

Why landlessness is on the increase



M ABDUL LATIF MONDAL

RECENT media reports reveal that the number of landless people in the country has tripled in the last five decades. Since land is the most important resource in the primarily rural and agricultural Bangladesh, and landlessness and poverty go together, the increasing landlessness is a cause for serious concern for all of us.

Who are landless?

The Agricultural Census (1983-84) defined landless as "those who possess up to one half of an acre." The survey classified the landless into three different categories: category-I are those who have no homestead or cultivable land; category-II are those who have a homestead but no cultivable land; category-III are those who have a homestead and cultivable land up to one half of an acre.

The Agricultural Census of 1996, which is so far the latest, showed that in all the three categories mentioned above, the percentage of landless people increased in 1996. The table below shows the category wise distribution of landless households in the agricultural censuses of 1983-84 and 1996.

Category of landless	Agriculture Census 1983-84	Agriculture Census 1996
Percent of landless-I	8.67	10.18
Percent of landless-II	19.64	28.06
Percent of landless-III	28.21	29.12
Total	56.52	67.36

It appears from the data that compared to 1983-84 landless households belonging to the above mentioned three categories have increased since the last census of 1996. The data of the two censuses further show that the landless under category-II has tremendously increased, but in category-I and category-III the increase has been

BARE FACTS

The major rivers of Bangladesh -- the Jamuna, the Padma and the Meghna -- annually consume several thousands hectares of floodplain land through river erosion. According to one study, about 5 percent of the total floodplain of Bangladesh is directly affected by erosion. Another study shows that about one million people are directly affected each year by bank erosion in the country.

moderate.

Why increasing landlessness?

It is said that there is a close correlation between landlessness and poverty. Poverty is generally defined as "an economic condition of lacking both money and basic necessities needed to successfully live such as food, water, education, and shelter."

Poverty has also got classifications. The World Bank defines "extreme poverty as living on less than \$1 per day, and moderate poverty as less than \$2 a day."

Available data show that about half of the total population in Bangladesh live in extreme poverty as their per capita income is less than \$1 a day. A key factor behind the high rate of poverty in Bangladesh is the increasingly insecure relationship between people and the land. In a country where agriculture continues to be the biggest sector in the economy and, in one form or the other, it affects the livelihood of the preponderant number of the people who are mainly rural inhabitants, land is the most important resource for the rural people. Without owning or having access to land, it is difficult for the rural people to sustain them-

selves.

Now the question is: what causes rising landlessness in the country? Economists, researchers and others have identified the following factors that are primarily responsible for the increasing landlessness in the country:

-- The ratio of land ownership is uneven in the country. Available data show that more than half of the

families in the country own only 4.2 percent of the country's total land area while only 6.2 percent of the families own 40 percent of the land.

-- Wealthy and influential people have been the beneficiaries of the distributed khas land. The 12 lakh acres of cultivable khas land distributed between 1980 and 1996 constitute 44 percent of the total khas land, and 88 percent of the distributed khas land went to wealthy and influential people while only 12 percent went to landless people.

-- Successive governments have not been serious about recovering khas land from illegal grabbers who are elite politicians and influential people. In its editorial on June 18, The Daily Star wrote: "The political leadership has failed to tackle the problem of land grabbing, rather the grabbers are exerting political influence to throw their weight around and bend government policies. It is an example of the government failing to protect the interests of the poor and check the process of pauperization."

-- Available information suggests that in the last 10 years the government allocated almost no khas land. Distribution of khas land among the landless people during this period could have saved thousands of landless families from extreme poverty.

-- The core problem facing Bangladesh is the scarcity of land. With a high and increasing rural population, farm sizes are declining rapidly and landlessness is rising. According to inheritance laws, land is divided among siblings and such fragmentation of landholdings gradually leads to landlessness as categorised above. Further, unplanned housing pattern in the rural areas leads to huge loss of valuable agricultural land and ultimately contributes to landlessness.

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the Jamuna, the Padma and the Meghna -- annually consume several thousands hectares of floodplain land through river erosion. According to one study, about 5 percent of the total floodplain of Bangladesh is directly affected by erosion. Another study shows that about one million people are directly affected each year by bank erosion in the country. The total monetary loss is estimated to be approximately \$500 million a year. An estimated 300,000 displaced persons usually take shelter on roads, embankments and government-requisitioned lands.

-- The pressure of too many people on a limited land base is also an important cause for increasing landlessness in the country.

Socio-economic impact

Landlessness and poverty are inter-related. Annual population growth rate surpassing the growth rate in food production, and increasing landlessness, outweighed whatever little success had been achieved in the reduction of poverty in the last two decades or so.

Further, poverty resulting from increasing landlessness and lack of employment opportunities in the rural areas leads to massive rural to urban migration. Large-scale migration of landless and poor people to big cities and their living in slums and squatter settlements create social, environmental and many other problems.

To conclude, some of the major factors contributing to the rise in the number of landless people, in particular in rural areas, will have to be addressed on a priority basis. Appropriate measures are also needed to check further rise in the number of landless people in the country.

M. Abdul Latif Mondal is a former Secretary to the government.

No reason we cannot

After the BNP-Jamaat coalition won the general election in 2001, we witnessed a vicious persecution of Hindus throughout the country, particularly in the southern districts. Throngs of BNP-Jamaat activists swooped down on Hindu households and business concerns, looting and plundering. Hindu men were physically assaulted, and in some cases, killed, and the women raped.

SYED MANZOORUL ISLAM

DEMOCRACY in Bangladesh, everyone likes to believe, is still in a nascent state: it is scarcely a decade and a half ago that the country began to practice a democratic way of governance. But fifteen years, and three full-fledged elections, are a long enough time and experience to come out of the nascent state.

Indeed, democracy in the country, by that reckoning, should be somewhere in its early youth. It should be steaming ahead, growing from strength to strength each passing year. But reality shows a picture which is quite the opposite: democracy, if anything, is floundering. It is floundering because it is continuously under attack from the very forces and institutions that are supposed to nurture and strengthen it.

The country has a government riddled with corruption and inefficiency; a dysfunctional parliament and an Election Commission that finds more pleasure in problematising the electoral process than in making it smooth. Add to this the endemic violence, religious extremism and persecution of religious minorities. This last is particularly worrisome, since respect for other religions is a fundamental principle of a democratic society.

What compounds the problem is the administration's tolerance of -- and in many instances, active support to -- the persecution of religious and ethnic minorities in the country. The saga of the Hill people is a and tragic one. The Ahmadiyahs are fighting a losing battle just to keep their heads above water. And other minorities fare no better.

After the BNP-Jamaat coalition won the general election in 2001, the country witnessed a vicious persecution of Hindus throughout the country, particularly in the southern districts. Throngs of BNP-Jamaat activists swooped down on Hindu households and business concerns, looting and plundering. Hindu men were physically assaulted, and in some cases, killed, and the women raped.

The administration failed to come to the aid of the victims since the perpetrators were from the ruling coalition. The media gave wide coverage to the violence, but hardly anyone was ever brought to justice. And, as is the tradition with the media, their interest gradually waned as new stories kept emerging. And with a new government in place there was no shortage of hard news. Soon, the violence against the Hindus was forgotten as "yesterday's news."

The fact that we have decided to forget the incidents shows what is

seriously wrong with our practice of democracy, as indeed with our whole mindset. The persecution of the Hindus was not simply an act of political vendetta -- which would be reprehensible by any standard of judgement -- but was something more deep rooted and pernicious. It was a revival of the brand of communalism that was practiced in Pakistan times, and is still practiced in that country and in India. Its roots lie in sectarian prejudices and ignorance.

Acts of political revenge are not concentrated against a particular minority community, as are hate campaigns fuelled by religious fanaticism. The persecution of Hindus was also symptomatic of a "get-rich-quick" mindset that saw looting and the expropriation of others' properties as a sure way of getting there. The looting of Hindus' property in 2001 was an early warning that the perpetrators would move out to greener pastures once they were through with the first round. Today, there is absolutely no sector in Bangladesh that is safe from the looters' hands.

If a detailed investigation into the sociology, psychology, politics and economy of the 2001 persecution of Hindus was missing so far, a book by Mohammad Rafi has substantially filled the gap. Rhetorically titled Can We Get Along the book proposes to be "An Account of Communal Relationship in Bangladesh," but is actually more than that.

It examines the whole spectrum of pre and post election violence in Bangladesh, detailing the nature and incidents of violence -- on families, on communities, on individuals. It looks into the history, sociology and other such issues related to the violence; raising questions of complicity not only of political parties but of non-political entities such as rural communities; and finally posing the question: "Can we get along?"

Mohammad Rafi, an active and contributing member of the Research and Development Wing of BRAC, has put into place, what appears to be a dependable and extremely effective methodology. The information on the violence against Hindus was collected, he informs us: "from BRAC staff working at field offices ... BRAC has 1,150 field offices covering 89 per cent (60,000) of the villages in 99 per cent (460) of subdistricts in the country."

A network of checks and balances was in place to ensure that the information was authentic before the writer could use it. The writer also provides case studies, mentioning the place and time of each interview. Contrary to the practices usually followed by writers of such sociological accounts of current events, Mohammad Rafi

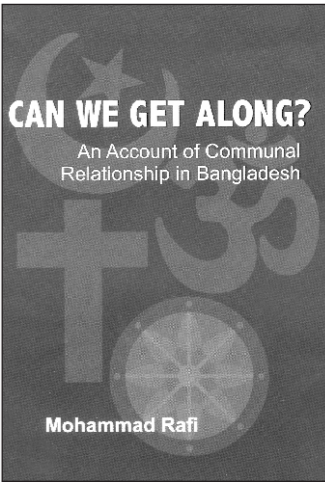
has added an entire chapter on "Concept [of violence], Theoretical Framework and Methodology." One wishes that the book began with this chapter (it is placed rather uncomfortably between the chapters "Communal Relationship" and "Composition of Religious Minorities"), since it establishes the authenticity of both the theoretical and applied aspects of the book.

Mohammad Rafi's book has three broad areas of focus: (a) the pre- and post-election violence (2001), (b) the often problematic nature and history of communal relationship in the country and the need for getting along, in spite of setbacks. The first area of focus is a very urgent one. By starting with an investigation into the 2001 violence, Rafi has revisited some of the most shameful and alarming events of our recent history, and alerted the readers to the possibility of their recurrence, unless of course, corrective measures are taken immediately.

The second area of focus is largely an academic one that sets the communal relationships in a Bangladesh perspective. As one reads through the history of such relationships, one sees clearly how politics, material greed and deep-seated sectarian hatred had contributed to the widening gulf between the minority and majority communities.

The academic nature of this particular investigation means that concepts and terminologies are often laboriously explained, but one sees that this is necessary if only to arrive at a historical and sociological understanding of the problems leading to communal violence. Once this understanding has been achieved, it is easy for the reader to see the 2001 violence not simply as an act of "political revenge," as a section of the media had put it, but the result of an interconnected web of causes -- from a revival of Pakistani-style communalism to a growing frustration against India in certain quarters for which the Hindus are made scapegoats.

In the larger historical and other contexts that the book sets for the 2001 violence, some questions become pertinent. If the political system, particularly our decade and a half old democratic system, has failed to protect the minorities and if our administrative system has increasingly imposed exclusionary policies on them, have the minority-majority relations any real chance of returning to pre-1975 levels? How will the government respond to the minority communities' sense of exclusion and alienation? How will the state fulfil its constitutional obligation of protecting them? What alliance can the civil society and the minority communities forge to safeguard their interest? And, very importantly, how do we instill a



Book Review

Can We Get Along?
An account of communal relationship in Bangladesh
by Mohammad Rafi

sense of belonging in the minority community?

Mohammad Rafi seems to believe that the majority and minority communities can indeed get along. But for that to happen there should be a paradigm shift in the way both sides look at the problem. He places a great deal of emphasis on a rethinking of the concept of nationalism which should have a secular, rather than an Islamic, basis.

He also suggests that efforts should be initiated by the Muslims for greater integration of the minorities, and frustration against India should be neutralised. Mohammad Rafi stresses on a greater role of the government in preventing violence against the minorities. He also sees a greater role for the donors and NGOs in safeguarding minority interests. And above all, he wants the minorities to be more vocal and more assertive about their roles.

Mohammad Rafi's research has been painstaking. The large number of tables and appendices point to exhaustive field work and a scientific base of the research. It is a courageous work that has focused on an area where not many researchers like to venture. But the book's virtue is that it has brought out all the facts (including many that the media looking only for "news value" might not find or ignore) and laid them out front for us to face.

Mohammad Rafi's study has been an unbiased one, aimed only at bringing home some disturbing truths. It will be to our, and the nation's peril to ignore them. Can We Get Along expects us to be aware of them and also to act on them. Only by collective action based on the principles of democracy, ethics and common humanity can the communal relationships improve in Bangladesh.

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Should we construct the Ganges barrage?

Bangladesh has recently proposed to India to increase dry season flows of the Ganges through the Farakka Barrage by constructing reservoirs in Nepal. The government is also continuing its efforts to convince Nepal for a tripartite cooperation (among Bangladesh, India and Nepal) to construct reservoirs in the Himalayan kingdom to augment the Ganges flow during the dry season. The proposal of Bangladesh is undoubtedly a good one and there is no reason why India, which always professes to be our great friend, should not accept it. And if India does, the water problem of the Ganges will disappear like the morning mist and there will be no need for the construction of the Ganges Barrage.

MOHAMMAD MUJIBOR RAHMAN

AS early as June 6, 1996 I suggested in one of my write-ups that in order to solve the Farakka problem we should, inter alia, build a Ganges barrage near the Hardinge Bridge at the off-take point of the rivers Gorai-Modhumati, which will store water for dry season use. I continued to reiterate the above suggestion in various write-ups appearing in the print media from time to time.

Hafizuddin Ahmed, Water Resources Minister, said in the Jatiya Sangsad on June 15 that due to unilateral withdrawal of water upstream through Farakka the dry season flows to Bangladesh had become very lean thereby seriously affecting the country's irrigation system. To overcome such a situation a survey was being conducted to build a barrage on the Padma, after bilateral discussion with India, the minister informed the House. But should we now really rush in for construction of the barrage which will entail huge expenditure? Let us give a second thought to it.

The construction of the Ganges Barrage will involve a huge expenditure, more than Taka. 25,000 crore, which will be a serious drain on the meagre resources of our poor country. Moreover, a large tract of our agricultural land will be inundated, and will remain so, causing colossal loss of agricultural crops. However, India may be overjoyed, for as soon as the barrage is constructed it would most probably stop supplying water to us and use the quantum of water for irrigation purposes in northern

and western India, specially in the desert land of Rajasthan.

Veena Sikri, the Indian High Commissioner to Bangladesh, in an article had already favoured the construction of Ganges Barrage although she did not mention how much of the cost of the proposed barrage India was willing to bear. (It may be noted that under the Indus Basin Water Treaty of 1960, India did acquiesce to sharing a part of the costs of the replacement works which were done in Pakistan in order to irrigate the land hitherto irrigated by the eastern rivers of the Indus).

I think the construction of the expensive Ganges Barrage will be illogical and unnecessary. Instead we should lodge our legitimate claim over the waters of the Ganges as all the international laws and practices are in our favour. Some of these are discussed below:

Lake Lanoux water dispute: The water of the river Lanoux which flows from Lake Lanoux in France and passes into the territory of Spain was being used for irrigation purpose by the Spanish farmers for a long time. Suddenly, France decided to construct a dam on the river Lanoux that would undoubtedly affect the interests of Spanish farmers. Thus arose the Lake Lanoux water dispute, which was eventually settled by the Lake Lanoux Arbitral Tribunal.

While rejecting France's claim for absolute territorial sovereignty over its river, it held, "Territorial sovereignty plays a presumptive. It must bend before all international obligations whatever their origin. It further added "the upstream state has, according to the rules of good faith, the obliga-

tion to take into consideration the different interests at stake to strive to give them all satisfaction compatible with the pursuit of its own interests and to demonstrate that on this subject it has a real solicitude to reconcile the interest of other common riparian countries with its own."

The Hannon Doctrine of absolute territorial sovereignty over international rivers: This doctrine, which originated in the USA in 1895, has in fact never been followed and practiced by any state, not even by the US. Thus, while resolving the Rio Grande dispute, the US did agree to provide Mexico with water equivalent to that which Mexico had used before the diversion of waters from the Rio Grande, for irrigation purposes in the US, took place.

The 1933 Montevideo declaration adopted by the Seventh International Conference of American States limits the right of utilisation of common waters by the obligation not to infringe upon the legal right of utilisation by other states. Similar views are also expressed by the inter-American Bar Association and the institute of International Law Association. The 1977 UN Water Conference at Mar del Plata has also accepted this view of the basin states' responsibility in dealing with common waters.

Besides, in a number of court cases, the US Supreme Court [e.g. Kansas vs Colorado (1902), North Dakota vs Minnesota (1925) etc.] and the German court [Wathenburg and Prussia vs Badem (1927)] asserted that they invoked the principles of equitable apportionment and limited territorial sovereignty as established

principles of International Law. Similarly, the Italian court of cessation asserts that international law recognises right of every riparian state to enjoy, as a participant, the partnership created by the river.

In view of the above decisions of court cases, and international laws and practices in this regard, we should ask India to stop unilateral withdrawal of water from the Ganges. As India is increasingly withdrawing waters from the Ganges the availability of water at Farakka, for allocation between Bangladesh and India as per 1996 water agreement, will be less and less in future. To solve the problem, the total quantum of waters of the Ganges and its tributaries should be calculated from 1992 to 2005 and should be distributed between Bangladesh and India in such a manner that Bangladesh is assured of a minimum 35,000 cusecs of water in the leanest period every year.

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Mohammad Mujibor Rahman is a retired Collector of Customs.

Why oil will get cheaper

With oil reaching another record high last week, it may seem odd that Jeroen van der Veer is expecting the price of crude to drop significantly. But the CEO of Shell and oil-industry veteran isn't given to rash predictions. Taking the helm of the troubled company in 2004, he helped Shell rebound from an accounting scandal. He's since streamlined a convoluted corporate structure and taken advantage of the record oil prices to ramp up investment in exploration and new technologies. He spoke with Newsweek's Rana Foroohar about the industry's most pressing questions, including oil nationalism, security and those record-high prices.

Foroohar: Oil hit \$75 a barrel this week. How sustainable are the current prices?

Van der Veer: There's no point in predicting the oil prices, because it tends to be a pretty bad prediction. Why is that? Because there are so many factors at play. What I will say is that as recently as this weekend, I looked at data showing that crude-oil stocks in factories around the world are very normal or even better than normal. It's a bit of a mixed picture, but by and large, there is no physical shortage in the world. So there must be two reasons (for the current prices) -- geopolitical tensions in the world, and the amount of nontraditional money like hedge funds moving into the oil market.

Are traders distorting the prices?

Nobody knows the correlations there; it's new territory. But some people estimate there is north of \$100 billion in hedge-fund money in oil markets right now, which is of course significant. But that said, I've grown up in a physical world, and what I see from the physical world is that the lines of ships at refineries, and things like that, are OK.

Given that, do you agree with others like BP's John Browne who say maybe prices will be more like \$40, or even \$25 to \$30 a barrel in the long run?

We don't give the precise figures. But we do believe that future prices will be significantly lower than today.

The rise in state oil companies means that Western companies aren't getting access to the world's known reserves -- access is down from about 85 percent in the 1960s to about 16 percent now. Does that worry you?

Easy oil is now mostly in the hands of state-owned companies. The added value of multinational companies like Shell is that with cutting-edge technology we can be very good in unconventional -- oil and gas that doesn't easily come out of the ground. That would include things like oil sands, oil shale and deepwater reserves.

Are your own interactions with governments becoming trickier than they were, say, five or 10 years ago? Russia, for instance, just passed a new law that could make it tougher for foreign players to enter the gas market.

Of course, when the oil prices are high, the governments take a

very sharp interest, usually at a very senior level, over what's going to happen with that national resource. I understand that. But in the end, you have to stand politely with your cap in your hand, and make sure that you propose something that is in the interest of that particular government -- otherwise you don't do business. That was the same 20 years ago; it's the same now and will be the same 20 years from now. Russia has a lot of gas reserves. They know that Shell is good, we are leading in liquid natural gas, and they want access to that expertise as well.

Do you think European fears over Russia as a major energy supplier are overblown?

I think the Russians have a bit of a point in that they feel that the West is looking only one way -- to their own advantage. If the Russians want to invest in the West in distribution companies, I think that is very good news. Then you have mutual dependency, which is win-win.

You've said that "elephant projects" -- big, expensive, complex projects, often involving unconventional -- will be the future for Shell.

Yes, these are real opportunities, because to execute multibillion-dollar projects, usually in very hostile environments, and do it with the same safety statistics as in the West, is quite a feat. We have three such projects at the moment (Sakhalin in Russia, Bonga in Nigeria and Nanhai in China), and we expect to have 10 in the next decade.

What keeps you up at night?

What do prices do to the world economy? So far the economy has been doing quite well, but will the energy prices slowly start to bite? Secondly, of course, we are fairly concerned about changing tax issues (i.e., the potential of a wind-fall tax). People say, OK, you oil companies have made a lot of profits, so what happens to taxes? Our message is that if there is the least perceived shortage of new-supply capacity, the best thing we can do is to invest a lot; and if we pay more in taxes we can invest less. It has to come from somewhere.

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