

Our Achievements and Afflictions

The Progress of Nations 1994, an annual report brought out by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) has extensively dwelt on Bangladesh to highlight its successes and failures in a comprehensive manner. Some of its findings are really alarming, others are less so and still others are quite reassuring almost to the point of contradiction. On one side of the picture is a grim warning that 93 per cent of children here suffer from malnutrition, 65 per cent of them as acutely as to have their physical growth stunted. On the other side, however, is a considerably bright, if not rosy, picture in that the country's achievements in the areas of family planning, Expanded Programme for Immunization (EPI), Oral Rehydration Therapy (ORT), safe drinking water, iodization of salt and many more of the health sector have been lauded by the UN agency.

The apparent contradictions between such pictures are not irreconcilable if only the obtaining situation here is taken fully into account. For example, given the nation's per capita GNP (US \$ 220 in 1992), one-third of children under five should have been the ideal or expected level of the malnourished, whereas the country has twice as much (i.e. two-thirds). Something somewhere in the national planning has gone terribly wrong. A closer look into the matter would reveal that preventive efforts have awfully failed to match the curative parts of the health delivery system. Making salt entirely iodized within this year would certainly be a major achievement, the prevalence of EPI, too, is equally encouraging.

What then has been the villain responsible for such a high percentage of the malnourished? The answer is as simple as this: Children cannot eat adequate amount of food and then whatever they eat does not have the required amount of food values in the right proportion. So low quality and scarcity of foods most of the time conspire together to seriously affect the growth of the children. Immunization of both mother and child can prevent death at birth but cannot be a guarantee for their good health if foods are scarce and below quality.

To quote from the last year's Progress of Nations report, "the biggest nutrition problem is to be found not in Africa but in South Asia — where the proportion of malnourished children is twice as high". Clearly that situation has not changed and if it has, it surely has for the worse. Now this is where we fault our policy makers and the national health policy. When the UNICEF pointed its accusing finger to this particular area last year, why could we not take some positive and effective steps to address the problem? We do not expect the situation to improve overnight, but at least a beginning to that end could be made. The warning seems to have fallen on deaf ears.

So where do we go from here now? We make progress in a number of areas only to find ourselves on the wrong side. All our achievements come virtually to nothing as we cannot check the spread of malnutrition like a plague that leaves our future generations shorter, weaker and mentally and intellectually poorer. Clearly the benefits of some macroeconomic planning have failed to reach the microeconomic level. Maldistribution of resources among its population might be the cause for the discrepancy between the achieved and expected levels of progress for its per capita GNP.

The report's praise for the family planning however seems to be somewhat misplaced. Until now not much has been achieved in this area, considering the oversized population in so small an area. We rather feel that the huge investment made in population programme has so far produced a marginal benefit. Better it would be if some of the fund could be diverted to education sector with a particular emphasis on making people responsible enough to take independent decisions for their own welfare. So both education and employment for a decent living prove crucial in shaping the fate of an individual as also of the entire nation.

Highly Condemnable

How bristling the political intolerance culture has grown in our midst was graphically illustrated on Friday in front of the Jatiya Press Club. The storming of a women garment workers' rally by lathi-wielding activists of Islamic Shashantara Chhatra Andolon, who emerged from the Purana Paltan direction apparently to hold a demonstration of their own, evokes our strongest condemnation. First, the attack, topped off by shoe-throwing, was upon women, in that mindlessly virulent form. Second, the wrath in full public glare befell the rally leader, Rahima Khatoon Juli, Organising Secretary of the city chapter of Samajtantrik Chhatra Front from a quarter whose very looks had traditionally exuded a pacific image to the public mind.

The women workers were perfectly within their democratic right to hold a rally and express their righteous indignation over discrimination against women. They as women could not conceivably be a threat to public order or social peace given the squatting kind of rally they were holding with only placards to put across their message. It was, therefore, only expected that the police, journalists and members of the public around would put up a defence ring for them as they did.

The riotous situation in front of the Press Club on Friday was wholly uncalled for and pre-eminently avoidable. The pertinent question is: why did the processionists, as distinguished from the sitting rallyists, close in on the latter and took their position nearly on the same venue as that of the women's rally? If peaceful expression of opinion was what they had in mind they could hold their rally at a safe distance without intimidating the others or allowing themselves to be worked up the way they obviously did. In the confusion that followed who could blame the numerous onlookers if they thought it all smacked of a deliberate, scheming act to hold ground by force.

The political atmosphere is hotting up with a call for hartal on June 30 and the burgeoning resistance against it by a number of political parties. At this time, the processionists and rallyists on both sides should keep within their respective perimeters showing utmost restraint and shunning extremely provocative utterances to avoid an anarchic situation. The bulwark of public resistance against any excesses lies in leaving the people to judge for themselves.

Human Development Report 1994 : A Valuable Document that Deserves Attention and Careful Study

I do not know if Bangladesh should be flattered that the Human Development Report 1994 was launched in Dhaka on June 8, 1994. Mr. Mahbub ul Haq, the Special Adviser of the UNDP Administrator was in Dhaka for the purpose. Mr. Haq is well known in Bangladesh as a noted economist and a former finance minister of Pakistan. He has done a fine job in helping the UNDP in preparing these useful reports which throw much light on the quality of life of the people in different countries.

Over the years we have been used to measuring economic progress mainly in terms of GDP growth rate or per capita income. The World Bank and the IMF have conferred some prestige and credibility to these methods of computing the growth rate of an economy. These yardsticks are often used to compare the relative performance of different economies. Such statistical data have often been used as a tool in decision-making.

The method has certainly served a purpose in indicating the overall situation of an economy. But we have learnt from experience that the overall growth figures may conceal the real condition of the people. Herein lies the importance and significance of the Human Development Index. If the eradication of poverty or improvements in the quality of life of the people are the national goals then a mere high growth rate is not enough. A nation may achieve a high growth rate and yet the number of poor people may actually increase or the extent of their poverty may intensify.

The Human Development Index brings out such anomalies and presents a more accurate picture of the life of the

general mass of people in a country. Today we know that a nation which is rather low in ranking in terms of per capita income may be quite high in ranking in terms of a human development index. Indeed this knowledge has provided a new perspective in decision-making.

The Report is an impressive document which analyses different economic and social issues in depth and brings together a wealth of statistical data not readily available elsewhere.

It focuses attention on the anomalies and distortions that may appear as a country moves along the development path. A nation may be rich and yet the majority of the people may not enjoy a secure or satisfactory life style. Saudi Arabia has 16 times the per capita income of Sri Lanka but a much lower literacy rate. Costa Rica's per capita income is only one-third of Oman but its literacy rate is three times as high and its average life expectancy is seven years longer. The United States ranks 9th in the world according to its per capita income but 44th according to its child mortality rate. These are telling figures from which development strategists can draw important inferences about patterns of growth and their implications for economic and social welfare.

A most important lesson that we can get from these studies is that investment is the key to progress and investment in human capital can act as the most potent agent in stimulating and accelerating economic and social development. Recent economic history proves this point beyond any doubt. An ESCAP study

showed that together with income and environment the level of education plays a decisive role in determining the quality of life of the people.

The Report clearly shows that South Asia is lagging behind other regions in the matter of investment in human capital. For example, the annual per capita expenditure on human priority areas of basic education, primary health care, family planning, safe drinking water and nutritional

backwardness are the dominant features of our national life. Despite the Finance Minister's rhetorical flourishes and the Prime Minister's smugness about the 'wave of development sweeping across the nation', has the BNP government even attempted to address these basic issues? We will never remove the blight of illiteracy from our nation by merely resorting to clever public relations exercises as the present government seems to be doing. The programme calls for total commitment and all-out national effort. There must be both a vision and determination which is sadly lacking under this government today.

The spectacle of thousands of teachers spending days and nights on the streets in front of the Press Club under the open sky is not a very edifying one. It is not likely to inspire confidence in the government's commitment to education.

Not only increased allocation but reform of the education sector particularly the management of the primary education system — is a long felt national need. Primary education as well as adult education must be integrated with local community life if we are to make any headway in this field.

Obviously, the criteria for determining the optimum defence budget and the education budget are quite different. Our allocation in the education sector should be guided by the fact that nearly 70 per cent of our people are illiterate. Indeed, illiteracy, ignorance, lack of skill and technical knowledge, low labour productivity, poor health and nutritional standard and overall

production as the highest national priority.

However today, under President Clinton's leadership, it is the health sector which occupies the centre stage of American politics and not the defence budget. Actually the latter is getting scaled down. In peace time military expenditure, very naturally, tends to go down. In analysing 'the peace dividend' the HDP pointed out that between 1987 and 1994 global military spending declined at an estimated average annual rate of 3.6 per cent.

We must invest more in our people. Why the present government always talks about expenditure on education and defence in the same breath is not clear to me. This myopic government seems to feel that its duty is done as long as the figures of allocation in the education sector is shown to be marginally higher than that on the military. Such comparisons can have no purpose except to hoodwink the people. For the military budget of a country

is only \$2 in Bangladesh, \$3 in Pakistan and \$9 in India. In contrast, Malaysia spends \$123 and South Korea allocates \$133 in these fields.

Small wonder that South Korea has today 47 scientists and technicians per 1000 people compared to an average of only 4 in India and Pakistan. The corresponding figure for Bangladesh is no doubt even lower. The lesson from these studies is very clear.

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complexes by itself constitutes development work. A health complex without any doctor or medicines, a school building without teachers or books should provide us with the clue to our problem: how we spend the money is as important as how much we spend. The government high school in which I studied had modest buildings with roofs of corrugated iron but the standard of teaching was very high. I fondly look back to the disciplined student body and dedicated teachers of my school.

At the global level the Report calls for the adoption of a World Social Charter. It recommends the setting up of an Economic Security Council. It focuses international attention on the peace dividend and calls for a global human security fund. These are bold and imaginative ideas worthy of consideration and support.

Here is an opportunity for the developed countries to prove their concern for the vast mass of humanity living in absolute poverty. Not only should they share a part, even if it is only a small part, of the peace dividend but they must help us in achieving self-reliance. Their record so far in this respect is not very encouraging. Most of them have not yet reached the target of 0.7 per cent of their GDP as official development assistance. I hope the Report will renew global attention to the urgent needs of the developing countries. It provides valuable policy recommendations for self-reliant and sustainable economic and social development. The best tribute that we in Bangladesh can pay to the United Nations for this excellent work is to examine these ideas carefully for application, where appropriate, in our development effort.

ON THE RECORD

by Shah AMS Kibria

Population : Boon for Japan, but a Dreary Prospect for Bangladesh

by Md Asadullah Khan

The hard truth is: Japanese companies' want their people to be at their beck and call and working women in Japan are averse to the idea of raising child to the detriment of their future prospect. On the other hand, high education costs have deterred Japanese families to go away from the idea of rearing a child. Parents in the Tokyo area spend, on an average, \$123 a month for each child on a nursery school education and this cost almost doubles for the junior high school students.

In the backdrop of such a situation in Japan, high birth rate in our country has put the economy in total disarray causing escalation of violence in all possible forms. The city dwellers, especially the affluent section living in the posh areas, enjoying all the comforts of an exotic life and having sufficient means to afford more than two children, have played the game otherwise. The rhetoric of containing the population boom has fallen on deaf ears in as much as the people are steeped in ignorance, poverty and last of all illiteracy. In rural areas, more children means more working hands, which may ultimately foster more prosperity. Paradoxically, the country's population growth rate that runs at 2.17% and translates in to a 2.4 million new mouths a year, could, in the direst scenario, bevel all development works and ambitious programmes.

Career building and an urge for higher education has lured the Japanese women so much so that they shy away from marriage to avoid the double-burden of job and house work. Child rearing in Japan is a very costly programme other than the fact that day care centres which run for eight hours a day, are hardly enough to accommodate for the long hours spent by parents on the job.

Japanese commercial enterprises are very much demanding, and working population shying away from work and responsibility are not evaluated for promotion in job.

In order that population explosion can be contained in this country, there are two key steps that need to be taken care of on an emergency basis.

High investments in education and health care: Educating the adult population both men and women spread over the nook and corner of the country is the prime need of the hour. This would help create an awareness in the rank and file of the population about the world economic situation, debt crisis and ecological diversity.

Higher investment in education will yield rich dividends in ultimate analysis. It will narrow down the gap between the richest and the poorest groups in the population. When the literacy is higher and women are better educated, the society will become more stable.

Controlling the rapid urbanization: Employment situation in the rural areas of Bangladesh appears to be very bleak. Vast tracts of land in the

coastal areas of Khulna, Barisal, Chittagong and Cox's Bazar etc are now being used for shrimp culture where agriculture was once the mainstay employing a bigger chunk of the population with fruits distributed evenly among all sections. The mad rush of people towards the metropolis for employment and living has given rise to new problems. Struggling to absorb the heavy exodus of people to this sprawling urban city, Dhaka has metamorphosed into a huge shanty town. The unmistakable message is that villages are no longer able to keep the people by providing them with the means of living. If the symptoms have made anything clear to us, it is that the much vaunted and lofty programmes launched for poverty alleviation have not yielded the desired result.

No wonder, the increasing population of the country will have an adverse impact on its economy already in a perilous situation. Burdened by the rigors of life, a vast majority of the rural population has swept towards city areas in search of a warmer and comfortable life. Needless to mention, the factors responsible for such migration are ecological catastrophes, famine and unrest. The urban areas, especially Dhaka city, have in the meantime received the highest flow of people causing a shock wave in

the comfort of the city-dwellers.

At the same time, middle class citizenry spread over the whole country who are often the well-springs of national development and indeed of a nation's moral and political fibre have been most hard-hit. The growing symptoms of over population are all evident. In recent years, children born of poor parents, having no facility for education, health care and employment are cruising the streets and market places with lethal weapons and making the lives of innocent people miserable within the precincts of home and outside. Theirs is a dreary universe where life is nasty, brutish and often cut short by violence, disease and drugs. They live lives without mothers, without husbands, men without work, families without future, neighborhoods without hope. They are the country's under class, a disturbing daily reminder that democracy has not measured

out liberty and justice for all. Nothing the fact that children are the treasures of society, we should concentrate on educating them. Let us not bury ourselves in counting heads day in and day out, but ensure a better life style for the vast population spread over the length and breadth of Bangladesh. That would be an effort in bringing down the population boom as it worked in the case of Japan.

Reports have it that with the improvement of economic condition and life style, Japan's fertility rate has been dropping from 2.14 of 1973. The latest figures of 1.57 that came down from 1.66 in 1988 are causing particular concern for them. While countries like South Korea, Hong Kong, and Indonesia are making steady progress by restructuring their economies, many third world countries like us remain anchored to statist policies that only ensure poverty of the masses.

OPINION

Death Threat to Taslima Nasreen

Professed feminist writer Taslima Nasreen is in hiding. She has been threatened to be killed because of 'blasphemy'. Order of arrest has been given to the policemen. Nasreen's family is trying to get help from lawyers on this account.

I had the privilege to go through two of her books including 'Nirbaita Column' (selected columns) and I am habituated in reading her 'Nosta Column' (spoiled column) published in the weekly Jay Jay Din. A mixed idea of her has been formed in me. She is to some extent a progressive writer. As it is claimed, she writes because she wants to change society. What type of change does she want? She wants on one hand to make society conscientious and on the other, she hopes to see a society where there wouldn't be any discrimination on the basis of sex. A conscientious society is the dream of

May I be allowed to request you to recall the memories of the days between December 4 and 6, 1990 when the autocrat decided to resign and Acting President took charge. During these days, virtually there were no visible government machinery and surprisingly crime rate went down to all-time record. The readers may easily draw their own reasons. I feel the criminals and anti-socials were not sure of patronization and protection and as a result did not dare to go for their favourite adventure. There were one or two instances and judgement and punishment was readily available. This worked as a deterrent. Who does not want to enjoy life? Can we not draw a conclusion that the criminals and anti-socials enjoy protection and patronization?

In democracy we are absolutely free to do whatever we like and we achieved democracy after a long and painful struggle. It is now time to enjoy the fruit. Democracy is being practised by bureaucrats, technocrats, teachers, employees, students, workers collectively. We are not jealous. They have every right to celebrate the achievement. Only thing odd is that they are apparently being paid or financed virtually out of public exchequer; the contributors are silent spectators. Will they remain so indefinitely?

However, it is not the proposed free sex for which death threat has been issued on Nasreen, but it is allegedly her 'attack' on religious beliefs that has brought the threat. The recent controversy began after the publication of her interview with the Statesman of India. Some progressive journals of Bangladesh have also been targeted by the fundamentalists. It has been reported that she had the auda-

cty to propose amendments to the tenets of Holy Koran revered by over 100 million believers as the words of the Almighty.

There is much difference between belief and knowledge. Knowledge is based on objective investigation through the scientific method. But belief does not always, necessarily require such reasoning. Scientific truths are never claimed to be ultimate. Even established beliefs are changing in this world of flux. But changing when majority of the world population are believers in one or another religious ideas, — one has to be cautious enough while proposing anything not conforming totally with the established beliefs. Therefore, any writer/social reformer has to know the technique of making people understand the essence of truth and also falsehood, what is welfare to them and what may be harmful. Any direct attack on peoples' religious beliefs makes them sentimental, agitated and violent.

Nasreen has every right to express her beliefs gently, and not hurting or agitating others. But Nasreen has no right to propose a single change in any book, holy or not, let alone the grand Holy Book, Al-Quran. Its originality and sanctity should be protected not only by the Muslims, it is the responsibility of every human being including Nasreen. She too should not cross the limit.

The great religious thinkers must make her understand where her wrong lies. The death threat and banning of books is an act of harshness and not likely to create greater understanding.

It is not only our religious beliefs that made men the greatest of all creations, but it is certainly the conscience of man which had led man to reach out to the ultimate truth and salvation.

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To the Editor...

Letters for publication in these columns should be addressed to the Editor and legibly written or typed with double space. For reasons of space, short letters are preferred, and all are subject to editing and cuts. Pseudonyms are accepted. However, all communications must bear the writer's real name, signature and address.

Why not strengthen the Judiciary?

Sir. The long-simmering dispute between the ruling party and the opposition parties, emanating from the opposition parties' insistence for nominating a caretaker government to hold the upcoming national election in a free and fair manner, shows no signs of respite. The ruling party, however, insists that a free and fair election can be made possible within the existing framework, if necessary by adding some muscles to the discretionary power of the Election Commission.

However, it should be crystal-clear to all and sundry that institutionalizing or installing either a caretaker government or a refurbished Election Commission is just an ad-hoc measure to this end. Why can't the grievances of a disgruntled candidate be redressed through some judicial means?

Yes, of course, one may point out to