

# Asian values or a system of social protection

When will we decide where our priorities lie?



STEPS taken to combat the coronavirus have severely disrupted public life and have put the livelihoods of millions in jeopardy. The global economy is in deep recession, especially the economies of the developed world; and there is a great deal of uncertainty as to when and how it might end. This is perhaps the deepest crisis human beings are facing after the Great Depression of the 1930s and the Second World War.

In many countries, the recession has already resulted in sharp increases in unemployment. In USA for example, it rose from 3.5 percent in February to 14.7 percent in April. The figure for May is feared to be close to 20 percent.

Some countries are trying to prevent an increase in unemployment by putting workers on furlough. The UK is providing support to private companies by paying 80 percent of the wages/salaries (up to a maximum of GBP 2500 per month) if employees are not laid off. The self-employed are also being covered. And yet, there is doubt if a rise in unemployment can be prevented. McKinsey—a consulting firm—forecasts that the rate of unemployment in the country is likely to go up to 9 percent soon. Of course, the unemployed in such countries can receive support through unemployment benefits.

In Bangladesh, the lockdown imposed in the last week of March brought public life, and with it economic activities, to a standstill. Although economic activities were partially opened in May, it is extremely uncertain when—if at all—life will go back to its normal rhythm. The shutdown has adversely affected employment and the labour market, but there is no data on this because such data is not collected on a regular basis. The latest labour force survey, carried out by the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS), dates back to 2016-17; and we don't know when the next survey will be done. If it is not undertaken this year (and soon), we shall never know what the unemployment rate is now because the data is collected on the basis of activities during the

week preceding the survey.

In the absence of concrete data, I made a guesstimate and concluded that nearly one crore people may have lost their livelihoods, based on reports found in *The Daily Star*. To this one crore, one has to add another 30 lakh who were already unemployed before the crisis. That would imply that about one in five members of the labour force were jobless during the shutdown. The question is: how are these people and their family members surviving?

Like in other countries, the government in our country has also announced a package of measures in response to the economic crisis that resulted from the shutdown, and some are already being implemented. The first step announced was support for export-oriented industries in the form of wages of workers so that lay-offs could be prevented. But the component for support to the poor who lost their livelihoods came last. Cash support of Tk 2,000 (later raised to Tk 2,500) for 50 lakh poor was announced on May 1—five weeks after the shutdown was announced.

The cash mentioned above is supposed to cover two crore poor people (at the rate of four members per person). But the amount is just one-fourth of what is considered to be the poverty line income (using data from the Household Income and Expenditure Survey of 2016, my estimate for 2020 is Tk 10,000 per month per household). And the number to be covered would be about 60 percent of the estimated poor in the country—if all the recipients are indeed poor.

In addition to the cash support for the poor, the well-to-do of the society are being exhorted to come forward and help them. Like in crises before, our society—including NGOs, individuals and informal organisations—has come forward with help for the needy. While the size and coverage of such efforts vary, there is no doubt that they are playing an important role in staving off hunger in the country.

This reminds me of the experience of the Asian economic crisis of 1997-98, which had severely affected a number of countries including the Republic of Korea, Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines and Thailand. During that crisis, countries that were once touted as “tigers” and were enjoying a long period of high growth fell into deep recession.

The result was unemployment for millions of people. Basking in the glory of high growth and rapid rates of poverty reduction, those countries did not build up any social protection system. As a result, the sharp increase in unemployment led to a reversal of the trend in poverty. A large number of workers migrated back to their rural roots and had to depend on the support of their families. And it was in that context that the term “Asian values” came into circulation—

incidentally, is lower than one day's wage of an unskilled labourer. In 2018-19, the coverage that was budgeted for was 40 lakh persons, which is about 40 percent of the people over 65 years of age.

There are a number of employment programmes for the poor which are basically like public work. For example, in 2017-18, the targeted coverage of the Employment Generation Programme for the Poor was 967,051 persons. Looking at the work-months

estimated their total coverage to be about 45 percent of the extreme poor.

In the context of the employment programmes mentioned above, another experience may be worth recounting. When the countries of East and South East Asia attained success with growth and poverty reduction, they had terminated such programmes. But in the wake of the economic crisis in 1997-98, they found such programmes to be relevant again and revived them—at least temporarily. They had to do so because there was no institutional mechanism for providing social protection to the unemployed. In the current context of Bangladesh, there seems to be a good case for expanding and strengthening the employment programmes for providing income support to the poor and jobless. India legislated a nationwide employment guarantee programme in 2005 which is also designed to act as a mechanism for providing unemployment benefits.

A common refrain about social protection in developing countries is that it is a luxury that they cannot afford. There are also those who consider this to be pure dole and hence not desirable. But such arguments no longer sound convincing in Bangladesh—a country that has moved from annual per capita income of USD 100 to about USD 2,000, and is now aspiring to reach USD 4,000 in another ten years (the target date for reaching the upper middle-income status). Universal access to basic health care and income support for *all* aged and the unemployed should no longer be considered a luxury. Of course, the entire cost does not have to be borne from the government's budget. For example, unemployment benefits can be contributory. These are matters of detail that can be worked out if policymakers are interested.

The key question that is staring at us today is whether we shall continue our single-minded pursuit of GDP growth and fall back on Asian values (or a Bangladeshi version of that) at times of crises or look at ways of improving the quality of life for all. It is a matter of priorities and for policymakers to decide. Once the choice is made, the details and modalities can be worked out.

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PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

70-year-old Aleya Begum, who lives alone on the footpath in Katabon area, is too weak to stand in queues for relief. The pandemic has only exacerbated her daily struggle to survive.

describing the way the poor were provided with support and protection. Of course, the experience was regarded as a wake-up call and steps were taken later to build up social protection systems.

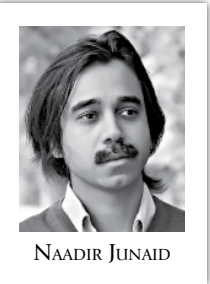
When one talks about social protection and safety nets in Bangladesh, one is usually referred to the hundred plus government schemes for a variety of target groups—though not the unemployed. To get an idea about the amounts and coverage involved, take the old age allowance as an example. The amount is Tk. 500 per month, which,

mentioned, it seems that the allocation was for about one month's work per person. On the other hand, if one uses the household survey data of the BBS, the number of extreme poor households in the country seems to be around 40 lakh. Putting the above figures together, one can conclude that about one fourth of the extreme poor were able to get one-month's work through this programme.

In addition, there are other programmes like food for work and cash for work programmes. Using the government's data, I

## TRIBUTE

# Courage, thy name is Devdas



RECENTLY, Mujibor Rahman Devdas passed away. Although the state honoured him with the Ekushey Padak, he had to lead his life in isolation and remained totally unknown to many people. At this time of immersion in the various lures of the consumer society, do many people show an interest in knowing about the torments people suffered during the Liberation War? Do contemporary citizens bother to think of their countrymen who sacrificed their present in 1971 for the future of many others?

Mujibor Rahman started teaching with a brilliant academic background. He stood second in the merit list in the HSC examinations and obtained a Masters' degree in Mathematics from the University of Dhaka, securing first position in first class. Later, he studied Mathematics at the University of Melbourne. In 1971, he was a Senior Lecturer in the Department of Mathematics in Rajshahi University. After the military crackdown on March 25, Rajshahi University turned into a Pakistani concentration camp and slaughterhouse. Hundreds of Bengalis were interrogated, tortured and murdered in certain buildings of the university. At that time, Nazim Mahmud was a public relations officer in Rajshahi University. His memoir *Jokhon Kreetodashi: Smriti 71* depicts those days of horror, humiliation and heartbreak in the Rajshahi University campus.

In those grim months at Rajshahi University, pro-liberation professors were taken from their residences by the Pakistani

army for questioning. Some of them returned, and some never did. Women and adolescent girls were raped by the Pakistani jawans, belongings of the teachers and officers were looted from their houses, and the decaying corpses of university peons were later found inside a building. University employees and people of the surrounding areas were taken to the army camp located in Shaheed Zoha Hall. Later, many of them were executed. After independence, various mass graves were discovered in the open area beside Shaheed Zoha Hall.

According to Nazim Mahmud's memoirs, some non-Bengali as well as Bengali teachers of Rajshahi University became collaborators of the Pakistani army. A Deputy Registrar used to help the Pakistani army to capture pro-liberation professors. Then Vice-Chancellor of Rajshahi University was known for his alleged leanings toward the Pakistani authorities. Suspecting that Nazim Mahmud was not a supporter of the Pakistani establishment, the Pakistani army ordered the bank to freeze his account. A very anxious Nazim Mahmud sought help of the Vice-Chancellor, who was also his teacher at the University of Dhaka. However, instead of reassuring his former student, he advised that if the Pakistani soldiers intend to shoot Nazim Mahmud, he should request them to fire the gun at the middle of his forehead. Then the death would be absolutely painless.

In this petrifying situation, the pro-liberation people in the Rajshahi University campus became very apprehensive. Teachers and officers used to greet the Pakistani jawans very cordially. At a time when it was unthinkable for anyone residing on campus to defy the dominance of the Pakistani army, a letter from Senior Lecturer Mujibor



Mujibor Rahman Devdas

Rahman, sent to the University Registrar on May 10, 1971, stunned everyone. In this letter, Mujibor Rahman stated his opinions clearly: “This is to inform the authority that I am going to leave the campus since the university campus has, at the moment, been degraded to the state of military camp. I may come to the campus when the university regains its status of sanctity and starts functioning as a university in its true sense... I hope to be kept informed about the situation here in the address noted

below, where I hope to spend these days of calamity, genocide and restricted freedom of movement. Please note the change of my name and my new name should be used in future communications.”

He signed the letter using his new name—Devdas. When everyone was trying to prove themselves to be good Muslims in order to please the Pakistani army, Mujibor Rahman's act of changing his Muslim name indicated his anger against the ideology of the Pakistani army. Soon, the army was informed of this letter and the pro-Pakistani Deputy Registrar took the army to the residence of this rebellious teacher. Mujibor Rahman introduced himself as Devdas. The army captain asked him what he meant by genocide in his letter. “That which you are committing these days,” he replied. He was arrested right away. Nazim Mahmud wrote in his memoirs that later, in front of the administration building, he saw Devdas sitting quietly alongside the captain inside the army vehicle. There was no sign of fear or anxiety on his face.

We don't know what treatment Devdas received from the Pakistani army in the following days, but the incarceration took a heavy toll on him. In September, he was released from jail and he was suffering from a psychiatric disorder at the time. After independence, he did not get the official approval to resume his work at Rajshahi University. In 1971, when many teachers and officers acted differently in order to save their lives, Mujibor Rahman refused to accept dishonour. In spite of living within the clutches of the Pakistani army, he condemned their aggression and genocide. Putting his life at risk, he denounced the degradation of the university to a military camp.

If such a person, with astonishing courage and moral fibre, was in need of medical care in independent Bangladesh, wasn't it expected that the university authorities would arrange for his medical treatment? Unfortunately, Mujibor Rahman did not receive importance in the new country. Out of frustration, he resigned from the university and went to his native village in Joypurhat where he spent the rest of his life. After several years, Rajshahi University organised a programme to honour him. At that time, after visiting a museum, he wrote in the comment book: “Visited the museum on August 10, 1998. I hope history will be able to overcome the distortion of facts depicted through pictures here.”

A documentary titled *Aami Kaan Pete Roi* by Mofidul Hoque depicts how Mujibor Rahman led a dismal life in his village. He hardly talked to his family members and most of the time, he used to sit alone morosely. In 1971, he did not put up with the crimes committed by the Pakistani army and their local collaborators. By showing extraordinary courage, he set a remarkable example of deploring Pakistani military brutality. The Pakistani army could not defeat him. But we failed him in independent Bangladesh by relegating him to oblivion. When we still witness unjust acts, and conformity to the ideas of the powerful becomes commonplace, it is important to remember a person like him. Let us do so in days to come because the fearless protest of Mujibor Rahman Devdas can inspire people to oppose and denunciate injustice without showing fear.

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ON THIS DAY IN HISTORY

ELIZABETH II CROWNED QUEEN

June 2, 1953

On this day in 1953, 27-year-old Elizabeth II, the elder daughter of King George VI, was crowned queen of the United Kingdom at Westminster Abbey, having taken the throne upon her father's death in February 1952.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

1 Fidel Castro's brother

5 Elephant of story

10 "The Lego Movie" hero

12 Banded quartz

13 Huge retail outlets

15 Quarterback Manning

16 "You bet!"

17 Boater or bowler

18 Opera's Stratas

20 Do some modeling

21 Some messages

22 Made fun of

23 Theater worker

25 Niger neighbor

28 Conspicuous

31 Doily stuff

32 Take, as the bus

34 "Not – dare!"

35 Bear's home

36 Verb for you

37 Emphasizes

40 Like some newspapers

41 Tennis star Chris

42 Pillow covers

43 Commotions

DOWN

1 Stopwatch

2 Charm

3 Strike caller

4 Director Ang

5 Cave creatures

6 In the past

7 Go carousing

8 Relaxed

9 Took a breather

11 Secret meetings

14 Coasts

19 Radiate

20 Did a KP chore

24 Show clearly

25 Rain source

26 Daryl of "Splash"

27 Maine park

29 Brought up

30 Bullfight star

33 High homes

35 Prohibition backers

38 Shade tree

39 Eggs, to Caesar

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YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

S	W	A	M		S	H	A	R	P
H	I	D	E			P	O	S	E
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BEEBLE BAILEY

BY MORT WALKER

BABY BLUES

BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT