

Towards a pro-poor health system in Bangladesh

The overall health service consumption in Bangladesh is low compared to other developing countries. Also, the number of qualified physicians and nurses in Bangladesh is quite low, compared to other low-income countries. For example, in 1998 Bangladesh had 19 physicians and 11 nurses per 100,000 population compared to 73 and 132 respectively for low-income countries, and 286 and 750 respectively for high income countries.

SYED MASUD AHMED

IN the words of Nobel laureate Amartya Sen, health, like education, is among the basic necessities that gives value to human life. Better health translates into greater and more equitably distributed wealth by building human and social capital and increasing productivity.

However, it has been found that the cost of healthcare itself can be a cause of poverty in low-income countries through loss of income, astronomical health expenditures, and potentially irreversible crisis coping mechanisms that involve asset and savings depletion.

Studies have shown that, of all the risks that poor households are facing, health risks probably pose the greatest threat to their lives and livelihoods. Unfortunately, health systems are frequently ineffective in reaching the poor, generate less benefit for the poor than the rich, and impose repressive cost bur-

dens on poor households.

The consistently inequitable nature of health systems limits the access to healthcare by the poor who need it the most. Concern was raised recently about attaining the health related Millennium Development Goals (reduce child mortality, improve maternal health, combat HIV/Aids, malaria and other diseases) in low-income countries without improving the ability of health systems to reach the poor effectively.

Society in Bangladesh is characterised by substantial socio-economic differences in health status, health-care access and utilisation and health benefits gained from public and private health expenditures, all disfavoured the poor. The economic consequences of ill health for the poor households, especially the bottom 15-20% are also well documented in Bangladesh.

Cost burdens of healthcare may

deter or delay healthcare utilisation or promote use of less effective healthcare sources or practices, particularly by the poor. In the absence of any risk-pooling mechanisms and pre-payments, expenditure on health is mainly met by out-of-pocket payment by the households (> 60%). This mode of payment for health-expenditure is the most repressive one and exposes people, especially the poor and disadvantaged, to great financial risk and makes the health system inequitable.

Recent studies on health-seeking behaviour of the poor and some selected disadvantaged populations (e.g., the women, elderly, ethnic minorities, poor/ultra-poor) have found self-care to be the predominant therapeutic activity (around 30-40%) undertaken by them for managing illness. It is defined as any treatment used without a physician's prescription or direct recommendation by a healthcare professional. Self-care involves risks such as incorrect diagnosis, absence of knowledge of alternative treatments, irrational use of drugs and neglect of side effects and drug interactions.

This is especially important in a population with low literacy level like

external factors) is essential to mitigate the income-erosion effect of ill-health and poverty alleviation in Bangladesh.

To maximise this poverty-alleviation effect, health institutions need to be designed according to the needs and priorities of the poor and the disadvantaged. Such a health system allowing access to the poor irrespective of their ability or willingness to pay, and responsive to their needs and priorities is called a "pro-poor" health system. Knowledge and understanding of the existing health-seeking behaviour including its differentials and determinants are required for this to happen.

Self-care is followed by treatment-seeking from unqualified providers (in around 20% of cases) in these studies. By far the single largest group among them is the "unqualified allopaths" who are the sales people in drug retail outlets or drug vendors, with little or no professional training in either the dispensing of drugs or in diagnoses and treatment. Studies from Vietnam, Laos and Nepal found that education and training efforts are necessary but not sufficient to change the practice of irrational and harmful use of drugs by these providers. In addition, managerial and regulatory interventions are also needed.

The studies also noted a

and midwives, who are a higher-level cadre of para-professionals than the CHWs. The village doctors (palli chikitsaks) have received some semi-formal training from private institutions, including those trained through a short-lived government sponsored program that ended in 1982. Given the varying degrees of training and expertise of these para-professionals, the quality of care remains a concern.

The overall health service consumption (from any source) in Bangladesh is low compared to other developing countries. Also, the number of qualified physicians and nurses in Bangladesh is quite low, compared to other low-income countries. For example, in 1998 Bangladesh had 19 physicians and 11 nurses per 100,000 population compared to 73 and 132 respectively for low-income countries, and 286 and 750 respectively for high income countries. Around 26% of professional posts in rural areas remain vacant and there is high rate of absenteeism (about 40%), particularly among medical doctors in rural areas. Both shortage of trained manpower coupled with "brain drain," and lack of required investment in health sector are responsible for this.

A recent survey evaluating the performance of the latest Health and Population Sector Programme (1998-2003) noted that it could not

fulfil the stated objective of delivering a pro-poor service catering to the needs of the poor. In this context, the importance of para-professionals for healthcare in the rural areas of Bangladesh should be recognised, and their capacity developed to ensure that the poor and the disadvantaged get an acceptable level of care. Empirical evidence shows that human resources for health is important for population health outcomes and presumed to be one of the limiting factors in achieving the MDGs.

The dominant role of a household's socio-economic level in shaping health-seeking behaviour of the disadvantaged groups supports the conviction that improving health is contingent upon reducing poverty. Reducing poverty through specific targeting of the disadvantaged groups with a pro-poor health system in a country with large out-of-pocket payments for healthcare is possible, and is urgently needed in Bangladesh. The above scenario should be kept in perspective while designing such a health care system for Bangladesh.

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A Bengali jajabor in the Middle Kingdom Learning from Malaysia

Kunming, to me, was in many ways even more astounding. A remarkably livable, orderly, and pleasant city, it has handled a tripling of its population over the past decade in -- especially so to one who has observed the contemporaneous (mis)management of rapid urbanisation in Bangladesh -- an enviable manner. The streets are absurdly clean, the planning rational and forward-looking.

MANZUR RAHMAN

THE thought of visiting the Middle Kingdom was naturally exhilarating. Though I had been to Beijing once before, no doubt it had changed unimaginably in the interim eleven years. And having first stopped in Dhaka, made the journey -- the comparative possibilities couldn't be juicier -- a priori enriching.

For a Bengali expatriate who has lived the better part of his life willingly, and I might add, happily, submerged in the Western culture -- thus I hope both B. Hajarika and my little brother will both accommodate my appropriation of jajabor -- the rise of China represents a bit of a conundrum.

Notwithstanding the clever coinage of the term "Chindia" by the keynote speaker at the academic conference that I was attending in Beijing, viewing China from afar, the subcontinental mind cannot but feel a sense of, not necessarily envy, but something akin to the proverbial train having just left the station with you, of course, in the platform.

So while to my Western interlocutors I am an (quasi) unabashed champion of China rising, a parallel, unsaid question sometimes remains suspended. Why can't we say the same about the other billion plus below the Himalayas?

Beijing. I should add that a fortunate, and perhaps necessary, by-product of being a jajabor is the capacity of finding the ways and means of your hosts unexpectedly ingenious. Thus the gentle reader is forewarned that my recollections of my days in China may not pass the critical eye test -- but it remains my personally felt observations.

Beijing was grand (of course), polluted (though less so than five years ago, as I was told by an ex-Beijinger), and (somewhat disap-

pointingly) entirely less "foreign" to a (primarily) Western eye. A recurrent refrain from my fellow visiting conferees was how much of an "any city of the world" feel that the Beijing we saw emanated, the Forbidden City and other monuments aside.

The streets were clean and straight and large -- larger than anywhere that we had ever seen -- and a great majority of the structures were modern and (again) large (and yet again, larger than we had ever seen). But apart from the sheer scale of the city and what is within, it was difficult to pinpoint how it was any different from the scores of cities of the Western world.

The only line of separation I could gauge was the careful and well-used bicycle lanes alongside most of the major boulevards. Though one cannot call the modern Beijing a beautiful city by any means -- clean, (surprisingly) orderly, efficient, and massive are the adjectives that come to mind more readily in describing this city of 15 million -- one does get the sense that instead of merely being the northern capital (one meaning of Beijing in Chinese) of the Middle Kingdom, Beijing has laid the groundwork for being the capital of the world.

Kunming. The daily China Eastern flight from Dhaka to Beijing stops at Kunming in southwestern China, which has become a regional transportation hub; from my flight of a hundred or so passengers, just four of us continued onto the second leg for Beijing. As the first port of entry into China, one has to clear immigration in Kunming, where I had my first, and a rather, mixed experience with Chinese bureaucracy.

The immigration officer was puzzled to see a US passport-holder with an Arabic name on the flight from Dhaka (95% of the pas-

sengers were Bangladeshi, the remaining Chinese), particularly one that was born in Karachi (one of the few words I could comprehend from the animated exchanges among the officials that were examining my passport).

After 20 minutes of rubbing, pressing, pulling and handling of my passport by various officials -- all the while I had the distinct pleasure of standing next to the cubicle watching all my fellow passengers with Bangladeshi passports move on -- it was decided that the passport was legitimate, and I was led by my friendly China Eastern escort to re-board the flight for Beijing.

On the other hand, landing in Beijing around midnight I was impressed favorably by the pirouette performed by the various functionaries to separate the international travelers from the domestic ones for customs clearance.

On the return trip to Dhaka, I decided to take advantage of the routing and make a one day stop-over in Kunming. Known as the Spring City for its amenable climate (average annual temperature of 15 Celsius), Kunming is the capital of Yunnan province, with a population of about four million people.

Rapidly growing regional trading centre -- with the rising affluence and aging of the eastern seaboard, Chinese and foreign firms are increasingly making large investments in the previously neglected, and thus, less costly hinterlands -- Kunming, to me, was in many ways even more astounding.

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absurdly clean, the planning rational and forward-looking, all seemingly geared at attaining the delicate balance between modernisation and the alienation that it so often engenders.

While some of the main thoroughfares in the central commercial district approximated global financial centres such as New York or Hong Kong, a turn on to one of the side streets brings you to street scenes resembling mid-size European cities with cafes, tea houses and boutiques providing a more leisurely atmosphere.

Though brief, it was sufficiently enticing to make me want to return, more so than Beijing. Kunming, in many ways, made me think about our own cities in Bangladesh, insofar as a model that our planners could do worse than to emulate.

Albeit a sample size of two is hardly the basis to form generalizations -- though on my flight to Dhaka a Bangladeshi businessman on the next seat related the same story of orderliness and efficiency in even poorer regions deeper in the interior -- but China would appear to be creating a hundred Singapores as it transforms itself into an urban society.

Hyperbole aside, the rise of "Chindia" is not an unlikelihood among the possible futures. The media quite reasonably draws attention to the environmental risks (though the high incidence of zero-emission electric bicycles and scooters and solar water-heaters suggests an impressive, if nascent, effort at environmentalism) posed by China's industrialisation, and the sacrifice in freedom inherent in its top down political system.

However, as a member of the Indian diaspora -- and I use the term advisedly and perforce in its subcontinental sense -- I couldn't quite avoid the sensation that the Indian part of the dyad is even less prepared, perhaps due to institutional or political or cultural differences, in negotiating the significant challenges posed by wholesale industrialisation and urbanisation.

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Malaysians are pious and conservative Muslims. However, they are not extremist in nature. Their cultural heritage is renowned throughout the world. Malaysia is home to a world famous Buddhist monument that is situated on top of the highest hill in Penang. Although it is an Islamic country, all sorts of mixed drinks are available to the public. Muslims, Hindus, and Buddhists peacefully live side-by-side.

KBD MA MATIN

ON a recent trip to Malaysia, I learned that Malaysia is a model nation for Bangladesh, due to its flourishing economy, tolerant society, and strong leadership.

Malaysia is a beautiful country with abundant resources. Its hill tracts covered with dense rainforests and surrounding seas offer splendid views that charm all those who visit. Early in the morning, one is touched by the natural beauty of the country, especially in the picturesque islands of Penang and Langkawi. An eminent western travel journalist said of Penang: "He who has never visited Penang in Malaysia has been deprived of witnessing much gracefulness of the Earth."

Malaysia's rainforests are among the oldest on the planet, and are teeming with rare species of wild animals and colourful birds. Malaysia enjoys a summer climate year round, with almost all regions of the country sharing the same climate. The internal road communication networks, tourism centres and shopping facilities are very comfortable and congenial. I was impressed by the reception given to me by the Malaysian people and the sense of security I felt as a visitor.

I visited seven out of the fourteen provinces in Malaysia, which included Kuala Lumpur, Penang, and Malekka. During our visits, that ranged from the airport to remote villages, we observed that this nation has a balanced sphere of national development. The Malaysian government strictly maintains discipline, long-term planning, and development, as well as an effective law and order situation.

The highways and roads are wide

and well planned with structured traffic signals, thus reducing the chances of traffic congestion and road mishaps. Their well-designed vehicle parking centres, fantastic high-rise shopping malls, and flyovers have greatly reduced traffic jams in almost all the cities. Also sound and air pollution are absent due to the restrictions on honking horns and setting up of exhaust pipes to the roof level. Despite the fact that the use of polythene is not restricted, there is no evidence of misuse of polythene. Most of the cities are observed to be neat, clean, and less crowded, which helps the citizens and tourists lead a free-roaming, peaceful life.

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All Malaysian citizens are ensured of civic rights, which is an important indicator of development. Gender disparity is not a factor in Malaysia. All government and non-government organisations support women's participation as a vital factor in nation building. According to the women's affairs ministry, women's oppression, as well as other anti-social practices, such as dowry, child marriage, and polygamy are not issues in their society. Bear in mind that all anti-social activities are viewed as hindrances to development initiatives.

Most Malaysians appear to be very conscious of nature and their

environment. They plant trees along every highway and by the foot of every mountain. It is worth mentioning that Malaysia has already declared its intention to grow the world's largest forest reserve in the near future. Every Malaysian is well habituated to pay tax to the government. People are offering taxes or tolls for the sake of the nation's development, which indicates their deep love for their motherland.

Furthermore, the government is sincere and committed to the country's welfare and comprehensive development. Political disturbances of any kind related to anti-government campaigns were not observed during our visit. Although it was impossible to look into all the successful endeavours and to find the influencing factors behind the development of this nation, it can easily be concluded that Malaysia has miraculously achieved tremendous success within the short span of twenty-two years.

In Malaysia, the issues of population and education are addressed very differently from Bangladesh. Although Malaysia is three times larger than Bangladesh in terms of area, its total population is a mere 24 million as compared to Bangladesh's 140 million. Due to its low population, the government of Malaysia encourages couples to have up to five children, which is the opposite scenario from our country.

The literacy rate of Malaysia is above 99%, while in Bangladesh it is only 65%. Clearly, Malaysia focuses on education, and so in a discussion session presented by the Economic Planning Unit, I asked the presenter: "Why does the government emphasise the education sector as opposed to other important sectors like health and home affairs?"

He replied: "Education gives a nation consciousness and fosters

real patriotism, which later leads one to generate various devices for self development as well as to improve the welfare of the entire country." All education authorities in Bangladesh should implement this ideal.

Less than two decades ago, Malaysia was under-developed in comparison to Bangladesh. Today Malaysia can boast of the tallest business tower in the world, electronic products that are highly valued in competitive overseas markets, and a well-developed extensive communications network. Malaysia is also home to the longest bridge in Asia (15 km) that provides easy access to the state of Penang.

Malaysia has furthermore made commendable progress in poverty alleviation. In 1970, the overall poverty incidence was 52.4%. According to statistics provided in the year 2002, 5.1% of Malaysians live in poverty, of which only 2% are below the poverty line. On the other hand, an astonishing 40% of Bangladesh suffers from poverty.

The efforts made by both governmental and nongovernmental organizations to alleviate poverty in the last two decades are truly remarkable. Bangladesh needs to focus on accelerating industrialisation and other development processes in order to achieve the level of success that is already evident in Malaysia.

All their success has been possible due to honest leadership, which our country has yet to achieve. The former prime minister of Malaysia, Dr. Mahathir Muhammad, also the architect and implementer of modern thought in Malaysia, paid a visit to Bangladesh last year.

During his visit, he highlighted some important national issues and gave suggestions for our rapid development in light of his experience during his tenure in Malaysia. I would like to appeal to our intellectuals and national leaders -- both ruling and in opposition -- to follow his advice for the greater good of our homeland.

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Should history repeat itself?

More than fifteen years have elapsed since we regained our democracy, but we faltered in building the democratic institutions necessary to strengthen and safeguard democracy. We failed to build an independent election commission and judiciary. The ruling party and the prime minister's office can exercise a lot of control over them. Until this control is eliminated we will always have a risk to have CECs and CJs coming from the ranks of ruling party flunkies. A few people can utilize a leaky system for public good, but these days such people have minimal chance of being appointed in these positions.

AJM SHAFIUL ALAM BHUIYAN

HISTORY repeats itself is a trite expression, but it seems to be forever relevant to our politics. When we say history repeats itself, we take it for granted that history is an automatic process which occurs without any actors. But this is not true. History never repeats itself. It is social actors who create and recreate history. It happens more frequently in Bangladesh than anywhere else. Therefore, we need to ask should we allow history to repeat itself once again. For this,

it is necessary to tell you which history I am hinting at.

It was 1996. It was the end of the five year term of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) in power. The opposition demanded that state authority be handed over to a caretaker government so that we could have a fair parliamentary election. But BNP avoided that and held an election without the participation of major political parties. They did not put enough effort to guarantee a fair election and ensure the participation of other political parties.

In hindsight, it is clear that at the

time the BNP leadership was fearful that if the election was fair they would lose. They were apprehensive that people would not re-elect many of their party candidates to Jatiyo Songsod (parliament). BNP arranged an election which turned out to be one of the most derisive elections in our democratic history.

As expected, BNP won most ridings to have an absolute majority in Jatiyo Songsod. But it could not hold on to its victory because of a vociferous mass movement. It had to dissolve Jatiyo Songsod and relinquish power to a caretaker government to arrange a fair elec-

tion. The election was arranged and eventually BNP lost, confirming their worst nightmare of not getting re-elected.

BNP thought that it was the end of their world. But they were wrong. They regained power in the following general election. Many people in Awami League (AL) camp believe that the election was manipulated to unseat them. While there might have been some systematic manipulations, but there was no substantive evidence to prove that the election was rigged. AL failed to present convincing evidences to prove that their victory was denied through manipulation.

It is a typical tendency of our political parties to search out conspiracy theories to hold other responsible for their defeat. When they rule they feel that they do everything right and their critics are wrong or just unnecessarily hostile. They never evaluate their performance and they hate criticism.

The only time they are happy is when they find opportunities to somehow hang on to power. If it goes otherwise, they are so upset

that they begin to believe that the whole country conspired to dethrone them. They forget how some of their ministers and party leaders patronized goons, grabbed public money, and worked against people's expectations. They are always scared to face people in a fair election.

They try to find ways to manipulate elections. They plant cronies in key positions of the bureaucracy so that they can control the administration during elections. They line up loyal judges as the future chief justices (CJs) in order to have a loyalist head the caretaker government. They also appoint party loyalists as the election commissioners with a view to concocting election results. They forget that they have a responsibility not only to make the country economically self-reliant but also safeguard and strengthen its democratic system.

There has been a rumour that the ruling coalition has been doing everything to swing the upcoming general election. Those who go along with the rumour argue that the bureaucracy has already been

restructured, the election commission and judiciary -- two other important institutions of the electoral process -- have been corrupted through the employment of ruling party flunkies.

Under the existing arrangement, the head of the caretaker government is supposed to be a former chief justice. From the perspective of the ruling coalition, it is important to have their man as the head of the caretaker government. They were really conscious to make it happen. As part of their plan, they promoted their favourite judges to supreme judicial positions.

The rumour-mongers also tell a similar story about the election commission. They note that the commission is manned by the flunkies of the ruling coalition. The commission has failed the rudimentary job of the election -- preparing a genuine voter list. A strong and independent election commission is a prerequisite for a fair election. They ask, is our election commission independent?

All these allegations seem to bear some element of truth. The

future head of the caretaker government would be someone who was promoted by the ruling coalition. The recent performance of the election commission in voter listing has shown how partisan it is. The recent developments in Bongobhobon further fuel the rumour. Everything tends to bring back the memory of 1996. If the things go the way they are going at the moment, we will see the repetition of a recent history. We will see the reproduction of election 1996 in 2007.

Now the question remains: why an evil history repeats itself every now and then? I have already identified the actors who recreate such histories. I will now explore why they are successful in doing so. In fact, they exploit the systemic vulnerabilities of our democracy which allows certain actors to recreate evil histories.

More than fifteen years have elapsed since we regained our democracy, but we faltered in building the democratic institutions necessary to strengthen and safeguard democracy. We failed to build

an independent election commission and judiciary. The ruling party and the prime minister's office can exercise a lot of control over them. Until this control is eliminated we will always have a risk to have CECs and CJs coming from the ranks of ruling party flunkies. A few people can utilize a leaky system for public good, but these days such people have minimal chance of being appointed in these positions.

As a conscious citizen I ask myself how long we should wait to prevent the leaks in our democratic system. How long will we allow evil actors to recreate evil histories? When will we act for public good?

I want you to do the same.

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