

## Fighting Unemployment

Even if we accept the conservative figure of the country's total unemployed, 17 million, as provided by the Director General of the Bureau of Manpower, Employment and Training (BMET), we cannot help getting alarmed. The message is quite clear: either we do all we can in our capacity to tackle the problem or perish. The government, it seems, is also aware of the monumental task ahead and has even been contemplating to set up employment offices in all the 64 districts of the country. The proposed step is going to be an improvement on the existing service system in that it has sought to make registration of all the unemployed obligatory for recruitment by the employers — government or private.

Sure enough, the move is going to infuse a sense of discipline in the labour market — both domestic and foreign. But registration alone is hardly enough justification for setting up of as many as 64 employment offices, the establishment cost of which will be a staggering sum. Registration or not, the fact remains that the huge army of the unemployed need employment opportunities far wider in range and option. The proposed district-level employment offices will do them a great favour if they can help create jobs in greater numbers and set the standard for the job-seekers quite high for their employment. Under no circumstances can the qualities in order be compromised, rather there should be a mechanism to develop knowledge, technical in particular, and skills matching the ever more challenging tasks of the time.

If the employment offices shut their eyes to this most fundamental requirement, they will end up doing virtually nothing. Most likely, the procedural bottlenecks will cause the job-seekers endless harassment and even sufferings. As an additional by-product, corruption and malpractices cannot be ruled out in the process. Considering the pattern of present unemployment, the task of reducing the gap between the requirements of the employers and the type of education and training of the unemployed manpower should be assigned to those employment offices. This has not necessarily to be free of charge. Evidently a lot of coordination work will be required to be done between and among different government institutes and agencies. Almost the same amount of cooperation and coordination will be on demand from the private or non-governmental establishments and organisations. Only in such a role, the proposed employment offices make sense.

The fact that 30 per cent posts are now lying vacant — quite ironically — is an eloquent testimony to the incompatibility between the demand and supply at the job market. No denying the fact, at the same time, that the shortage in the supply of trained and skilled manpower in the technical area vis-a-vis an abnormally high turnout of general educated ones need a thorough review of our education system. The Ministry of Labour and Manpower, in cooperation with the Ministry of Education, must evolve a formula how a balance can be struck between the job requirements and the production of the education system. At the same time, the need for skill development by the illiterate unemployed is no less urgent. Vocational training and guidance may indeed work wonder provided that the programmes are well thought out and comprehensive.

No doubt, there have to be separate institutions for these jobs but the employment offices, once again, ought to play the role of a superb planner and coordinator. A daunting task, but the devolution of power and responsibilities stands a real chance of squarely addressing the problem. Past experiences of a centralised employment exchange bureau are far from happy. But then the success of the district employment offices will depend primarily on the employment generation which again is directly linked to the socio-economic condition of the country. As long as small-scale agro-based industries cannot be set up in a greater number, the regional offices themselves are bound to face unemployment. Efforts have to be expanded specially to building up such an agro-industrial base.

## A Brave Move by Mahathir

The relationship between the federal government in Kuala Lumpur and some of the state administrations in Malaysia has been often difficult. Ever since the establishment of the federation in 1963, the central government, ruled by the United Malay National Organisation (UMNO) without any break have had problems in dealing with the states in eastern Malaysia, especially Sabah, which is geographically separated by sea from the mainland. The problems are compounded when any of the states votes an opposition party to power. It gets more awkward for Kuala Lumpur when such a state is under the figurehead control of a local Sultan who treats the central government in Kuala Lumpur with hostility.

These two factors, the administration under an opposition party and the presence of a hostile ruler, have combined to make the Kelantan state in peninsular Malaysia a difficult one for the government of Dr Mahathir Mohammad in Kuala Lumpur to deal with. The state administration which is now under fundamentalist Party Islam (PAS) has just announced the introduction of what it describes as an Islamic code. Under the proposed code, an adulterer would face being whipped or stoned to death, while thieves could have their hands chopped off. The code, PAS legal officials proudly claim, is similar to that of the Arab world. A good part of what is indeed a disturbing news is that Prime Minister Mahathir has reacted firmly against the move, vowing to prevent the state from putting the proposed code into practice. He has just declared at a press conference that the code differs from the traditional Islamic laws.

We commend the Malaysian leader, a devout Muslim by any standard, for taking this straightforward and a brave position on a matter which causes concern to governments in many Muslim countries, with some, such as Pakistan, succumbing to the fundamentalist pressure. A multi-racial and multi-religious country, it is particularly important for Malaysia to stay away from any form of fundamentalism, the kind that has reportedly put the opposition leader, Benazir Bhutto of Pakistan, under a threat of death. We hope, Kuala Lumpur enjoys the necessary legal power to undo the move proposed by Kelantan state administration with or without the support of the Sultan.

# Lots of Jobs in Asia — in a Few Places

Alan Chakley writes from Hong Kong

**This is the paradox in Asia — there are millions who are workless or underemployed, right next door to millions who have more job offers than they can fill**

**P**OLICE clamber over a large construction site in Hong Kong, and flush out a dozen disconsolate young men in grubby jeans. They have been smuggled in from China because, their employers say, there is an acute shortage of construction labour.

The newly well-off citizens of Hong Kong prefer white-collar work. The gold-plated offices in the commercial districts are a great attraction, against a muddy track around one of the many new concrete high-rises, and not even higher pay will draw today's young.

At precisely the same time that the police are combing the sites for illegal entrants, a procession of labour union leaders is climbing the slopes of Hong Kong Island to present a petition to the Governor. They unfurl a big banner, and shout a few slogans, protesting against allowing more foreign workers into the territory.

This, they say, will threaten a labour surplus and depress wages. A Governor's aide in a business suit hurries to the gates of the Governor's mansion, and a union leader hands him a thick brown envelope. The aide smiles, murmurs a few words to the group, and returns inside. It's all very gentlemanly.

But Hong Kong's unions don't have a very strong argument at the moment. The unemployment rate has been below 2 per cent of the workforce in recent years, and that is what economic theorists call "over-employment." What they mean is that there are not enough mobile people who can

readily fill up the new gaps in the job market.

The two events, however, exemplify the paradox in Asia. There are millions who are workless or underemployed, right next door to millions who have more job offers than they can fill.

As the UN "Economic and Social Survey of Asia and the Pacific" put it this year: "On one side are the rapidly industrialising countries where demand for skilled workers has exceeded supply, and on the other the low-performing economies whose difficulties have been compounded by high unemployment rates."

The number of foreign workers varies greatly among Asian countries, but the numbers are rising everywhere.

Japan is, expectably, the biggest magnet: there are 360,000 known foreigners working there legally, and estimates of illegals run as high as 200,000. The illegals include a wide range of people, from fisherfolk and construction labourers to performers and "hostesses" in Japan's demi-monde entertainment industry.

Japan has been remarkably liberal in the granting of visitor visas. For many nationalities, visas are given on arrival fairly freely, and are easily extended.

This indeed is a problem for all countries which attract job-seekers — the tourism authorities want lots of visitors welcomed, and do not want them annoyed by searching questions from immigration staff. And if the visitor puts "business" as the reason for his stay, then the departments of industry and trade don't want

the immigration staff to turn away what could be wonderfully valuable investors and buyers.

Another magnet for incoming workers is Hong Kong, which has about 200,000 legal foreign workers of all nationalities and grades, the biggest group being some 70,000 domestic servants from the Philippines who have been recruited over the last ten years as the old Chinese servants retire and are not replaced by the younger generation.

For many years, illegal workers sneaking in from next-door China were allowed to stay if they managed to avoid border patrols and landed up with the urban areas. This liberal kind of "catch me if you can" game to longer applies, though.

About 15,000 illegal arrivals were arrested last year and were promptly sent back to their countries of origin (mostly China). At any time the number of undetected illegals is probably quite small.

One sad aspect of Hong Kong's arrivals is the fact that over 50,000 Vietnamese "boat people" have entered the territory. At first, when numbers were smaller, they were given some living space and allowed to take up work during the daytime, awaiting refugee status in a Western country. But faction fighting among them

led to some severe damage, and so over the last ten years they have all been shut up in camps.

Just recently, the number of new arrivals from Vietnam has fallen right off (only eight in the first six months of this year). Small groups are being accepted abroad, and others sent back voluntarily or involuntarily, so it is estimated that all the Vietnamese will have gone in a few years.

Singapore, having reached a high income level like Hong Kong, has a special difficulty. Strictly speaking, everyone is a "foreigner" in the island republic, except perhaps some Malay fisherfolk and sailors who were using the island when the British took the place over in the early 1800s.

But now, 173 years later, the population is 80 per cent Chinese (mostly from Fujian province). When the island broke away from Malaysia, the Malays and Indonesians who were not already living there became foreigners.

Economic development has been so strong that there is an acute labour shortage, partly because the local people have decided to have small families, resulting in a threatened shrinkage of the workforce. However, to allow in much more foreign labour may, in the government's view, lead to social tensions.

Singapore wants to keep the state a Chinese society. There are some 200,000 legal immigrant workers, and the number of illegals may be as high as 100,000. The latter are chiefly from Malaysia and Indonesia, because Singapore's borders are so close to those neighbours that they are like a sieve.

Judging the right numbers of new workers to allow in is, of course, difficult, and the government tends to keep tight limits. So some of Singapore's labour-intensive industries are moving out to Indonesia and the Philippines — ship-building and repairing, for instance. The same decision is being made by industries in Hong Kong and Macau, which are moving garment and toy factories into mainland China.

The economies of Malaysia and Thailand are now soaring into the "dragon" class, and this presents problems. Malaysia has just begun a serious crackdown on illegal workers, who are estimated to total 400,000 (mostly from Indonesia and the Philippines). But the government grants amnesties and permits for small businesses.

Thailand has only recently seen its economy soar in growth, and its illegals are coming chiefly from Indochina. Laotian immigrants have been moving into the poor farmlands of the northeast for many years. As the rural Thais have drifted into Bangkok and the bigger provincial towns, attracted by high urban wages, the Laotian folk have taken their place naturally and fairly

peacefully on the farmlands. On Thailand's Burma and Cambodia borders, drenched in misery and blood, few Khmers or tribes such as the Karens want to enter the workforce. They take refuge in Thailand, but stay ready to return to their native countries as and when peace comes.

Just recently, Taiwan has become famous for the fact that it now has the biggest foreign reserves in the world. So it has become another attractive place for foreign labour, and about 60,000 illegals are now in the island. Like Malaysia, Taiwan has offered an amnesty for those who apply for work permits.

Taiwan's employers, especially those in the construction trades and heavy industries, say they are very short of workers — for the familiar reason that the local people now prefer clean-collar jobs. But the Taiwan authorities fear social disruption, and so insist that foreign labour stays in dormitories under a nightly curfew.

South Korea, where employers say they are 360,000 workers short, is also taking tough measures over foreign labour — again, for social reasons.

In a perfectly mobile world, of course, the unemployment problems of Indonesia, the Philippines and the countries of South Asia would be solved naturally, the labour-short industries from other countries would move into them. This is happening to some extent as foreign investment edges abroad but, as we see, social considerations raise a barrier.

— Depthnews Asia

# The Disabled Need Socio-economic Security

by Md. Shahidul Haque

**I**T is well known today that life is becoming expensive gradually and for the disabled persons, much more expensive.

A disabled person needs to live independently. The cost of transport, medical facility, mobility aids, house cleaning, cooking, shopping means in every sphere of life he/she might need help of attendant and all these extras cost money.

The government in most countries are aware of such needs and feel that they have an obligation towards lessening the financial burden of disabled persons. But in our country this is found only in feeling but not in practice. This is not an appeal for charity, but a question of rights. We feel government should set an example by introducing grant and disabled people should be allowed to claim it from the government.

On the other hand, for social security, insurance companies are playing a vital role in this sector. Government can influence insurance companies to introduce a special disability insurance. Disability insurance has become part of social security law in several countries. In USA the social security law of 1954 gives certain facilities to the disabled persons. In UK through National Health Service has been available to the disabled from 1948. In Netherlands, since October 1976, the Disabled Insurance Act and the general disablement benefits were introduced. The Dutch tax system has provided disabled people the right of tax exemption. In Germany there are provisions for the disabled for social insurance. On the basis of the above facts, we feel a kind of social insurance should be introduced in Bangladesh.

## Rehabilitation

Although the UN-declared Disabled Decade has just indeed, most people who are suffering still don't know about

this decade and those who are related with the development of the disabled section in the society have been awakened just now. This decade has been possible by the personal initiative of Julian Francis, who was a CUSO fellow, now posted in Indonesia. He tried to motivate the disabled persons to raise their own voice for their own rights and to claim rehabilitation services for the disabled both from the government and non-government sector. The need is so much and the facilities available are so little that much more needs to be done and scope of social service for the disabled persons, needs to be expanded hundred times more than the existing facilities for medical, mobility aids counselling and vocational training education housing accessibility etc. In 1973 USA introduced Rehabilitation Act for the disabled section of their country. In UK they have employment rehabilitation centre throughout the country. In Federal Republic of Germany, in 1970 the government took an action programme to standardize and expand the facilities of rehabilitation for the benefit of disabled section in medical, technical and orthopaedic aid physiotherapy. Even in India they have a National Institute of Orthopedically Handicapped where for the development of the disabled all sorts of care are taken. In comparison to what we see one may well ask what steps have been taken by our government for the development of this section? What will be the reply to that? Do we ever feel that this is not only the component of health sector, but a special sector of the development where every body shall have to give special attention? Some self-help programme of development for the disabled have been taken by the NGOs. They are trying to rehabilitate this section. But this continuity is uncertain; there is no sustainability of

their programme for which they are not able to bring out any better result and thus set up any module for rehabilitation of the disabled.

Rehabilitation is a long term process. The main objective is to develop disabled people to lead their life independently on the basis of their own resources, qualities, facilities adjusting with present socio-economic-cultural conditions. Much of what is needed to be done to rehabilitate the disabled can be achieved by extending the facility and the right information, motivation, moral and physical support to the local community. And what is true of rehabilitation is truer of prevention of disability. Then this rehabilitation should be given a top priority by both the government and non-government agencies.

At the end we want to draw attention to integrate the disabled with the rest of the community not only giving facilities to them but with the motivation that we must accept them as our own fellow beings and we create an atmosphere where they could live peacefully. Keeping this idea, SARPV, a non-government organization working with the disabled, is working to develop the quality and talents of the disabled and remove the atmosphere barriers and loneliness thus trying to create a surrounding full of love and affection so that a disabled person feels that he is not an unwanted persons in the family, community and nation at large.

With the development of science and technology the disabled themselves of the necessary aids available. Again cost and expenses question arises due to lack of availability of proper assistance.

Observing all the problems with disabilities in the community the United Nations declared Disabled Decade from 1981 for their equal rights

and opportunity to live amongst without being treated as strange or second class citizens. Disabled people don't want pity or sympathy, they want their right community support and assurance that they have an equal place in the community.

Our liberation movement

created a large number of disabled persons in the country. Considering all these, the Constitution Part-III, Section 28, Clause No. 3 declared the right of the disabled persons, but in practice this is virtually absent.

So let us remember the promise of the Resolution of the UN Decade of the Disabled

and try to give them the honour which has been promised by the makers of the constitution of Bangladesh — equal rights and opportunity for all disabled persons.

The writer is the founder of Social Assistance and Rehabilitation for the Physically Vulnerable (SARPV), Mohammadpur, Dhaka.

## OPINION

### Ascribed Status

I am an admirer of the writings of your esteemed columnist Shahed Latif whose very thought provoking and revolutionary ideas must have drawn the attention of the intelligentsia. At times I feel that some of his writings, which throw beacon light on many urgent national issues, deserve to be included in school and college text books. But his write-up on "The Dominance of the Ascribed Status" (The Daily Star 31.7.92) has been disappointing because of his unkind comments against a class of people, whom he calls "ascribed status" holders, that is, scion of the "blue-blood". Perhaps he has oversimplified an eternal issue by tracing the root causes of the degradation of our society to the Nawabs, Rajas and Zamindars who ruled over this part of the subcontinent not as outsiders but as representatives of the people during the time of the British. He is, in fact, talking of "blue-blood" is sheer nonsense! Some years ago, while donating blood for a voluntary organisation in London, Prince Charles looking at his own blood joked by saying, "I don't find it blue, it is all red!" Shahed Latif's annoyance with Khan Bahadurs, Roy Bahadurs, Nawabs, Rajas or Zamindars is understandable. But the fact remains that the so-called "ascribed status" holders and even the last batch of their descendants had left our political or economic stage long ago. Who are at the helm of affairs now? Did not the country get its desired leaderships of the so-called "achieved status" holders after 1971? The leaderships during the last two decades were not in any way connected with the people of "ascribed status", except perhaps through matrimonial links! After independence, leaderships did grow from the grassroots level which was desirable from many considerations, including preference to merit instead of parentage or high birth. Though a closed chapter in the context of the present socio-economic situation, Shahed Latif's plea for completely forgetting the past will do more harm than good for the society. After all, "culture" should precede "status". And, culture, which is the way of life of a people, is not automatically born, nor it can be acquired except through long and arduous practice of reading, thinking, understanding and then doing", as one columnist recently put it, for the welfare of the society. Some political thinkers of today have been preaching that now is the time to return to "values" which are essential in the business of successful government-running. What for Indian President Shankar Dayal

Sharma got a lot eulogies? The reason is one: he carries with him learning, culture, tradition and determination to uphold the Constitution. How many of our "achieved status" holder politicians on military dictatorships could do it here? I leave the answer to your esteemed readers. Shahed Latif, who has emotionally, but aptly, pleaded the case of the "commoners" for acquiring social and political leadership in our country, will certainly agree that one Benazir Bhutto, or one Indira or one Shere Bangla A K Fazlul Huq or H S Suhrawardy, or a Sir Salimullah is born only once in a century. But all of them were the scions of "blue-blood" having well known parentage. Were they not "achieved status" holders as well? Have we been able to make one Danbir Charid Mia of Korotia or one N N Dutta of Srikanth? Not even one R P Saha, who represented "achieved status" and not "ascribed status", has taken his birth during the last two decades.

What contributions the so-called "achieved status" holders, who are now at the helm of affairs, have so far made to uplift the lot of the poor people? Every one is busy in building his own house! Perhaps late Mahub Alam 'Chashi' was aware of the supremacy of the "achieved status" well ahead of his time and this is why despite his being a successful diplomat and civil servant, he entitled him as "chashi" (cultivator), alas now dead! Yes, one can be proud of his culture (in the sense of tradition) be it agriculture, pisciculture or horticulture. Perhaps one reason why communism failed is that the communists did not create wealth but collected wealth of others to distribute among the "proletariats". Why the Russian agricultural farms never saw a good crop is no more a mystery now. All the Russians were protagonists of "achieved status"! In their realm of thinking, they bade "goodbye" to the past and wanted to live on the "present" alone. But they are now trying to re-establish old tradition and tested values.

One pertinent question: how many cases of defalcation were there when the Nawabs or Rajas were in the helm of affairs in erstwhile Bengal governments? They were not upstarts but elected representatives of the people to the legislature. They were elected through popular votes like today but could never think of stealing money from the government exchequer. For doing politics they spent their own money, in some cases, their fathers' money, for the advancement of education and

culture. Most of the renowned schools and colleges were built by them. Today's achievement is the result of their philanthropic activities which in fact nurtured their dreams of a 'homeland' which was ultimately achieved. 'Achieved status' should not make one ungrateful! Moreover, the present state of affairs in this country should be an eye-opener to all. What a startling disclosure Lt Gen Mir Shaukat Ali, MP, has recently made in the parliament that Lt Gen H M Ershad smuggled out briefcases full of dollars! The present-day smugglers and black marketers are not from the 'ascribed status'-holding families. It is only an accident and democratic miracle that the unarmed civilians have succeeded in sending a powerful General like H M Ershad behind bars. Perhaps the strength of the 'people's power' has been tested! Again it is a mystery and democratic miracle that cases have been started against many civil and military high-ups for alleged corruption. The parliament has discussed, though belatedly and inadequately, the law and order situation in the country. The Home Minister has assured that he is preparing a list of 'terrorists'. Who are riding rough shod on the sentiments of the innocent people? Certainly not the people of 'ascribed status'! Who are going to own tax-free cars? Will it not be the symbol of both 'ascribed' and 'achieved' status? What about kickbacks from other deals?

Fortunately, the 250 NGOs are now playing the role of the forgotten Nawabs and Zamindars who were done away with long ago but not yet completely forgotten! It is a pity that although the traditional philanthropists have left the scene long long ago yet their very names are eye-sore to many persons. Were not Haji Mohammad Mohsin and Nobel prize-winning poet Rabindra Nath Tagore Zamindars? Of course it is funny that the 'ordinary' people still remember them with due respect and gratitude. It is because that unlike the first generation leadership of 'achieved status' they were more 'trusted worth' or tested friends?

On top of everything, our unfortunate country is a 'divided nation' — religiously, politically, economically and socially. The two top leaders have failed to stop their routine mudslinging even while living poles apart. Are not the Nawabs and Zamindars of the good old days turning sides in their graves? One can only ponder: 'Whither Bangladesh?'

Abdul Kader  
Purana Paltan, Dhaka.

## To the Editor...

### Biggest hospital is sick

Sir, This has a reference to Mr A S M Nurunnabi's "Down to Earth" (Sat, 8th August) which presents a dismal picture of treatment at the Dhaka Medical College Hospital.

Even if there is some semblance of medical treatment in the DMCH and the other urban centres, the services in the rural areas is almost non-existent. Some of these inadequacies are due to the severe resource constraints, while the others are man-made. Within the financial grants made to the DMC Hospital, the whole area can be kept clean, the essential maintenance and repairs done timely, and the patients supplied with hygienic food. With a more efficient management, and greater human interest things can be improved to a great extent.

Now we have to look into the macro issues. With the government's declared policy of free market and privatisation, the time has come to strengthen the social sectors, such as health and education, which are two of the five basic needs of any democratic and

civilised society. Both health and education are required to be given top priority in the allocation of our scarce resources. At least ten per cent of our revenue expenditure be allocated to the health sector, and another ten per cent, to the education sector. Similar allotment may be made in the development budget.

The investment and expenditure as indicated above, will have a direct impact on poverty alleviation to which the government is committed.

Shahabuddin Mahtab  
Dharmondi R/A, Dhaka

### "Harassment"

Sir, Although agreeing with Mr F R Chowdhury of Lalmitia, Dhaka, insofar as he, in his letter captioned "Harassment" (August 3), suggests investigation into what he has termed as "arbitrary marking system" of the incoming passengers' luggage at ZIA, I wonder why he has abstained from giving his full address. How can the authorities concerned contact him in the event of an investigation into his alleged harassment by some customs officials?

If we want to put an end to the rampant corruption which we never tire of talking about, I wish we mustered the guts to belt the cat.

Fazlul Kabir  
6/12, Bailey Square, Dhaka

(We usually publish short address of letter writers and the address was also shortened from 2/9 F Lalmitia, Dhaka—1207. Edit)

### Nazrul songs

Sir, Recently the Electro-band (India) Pvt Ltd has released a cassette of Ferdousi Rahman's Nazrul Giti, the title of which is — "Nadir Nam Shoi Anjana". The album contains some popular songs of the great poet Kazi Nazrul Islam including Nadir Nam Shoi Anjana, Paddar Dheure, Shunno Ea Buke, etc.

The songs are well sung by the celebrated singer and the recording is also very good. I believe, all types of music listeners will like the Nazrul songs in "Nadir Nam Shoi Anjana."

M Zahidul Haque  
Asstt Prof, BAC, Dhaka