategic assessment of community level and state interventions. Overall there is a prevailing argument that as Bangladesh approaches middle income status, there is need for an open debate about what kind of welfare regime is required to engage successfully with poverty, vulnerability and marginalisation. Such a debate represents the search for a new political settlement about the rights and duties between the haves and have-nots.

The second book comprises 10 strategic essays with authors from Bangladesh and the UK. It juxtaposes the "leave no-one behind" approach with a more re-distributive ambition, encapsulated in the phrase: "sharing the well", in order to improve poverty elasticity as a

affordability in Bangladesh. To reach these conclusions, the book examines: extreme poverty trends, feminisation of poverty, financial exclusion, regional disparities, agricultural transformations and employment, urbanisation and new challenges for reforming the social security system.

Ongoing interrogation of the data draws attention to a wider set of actors beyond individuals and households, such as community level powerholders, other neighbours, local and remoter markets, and the state, who in combination can contribute to a household's resilience. This allows us to interpret resilience as not just about recovery to the status quo ante, but about sustained, more secure coping at an enhanced standard of

resilience among the extreme poor, and which engages with both systemic and idiosyncratic poverty in a blended approach:

- Addressing the strategic, meta context (such as climate change, prices of staple commodities, law and order offering security, rights of women and children, anti-discrimination of minorities, governance of state practices and market behaviour, tax compliance);
- Further development of meso level direct levers to support agency affected by systemic relations (asset transfers, social protection/safety nets, employment generation, education, microfinance, legally owned property, access to health services, protection of gains);

CELEBRATING SHER-E-BANGLA'S 145TH BIRTH ANNIVERSARY

Sher-e-Bangla: A natural leader

SYED ASHRAF ALI

DR TG Percival Spear of Cambridge University divided leadership into five types: (1) natural, (2) charismatic, (3) rational, (4) of consensus, and (5) by force. According to him, the natural leader is selfless; he is, in fact, not interested in leadership. He exerts himself to the best of his ability and with all the sincerity and devotion under the sun without any expectation of reward. Because of his sincerity, he is able to establish a personal bond with his followers. Generally, the cause throws up such a leader—he takes to it like a duck to water.

Dr Spear cites Napoleon Bonaparte as an outstanding example of a natural leader; the imprint on the sands of time of this "Child of Destiny" can never be erased. Sher-e-Bangla AK Fazlul Huq, the indomitable champion of truth and justice, was also an out-and-out natural leader. It is true that he was not fated like Napoleon to eat his heart out in exile, or to bury himself during the closing years of his life in bitter memories of a stirring past. In a sense, Napoleon had been fortunate in his death; he had been spared the torment of brooding over the ruins of his ambition. But Sher-e-Bangla did not fade away gradually. He died, as was proper, in the fullness of his glory. Like Napoleon, he was also a patriot, an idealist, a man of action, a dreamer of dreams.

A review of his career reads like a romance: it seems unbelievable that a man so daring, so adventurous, so bold, so reckless of consequences, and yet so intensely practical, should have arisen in this benighted land of ours. Yet, a study of his life will show that "the elements" were: "So mixed in him that Nature might stand up / And say to the world: This was a man!"

Like a genuine natural leader, he had always been wedded to his ideals and, in his ardent desire to realise them, he unhesitatingly lighted upon truths that "perish never." He never bothered about creating any effect. He took up a cause it came naturally to him, and always worked for it with genuine sincerity and indomitable courage, befitting a natural leader of the first order. His towering frame overshadowed everyone and everything around him. But more, much more, than his physical charisma was the vision and the deep humanity that came through and left an indelible impression. A man with amazing foresight, he had

the courage and conviction to demand a separate Bengali Army in British India. In a letter addressed to Sir John Herbert, the Governor of Bengal, on August 2, 1942, he wrote: "I want you to consent to the formation of a Bengali Army of a hundred thousand young Bengalis consisting of Hindu and Muslim youths on a fifty-fifty basis. There is an 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."

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

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."

What is more, he did not even hesitate to rebuke the journalists of his time for their passive role and cowardice. Reminding them of great dare-devil journalists like Maulana Mohammad Ali Jauhar, Motilal Ghosh, and Surendra Nath Banerjee, he declared on the floor of the Bengal Legislative Assembly on February 27, 1944: "They were lions in their own days and we have the

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 an unparalleled ability to gather up complexity and transmute it to simplicity, also endeared him to the masses.

When Dr Nalini Ranjan Sircar, himself a renowned parliamentarian, urged the chief minister to change the angle of vision regarding a particularly ticklish issue, Sher-e-Bangla promptly replied that it was not his angle of vision but that of the honourable member which needed a change. With his inimitable sense of humour and superb command of mathematics, he retorted: "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 in all difficult situations—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 awfully irritated by the peculiar gestures and caricature of a hostile member. The member was urging the chief minister 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.

Sher-e-Bangla 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 Sher-e-Bangla. The member concerned demanded immediate apology and withdrawal of the objectionable and unparliamentary remark of the chief minister. But, cool as a cucumber as he always was, our beloved hero with his brilliant parliamentary skill 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.



Sher-e-Bangla AK Fazlul Huq (1873-1962)

government's policy on Midnapore Affairs. Sir John Herbert did not like the statement and, in a letter written to Sher-e-Bangla on February 15, 1943, he 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 a decision of the government."

The letter very naturally angered Sher-e-Bangla and, in a befitting reply sent on February 16, the Tiger of Bengal roared: "Dear Sir John...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 it was not only his indefatigable

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 homes 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 only 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 ever had the guts to scold journalists in such a forceful language.

But it was not only his indefatigable

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS	buckets	5 Assignments
1 Brain part	29 S&L offering	6 Mimic
5 Insect organ	30 Doorways	7 Dictionary writer
9 "The Tempest"	32 Gator or gecko	8 Like fabric in a
sprite	34 Architect I.M.	quilting kit
11 Met work	35 Hawke ofilm	10 Map key
13 Bridge	36 Broadway	12 Fire product
suspender	worker	17 Assn.
14 Species	38 Arab leader	19 Pairs
divisions	39 Tick off	22 Lacking slack
15 Wing	40 Singer Guthrie	24 Shredded
16 Made billions	41 Small songbird	25 Electrician's
18 Fast pitches		concern
20 Stage prompt		26 Singer Franklin
21 Juvenile	1 Oxford features	27 Campaign pro
22 Nursery group	2 How some drugs	28 Coat part
23 Jupiter or Mars	are taken	30 Commie backer
24 Luggage add-on	3 Academic press	31 Alarm sound
25 Much of history	worker	33 Follow
27 Comes down in	4 Snaky fish	37 Make darts, say



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YESTERDAY'S ANSWER

C	A	D	S	H	O	S	T	S
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