

Covid-19 and the doubly disadvantaged

Ensuring protection of ethnic and linguistic minorities



C R ABRAR

ALMOST all communities across the world are now facing the adverse impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic. While virologists and the pharmaceutical industry race against time to discover the right vaccine to bring the contagion under control; governments, public representatives, community leaders and civil society activists are grappling to minimise its negative outfall on the people. With no sign of receding in the foreseeable future, the pandemic has begun to take a disproportionate toll on those who live on the margins of society. The official policy of lockdown to ensure “social distancing” has hit hard those who live hand to mouth and depend on wage labour. The announcement of the extension of the lockdown has triggered protests from those who face starvation and have largely remained outside the ambit of the government’s humanitarian assistance programmes. On April 20, hundreds of people from the Shaotal community of Chilagazi Union of Dinajpur Sadar upazila, who lost employment opportunities as a result of the pandemic, blocked roads and staged protests demanding government assistance. Days later in a similar protest, more than a hundred members of the Urdu speaking community took position in front of the Government’s Women College in the capital’s Pallabi area. The mask wearing protestors, including women and children, held placards that read “Help Murapara camp residents”. On April 30, at a meeting of elders of the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) presided over by the Chakma Raja, it was noted that despite efforts of the government, “contextual needs of remote and marginalised communities remained unfulfilled”. The above snippets of discontent are essentially manifestations of concern of three different minority groups located in the northern, central and south-eastern parts of the country. Despite the dissimilarities

in their lived experiences in the Covid-19 reality, the vast majority of the members of the three communities are tied by their feelings of vulnerability. They have no work, no income, no savings to fall back on, and face starvation and malnutrition, making themselves and their loved ones susceptible to diseases, at a time when they confront the deadly virus. They are in dire need of support to maintain their subsistence. Reports from the hill districts reveal that people are particularly hard hit, as the lean months of April and May were preceded by poor harvests in two successive years. This made them susceptible to intense food insecurity. News reports note that many poor Mro, Khumi, Tripura and Marma households are surviving only on potatoes. The extension of the lockdown exacerbated the plight of the pineapple and watermelon growers. Their dreams of making a copious profit from the bumper yield of the year has suddenly come crashing down. Weeks earlier, a pair of pineapples that was sold at Tk 30-40 now fetches a meagre Tk 10-15. The additional worry for many is how they would repay or service the loans that they have incurred, often at high interest rates. The outbreak of measles in a number of areas has already taken a toll on children. On March 28, the Bangladesh Indigenous Peoples Forum and Kapaeeng Foundation reported hundreds of children were affected in the Sajek valley of Rangamati, the Lama region of Bandarban and Dighinala of Khagrachhari. Community leaders allege that these children were left out of the government vaccination programme. In response, the civil surgeon and the local administration claimed that it was the local people’s “superstition” that held up the vaccination programme. Allegations have been made that public assistance in the CHT has mainly reached those who live next to main roads and riverways, and not many efforts have been made to reach those in remote areas. Activists note that although health is the subject matter of the Hill District Council, the Councils have been effectively ignored by the Deputy Commissioner’s office. Their apex body, the CHT Regional Council, was not assigned with a meaningful role.



This aerial view of Geneva Camp shows how difficult social distancing can be in such a congested space.

PHOTO: RASHED SUMON

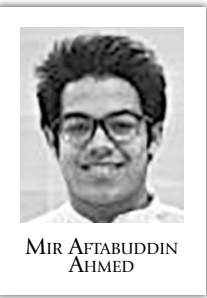
Lack of coordination among agencies involved in humanitarian assistance has also been identified as a problem. The pandemic has gravely affected the indigenous peoples of the plains as well. Along with their peers in other *adibashi* communities, members of the Garo community of Madhupur and Fulbaria upazilas of Mymensingh and of Srimongol of Sylhet; Shaotals of Gobindaganj, Gaibandha; Orao and Pahraria in Rajshahi, Banais of Netrokona, Sherpur; Hajangs of northeast Bangladesh and Mundas of Sundarban in Shatkhira district have been left without any earnings since the outbreak of the pandemic. In normal circumstances, these communities can barely maintain their subsistence by working as wage labourers in the construction sector or brick kilns, pulling rickshaws or collecting and selling crabs, snails and fish. The suspension of economic activities and restrictions on movement imposed in the aftermath of Covid-19 has effectively wiped out their scope for earning. The actuality of the pandemic becomes patent when even beggars are deprived of alms for fear of the contagion. A near universal grievance is the absence of any assistance from government and non-government quarters. Shaotals of Dinajpur alleged that they did not receive any assistance despite the fact that the local Union Council authorities have collected photocopies of their national identity cards. The situation is no better for linguistic minorities—the camp dwelling, Urdu speaking community. The 116 camps and settlements located in different parts of the country house 300,000-400,000 people, the largest being the so-called Geneva camp in Mohammadpur with 30,000 residents. Residents of the camps work as barbers, butchers, rickshaw-pullers, carpenters, mechanics and in handicrafts. The relatively enterprising ones are engaged in running shops and small businesses. The suspension of economic activities has brought immense suffering to these people. The services of those who worked as domestic help, mostly women, have been terminated without compensation. Urdu poet Shamim Zamanvi of Al-Falah Bangladesh

lamented—“for the first time I see camp dwellers begging”. Camp dwellers have been robbed of their last precious possession by Covid-19, their sense of dignity. Press reports highlight the propensity of camp dwellers to not abide by the shutdown guidelines such as staying indoors, wearing masks or regularly washing hands. The reality is that those affected by the shutdown, mostly men, have little option but to loiter in the streets. Their dwellings are too small and congested to stay indoors. “Maintaining social distance is a dream for us; we have so little space to live in,” notes one resident of Geneva camp. The summer heat makes it more difficult. Masks costs money. Another resident asks: “how can we protect ourselves if we cannot afford to buy masks, sanitisers and gloves?” Each tap of running water services hundreds of camp residents, if not thousands. The camps continue to remain largely outside the purview of government and NGO assistance. “There’s no one to help us, it’s Allah on whom we depend”,

bemoans an elderly lady in Town Hall camp. In some camps, the residents vehemently protest local commissioners’ claims that they provided assistance. “If indeed such distribution had taken place, then the only beneficiaries must have been those who worked for his election,” noted a community worker. The camps are in dismal conditions. On an average, six to eight people live in 10x12 feet structures. Experts note that if precautionary measures are not taken, the camps could be hotspots for the spread of the virus. Recently, in a single week, 11 people have been reported to have died with conditions similar to coronavirus: fever, cough and asthma. Lack of seriousness in controlling the spread of the virus is palpably demonstrated in a case involving two patients, residents of Block B and C of the Geneva Camp, who tested positive for coronavirus. In a report by the Gulf Today, lawyer-activist Khalid Hussain of the Council of Minorities asserted that two facilities, including the IEDCR which is dedicated to treat coronavirus cases, refused to admit them, declaring their condition “not critical”. All three minority groups discussed here meet the vulnerability criteria set by the Working Group on Regional Risk Communication and Community Engagement. They depend heavily on the informal economy; occupy areas prone to shocks; have inadequate access to social services or political influence; have limited capacities and opportunities to cope and adapt and have limited or no access to technologies. There is an urgent need to “give them priority assistance, and engage them in decision-making processes for response, recovery, preparedness, and risk reduction”. Covid-19 poses a serious challenge to those involved in framing policies and implementing programmes. Along with gearing up awareness programmes, there is an urgent need to acknowledge the special vulnerability of these minority groups and provide cash assistance to the neediest, set up adequate testing and treatment facilities in their close vicinity, and create conditions for their safe return to work.

C R Abrar is an academic.

Mobilising the spirit of Ramadan in the fight against Covid-19



MIR AFTABUDDIN AHMED

FROM a religious perspective, Ramadan has always been a time of self-reflection, restraint and altruism—and given the struggles being faced by daily wage earners and, in reality, a majority of Bangladeshis today, we have a unique opportunity to invest in our faith to collectively tackle the challenges posed by Covid-19. It goes without saying that this special month of fasting, prayer and community is going to be very different in 2020, compared to past instances—social distancing measures mean that the festive nature of Ramadan will be absent in its traditional form. Nevertheless, with Ramadan calling Muslims to reflect on their faith, we have a moral obligation to stand by the most vulnerable in our society, on a scale larger than perhaps any other time in our lifetimes. Let us think of this as an opportunity to serve our faith, at a time when it matters the most. In Islam, the idea of *Ithaar* translates to altruism—in simpler terms, the concept begs us as Muslims to prefer others over one self. Giving precedence to the other person, over individual wants, is something that is unrelentingly encouraged. In fact, specific occasions, like Ramadan, bring out the very best of Islamic altruism. And then of course, the concept of *Zakaat* comes into play—one of the five pillars of Islam, *Zakaat* is second only to *Salat* (Prayer) with respect to Quranic ranking of the pillars. In simpler words, the religious duty of alms-giving is treated as a civic obligation, and Muslims are expected to provide 2.5 percent of their total savings and wealth to the marginalised, poor and needy. This forms the very cornerstone of Islamic theology—and is a key duty which is promoted during Ramadan. Based on a person’s total value of possessions, one could evaluate *Zakaat* as a form of mandatory taxation—a kind of individualised and discretionary fiscal policy measure used to enhance equitable wealth distribution within communities. When it comes to supporting measures to alleviate hunger and poverty, either through charitable measures or mandatory *Zakaat* initiatives, Muslims tend to be more altruistic during

the month of Ramadan—and during this unique phase when congregations are discouraged, personal restraint encouraged, and physical interactions with community members barred, our entire focus as Muslims must be directed towards supporting the fight against Covid-19, while practicing our faith. In fairness however, religious obligations often carry greater traction with older members of families—Ramadan has been no different in the past. Nevertheless, given the accentuation of digital technology and the eagerness of youth groups to support initiatives in the battle against the coronavirus phenomenon, younger generations have an equal opportunity to invest their time in a very different aspect of Islam—an aspect often underrepresented across the media. On a personal note, I have joined a social movement called #BacharLorai (the fight to survive)—that is bringing together Bangladeshi expatriates (from Canada, Australia, USA and the UK), youth led initiatives, grassroots organisations and most importantly, Bangladeshi citizens, to do our bit in the fight against Covid-19. Our efforts are limited but directed towards Bangladesh, which is increasingly looking like a hotbed for disaster. For some perspective, two months ago, two Bangladeshis came together to create Resource-Coordination Network Bangladesh (RCNB). During that time, a few of my expat friends and I were involved in a public beneficiary campaign called *BacharLorai*. A month into spreading public awareness, feeding daily wage earners, assisting vulnerable communities and standing together with the healthcare sector, the two groups came together as one organisation, RCNB, to start a social movement: #BacharLorai. Looking back at our limited efforts, we successfully distributed healthcare masks to hospitals in Bangladesh, and raised funds for ongoing relief to feed daily wage earners who had lost their jobs to Covid-19 and for the penetration of public health messaging into rural communities. As we started to grow, the Network became stronger and #BacharLorai became dearer. From collaborations with reputed grassroots organisations to welcoming artists like Designify who contributed their talents to the cause, all our initiatives knowingly and unknowingly were operating in the very spirit of *Ithaar* as promoted in Islam.

As we near the end of the second phase of our approach, we are now placing a renewed focus on mosques, orphanages and the socioeconomically disadvantaged to diversify our efforts towards helping out our brothers and sisters in this time of need. RCNB and #BacharLorai is but a small speck amidst thousands of on-the-ground efforts by Bangladeshis to do their bit—and Ramadan provides an excellent segue for youth groups in particular, to fundraise in the name of prioritising our moral obligations. This brings us to my last point—it is imperative that youth groups and those fundraising during this time, use the spirit of Ramadan as a positive leverage

in workers’ insurance and an adept health infrastructure network, has made Bangladesh underprepared to face today’s calamity. The Government cannot address Covid-19 on its own—and therefore, private citizens stepping up is the only way that we can ensure that our people have a future. In hindsight, this very notion of giving and supporting one another, has made me feel closer to my faith than any other instances in my lifetime—Islamic teachings promote fundraising, charities and altruism, not as subsidiaries, but as fundamental aspects of our faith. I would urge youth groups in particular, to use the teachings of Islam and the values ingrained in Ramadan, to direct resources towards the most vulnerable in our society. Mobilising the spirit of Ramadan and tapping into positive religious sentiments may provide us with a collective ray of hope, in what is otherwise, a devastating situation. Furthermore, expatriate communities have the chance to give back to Bangladesh and recognise the privilege they have, by directing funds to organisations working in alleviating the struggles of communities at this time—sponsor *iftars*, support orphans or invest in any initiative you see fit. But contribute. Contribute as much as possible. And contribute in the name of your faith or an idea which motivates you. But contribute. We tend to practice the ceremonial aspects of faith. Islam promotes an additional narrative as well—that of preaching. In my interactions with my late Grandfather, he used to remind me of the precedence of social welfare and how preaching involves carrying these very teachings of Islam to our communities—those words, especially now, seem timeless. Let us preach and practice social welfare together and fight Covid-19 to the best of our abilities. I want to end by referring to a message of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), which carries great weight in today’s context: “Give charity without delay, for it stands in the way of calamity” (*Al-Tirmidhi*)—a calamity is in motion, but we have an opportunity to ensure a future for many. Let us do so. Let us come together in this #BacharLorai. To support the #BacharLorai movement, please email: bacharlorai2020@gmail.com Mir Aftabuddin Ahmed is a graduate in Economics and International Relations at The University of Toronto. He can be reached at atab.ahmed@mail.utoronto.ca.

Expatriate communities have the chance to give back to Bangladesh and recognise the privilege they have, by directing funds to organisations working in alleviating the struggles of communities at this time—sponsor iftars, support orphans or invest in any initiative you see fit. But contribute.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS	30 Plentiful	9 Road-house
1 Capital of Italia	32 Sum	10 Composer
5 Lily of “Grace and Frankie”	33 Diner dessert	Rorem
11 Captain of fiction	34 Scheduling aid	16 Cove
12 Galahad’s mother	38 Entirely	19 Broke
13 Wee bites	41 2017 Pixar film	20 River of Russia
14 Number in a sum	42 Judged	21 Singer Seeger
15 Issue a statement	43 Continental coin	22 Final, for one
17 History section	44 Not nervous	23 Bounce back
18 Accept without question	45 Goblet part	28 Puget Sound city
22 Lingerie item		29 Lists of candidates
24 Extra		30 Clumsy one
25 Earth-friendly prefix		31 Chops up
26 Contrived		35 Bonanza find
27 Closes		36 Lot unit
		37 Hotel unit
		38 Writer Tarbell
		39 Pay stub line
		40 Driving site

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TUESDAY’S ANSWERS

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