**The dream of ending poverty**

BY R A F I A Z A K A R I A 2021-03-03

ONE short decade ago, I happened to read an article about Westerners arriving in China to adopt abandoned baby girls. Written by a woman who had adopted a baby girl from China, the article described the story of how her daughter had been found.

It had all started early one morning in spring when a man walking in a public garden thought he heard a baby crying. Indeed, not very far from him stood a park bench and on the bench was a worn wicker basket. The man went closer to investigate and much to his surprise found a crying infant in the basket. He immediately took the basket and broughtit to an orphanage.

The orphanage staff lifted the baby out of the basket to change her soiled clothes. When they did so, a small sweet potato fell out from the folds of the fabric.

Upon hearing the story, the woman who was adopting the baby expressed surprise. Why would a sweet potato be wrapped up with a baby? It was then that the orphanage staff told her that the sweet potato was likely the most valuable item the baby`s mother, presumably a village woman, had possessed. Not able to keep the baby because of her poverty, she had nevertheless sent it off with the most precious item she had. Such items, they told her, were often found with the abandoned babies they tended in the orphanage.

If the Chinese state is to be believed, such a situation is unlikely to ever happen again. Last week, the People`s Republic of China marked the end of extreme poverty in the country. According to the materials released by the Chinese state, 100 million people had now been lif ted out of extreme poverty. This means that no one in China now lives under $1.69 a day.

The People`s Daily, the Communist Party`s official newspaper, ran a three-page spread celebrating Xi Jinping`s leadership for having reached the milestone a month before the deadline to achieve it. A dynamic leader had delivered on the promise of taking China into the new era. `The problem of absolute poverty that has plagued us for thousands of years has come to an end` announced thetriumphant People`s Daily. For his part, Xi Jinping wants his nation to unite around the core and `realise the Chinese dream of the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation`.

There are unanswered questions, however.

According to the Washington Post, China has not released the standards or metrics it is using to define `extreme poverty`. In the past, the Chinese have used metrics that vary from the ones used by the World Bank. Nor is there much clarity as to how China will sustain its feat of poverty eradication in a year when the World Bank has forecastthat in 2021, 150 million more people could fall into abject poverty worldwide owing to the Covid19 pandemic.

Then there are questions about how China has managed to reduce the number of poor. One report by a Western journalist profiled a village in Gansu province, which happens to border Xinjiang province. There, hundreds of people were moved from where their village was to another location where they were housed in newly constructed high-rises with water and electricity. These villagers worried about how they would pay for these new lodgings in the future.

Others were given residency documents that showed them to be residents of neighbouring Xinjiang where they were told there were more resources and that they should now go there. In reality of course, the land had belonged to the ethnic Uighurs, many of whom remain stuck in forced labour camps as part of a drive against Chinese Muslims. This gives the impression that one wayto make people less poor is to retain thousands in forced labour camps so that all of their assets become available to all those who remain free.

The leaders of the People`s Republic of China want very much for 2021, which marks the centenary year of the founding of the Chinese Communist Party, to be their particular moment: a moment when China stands tall and equal with the world`s superpowers. It`s a beguiling dream this; and there are many in China who certainly seem to believe that announcing a victory actually means one in line with the advice often given to job applicants to `dress for the job you want not the one you have`. The state is thus dressing like the superpower that it wants to be.

However, dreams can be dangerous and blind us to the reality of the moment. That reality is problematic; the demographics indicate that the birthrate in China is slowing down, meaning that fewer people are available to work which directly endangers growth (The Chinese economy is still expected to grow by eight per cent).

Most problematic is that news of the crushing oppression of Uighur Muslims in Xinjiang is now spreading, a f act that the United States will surely use as a point of leverage. Whether or not the Chinese state sees these realities or admits to them, Pakistan which has become wholly dependent on its funding and support in so many industries should appraise them with clear-eyed acuity.

Will China be able to retain its position globally as corporations deterred by rising wages in China move to even cheaper locales like Africa and Mexico? Will the slowed growth rate still leave the Chinese with large amounts of capital in the big projects the state has set into motion regionally? The question for Pakistan thus is not whether the Chinese have achieved their cherished dream but if the Chinese dream is too big, too costly and too risky ... perhaps even for China itself.  The writer is an attorney teaching constitutional law and political philosophy.

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