

Construction of Rupsha Bridge Vital for Exploiting Potentialities of Khulna

by Md Asadullah Khan



The writer who is Controller of Examinations, BUET, says that construction of Rupsha bridge will add to the economic well-being of the people of the entire southern zone of Bangladesh. Khulna town itself will be pulsating with dynamic commercial activities enhancing prospects of expansion of Khulna into an export-oriented industrial zone.

Khulna and its adjacent areas stretching far up to Mongla and Bagerhat on the southeastern side and Satkhira on the southwestern side offer vast potentialities and prospects of growing into an industrial belt and economic zone for Bangladesh. The lush green Sundarbans, about 40 km from the Khulna town, with its heart-stopping beauty, stunning diversity and abundance of forest wealth have lured people from home and abroad. But Khulna and its adjoining areas remain as neglected as ever. These places have attained growth in one aspect—the mushrooming population growth which has imposed new strains on its already depleted resources. Precisely speaking, growth here has faltered and joblessness has climbed up. But Khulna still, is the promised land of Bangladesh. The exotic shrimp wealth of Khulna, Bagerhat and Satkhira has zoomed the export market.

Against the backdrop of such a comfortable scenario, the construction of Rupsha bridge at Khulna over the Pousur river, a vital link with Mongla, Bagerhat, Gopalganj, Madaripur and Barisal turns out to be a viable proposition and panacea of all the ills that have plagued Khulna. The bridge, now proposed to be constructed by the Bangladesh Government at a cost of Tk. 250 crore would have eased transport congestion, passenger and cargo movement on both sides of the river. One who had ever visited Rupsha Ferry ghat at any hour of the day and night would get simply bewildered and jittery at the sight of mad rush of passengers and merchandise being lifted over by two ferries plying round the clock.

Without a shadow of doubt, Chittagong and Khulna have long since sprawled into two

promising port cities of the country. The development of infra-structural facilities at Chittagong including a fast link by road and rail has been established. But Khulna despite the fact that it holds so much promise has been denied its legitimate share in different fields of economic activities. Everything here is rotten. The government changes but not the disorderly state of affairs in Khulna. Khulna would love to have Chittagong's rate of growth. And peoples anger in this regard against the administration runs deep. Happily, the construction of container handling jetties, warehouses and other infra-structural facilities at Mongla port has given Khulna a special charm and grace. The road linking Rupsha ghat to Mongla port is one of the best metalled roads in Bangladesh.

The importance that Khulna will assume in course of time can only be measured when its link with Mongla

and other far flung areas extending up to the Sunderbans has been established by fast moving traffics of all categories. Tourists feel greatly jitter to travel up to the Sunderbans via Mongla at the sight of stomach-wrenching and nerve-racking congestion of bus, trucks and other public vehicles on both sides of the Ferry ghat. It is simply a ghastly scene and once vehicles get clogged due to carelessness as well as passenger collection spree of the drivers and conductors of public vehicles, the situation becomes exasperating.

The construction of Rupsha bridge will add to the economic well-being of the people of the entire southern zone of Bangladesh. Khulna town itself will be pulsating with dynamic commercial activities enhancing prospects of expansion of Khulna into an export oriented

industrial zone. The demand of the greater Khulna people to have a sound economic base in their area is very genuine. How can we write-off such a large portion of the country's population? The fact remains that long term peace, prosperity and stability of the country is predicated on economic development of the areas in and around Khulna. There is no lasting solution to their eco-

conomic backwardness without rapid and sustained economic growth. The challenge facing the government is how to inject vitality into the inefficient and decrepit industrial plants and factories in Khulna.

To be sure, more and more people in this area are committing themselves to development work. A number of shrimp culture farms and export oriented shrimp fac-

ories have sprung up in Khulna, Bagerhat and Satkhira. Shrimp culture, in recent times, has suffered a setback due to non-availability of "Shrimp Fries" in adequate quantity. But there is a glimmer of good news. Investigative findings on salinity levels in a laboratory at Paikgacha of Khulna suggest that hatcheries most needed for "Shrimp Fry" production can be developed in the "Dublar Char" area deep in the heart of the Sunderbans. There are now about 1 (One) lakh hectare saline watery? area available for shrimp culture in the greater Khulna region. Until recently, the region's indigenous and unscientific traditional methods of production of "Shrimp Fry" could only meet 15% of the total needs. The recent findings will boost up shrimp production to a significant level bringing

in its wake coveted foreign exchange earnings for the country.

The distinct advantage that Khulna enjoys for its non-vulnerability to natural vagaries like flood and cyclone and also as a high land must give it a high plus point for being chosen to be developed as an export oriented industrial zone presumably at a lesser cost than Chittagong. With Khulna vying as a booming economic zone, the dying railway link with North Bengal, now almost snapped, will have to be relinked by a broad gauge line. As it is well-known to all, bridges and smooth metalled roads serve as life-line for thriving commerce and industrial growth. But the vast potentialities of Khulna can only be exploited by massive infusion of wealth and manpower. People in these areas are struggling hard to eke out a living. Misconceived economic schemes and decrepit industrial plants have thrown people out of employment causing disil-

lusionment and despair among them. People have virtually no job and no work. Nevertheless, the lure of money, job and opportunity has brought many, just in their teens, to Khulna from the adjacent districts. But unsurprisingly, the search ends in frustration. Pathetically, a wave of resentment simmers beneath the calm surface of the societal norms in these places. The construction of Rupsha bridge will usher in an era of prosperity for these people.

Khulna and its adjoining areas will be bustling with economic activities catering employment opportunities to all these people bordering on impoverishment. Precisely speaking, there is simply too much human energy and talent in these people and it must be tapped.

People residing in the southern zone of the country did not expect miracles but counted on at least some prescriptions that could enhance the quality of their life or modestly speaking, their living conditions. All indications are there that the democratic government will have to pay a heavy price as these woes accumulate.

The task of salvaging the country's rapidly deteriorating economy must start not only from the capital city but also from the outlying and far-flung places like Khulna, Jessore, Rajshahi, Dinajpur etc. The government by concentrating on such matters of regional development rather than on the burdensome business of armed forces build up, will surely give the yearning millions a stronger chance for better life. Non-chalance of the administration to pay heed to people's legitimate demand and institutional reforms bedeviled the past regimes and also contributed heavily to their disgraceful exit.



Both-way crowding and congestion increasing at Rupsha ferry ghat: Imperative for the bridge implied.



THE purpose of the impressionistic account given in the first part of this article, was to illustrate the point made earlier that the problem of child labour needs to be dealt with at several levels. One of the commonest points that is made is that it is difficult to introduce legal measures for the protection of child workers, since child labour is supposed not to exist. While one sturdy response to this is that it is time that a more realistic assessment was made about the problem, that "non-existence of child labour is a myth and all concerned should face up to the reality and introduce effective measures which can reduce the evil effects of premature work on health growth and (the) future life of the children", it would appear to be the case that there is not in fact an overall prohibition against child labour; it is only some sorts of such labour that is prohibited.

Domestic work is not taken into account at all: there are no laws relating to it. Domestic service is a grey area where the enforcement of basic rights is concerned, for adults as well as children. Of course children are in no position to demand let alone get enforced rights which adults find themselves unable to claim. It is a fact of life that service is consistently undervalued as opposed to production (so that for instance nurses or teachers are amongst the more poorly paid workers even in many developed countries). Housework too has no monetised value. People doing domestic work in developing countries are seen by their employers to be on to a good thing they are getting housed, clothed and fed—not to mention paid, for doing no more than they would in any case have had to do in their own homes.

Such employers also feel, virtuously, that their homes provide a better environment for children than the city streets or sweat shops where they would otherwise be.

The problem of indifference

Poverty of course is a key factor, and has been identified as such in throwing a large number of children into the job market. It is however, debatable how far the poverty in the family from which the child comes is a result of circumstances outside anyone's control, and how far it arises from a disinclination to pay a fair wage for any job that can be done at half the rate. This is a point to which we will return.

An equally significant factor is the failure of society to perceive children as persons with rights of their own. Children are commodities. In well-to-do families to be sure the children are not sent out to repair the family fortunes,

but they are regarded as assets to be invested in for future returns. Sons are expected to do well, pass examinations and get good jobs. Girls are expected to acquire skills—even education—to enhance their marriage ability. In divorce suits, the world over, estranged husbands and wives battle over their respective rights to child custody and guardianship. Society that perceives its children as mere extensions of the parental ego will be slow to respond to the plight of other children. It is as much the acquiescence of all society to the exploitation of children, as poverty that makes this exploitation possible.

The economic equation

We said earlier that often the money earned by a child is part of that family's strategy for survival. Where the money earned is seen as an addition to the family income, the quantum becomes less important. And where a child earns this money in a job which will give him at least one meal a day, or, as in domestic service, food and shelter, then the sum of money is a bonus—however paltry to the outsider. This is the calculation that many employers make when they follow the practice of recruiting children. But whereas in certain situations there is a symbiotic relationship between the very poor "entrepreneur" and his "employees"—the making of paper packets out of old newspapers, discarded exercise books for sale to roadside snack sellers, for instance is an enterprise at a level at which no-one concerned could hope to make a proper living, and the activity can thus only be viable as a supplementary source of income for a household where there is already a primary source of earning for the adult members. Some enterprises which may otherwise be forbidden to children by law because it is dangerous for them, in turn remains viable for an entrepreneur out to maximise his profits in every way he can where profits depend on paying a below-subsistence wage to these children. Where an adult might hold out for more money, if not the minimum wage, at least an approximation thereto, a child makes no such bargain. The employer who hands over the child's wages to his father, and the father who receives these, both have something to gain from the child. As the child's earning is seen as supplementary, it does not matter that the employer could pay more.

Access to education

Children are available because they are not being educated or trained a trade or craft. It is too much to expect families who are too poor to meet the incidental expenses of educating their children—

primary school education is free and up to Class V textbooks are supplied free, but there are expenses such as exercise books, pens and pencils etc so a parent is quite out of pocket when a child goes to school—not then to expect the child to earn what money it can. In a labour intensive society, the children of the poor have always had to do a lot of work around the house/farm/homestead if only to release older members of the family for more productive work. An educational system that puts this sort of a financial burden on the parents can not hope to be successful in keeping its pupils. A large number of

seen as being entitled to access to any facilities at all. Adult domestic servants are not well-paid. But if they can get help with a child's education they will live with the child's "unproductivity"—it is being out of pocket that is unacceptable at the lowest levels simply because there is no slack.

Labour Laws

An essentially agrarian society, like Bangladesh, with a very small industrialised sector could in fact ensure that, at least in the formal sector, the laws were implemented. In order that any evil be overcome there needs to be legislation against its



Photo credit: Shezad Noorani, UNICEF

children do enrol in primary school but the drop-out rate is very high.

Some families would combine sending their children to school if the school year and the school day could be structured to release the children for some work. As this does not happen there is nothing else for the children to do than to earn what little they can. While well-to-do households expect and meet calls upon their purses to subsidise the education of the children of their domestic servants, those children who are "in service" themselves are not

continuanee, inspectors/officers to see that the laws are being carried out, and enough public interest and awareness to hold the administration accountable for its failure to do so. The labour laws on the books are adequate. The system of inspection, the member of people employed for the task, the whole set-up—is quite inadequate, and worst of all no one cares enough about the problem generally. The children who are crushed under the weight of this indifference form only a small part of the labour force in industry. The labour force

WAKING UP TO REALITY — II

by Salma Sobhan

is itself not a large one. It is clear that the failure to implement the rules laid down in the Factories Act arises from an absence of the will to do so.

National Conscience and National Pride

There are occasions when very prompt steps are taken to avert or prevent abuses. Such steps were taken to put a stop to the adoption of Bangladeshi babies by foreigners. Islam, of course does not recognise formal adoption, though childless families might well foster a brother or sister's child. After the Liberation War in 1971 there were scores of babies, born of rape victims of the occupation forces, who had been rejected by the mother, and also small children who had lost their parents. An Ordinance was promulgated to enable the placing of these children for adoption outside the country. This was never a popular measure to have been taken and criticism was made on the grounds that these children were being brought up in homes alien to their culture and faith. A few years later, when the trade in children from South East Asia was exposed, newspapers and weeklies carried articles speculating on whether any Bangladeshi babies had fallen victim to this exploitation. As a result all further adoption was banned.

As it happened, all the adoptions to that date had been documented. None had been done privately, and there was absolutely no indication that any such abuse had taken place. Nonetheless the government was obviously right to put a ban on adoption if it felt that it did not have the ability to monitor the procedure. But one got the impression that it was less a concern for the children than a sense of national prestige that produced this action which after all only closed down the legitimate avenue of adoption, through which a few fortunate children were able to escape their destinies of destitution.

Conclusion

It would seem, therefore, that the main obstacle in dealing with the problems of child labour arises from an insensitivity to the problem by society at large. Most people may be attentive to the needs and circumstances of their own children but have yet to identify children as a social category and to assume a sense of moral and social responsibility for children other than their own. We need to recognise that poor families who avail themselves of the economic benefits of their children's labour

do so because society does not provide any alternatives for them. Appropriate schooling and training for a trade or craft with some financial benefit tied in with regular attendance at the institution: a meal, clothes, as well as school hours that are geared to the notion that children will need time off (in the rural areas) to help with the harvest etc, would appear to constitute the elements of a viable programme to directly help children.

The laws in the formal sector need to be rigorously enforced. Trade unions and the labour movement should make it their business to expose those industries which exploit children—calling for boycotts of their products where necessary. This task should, however, be pursued with a sense of social realism, since any enforcement of the letter of the law could lead to the substitution of children with adult labour. Such legal interventions would thus need to resolve, ab initio, whether child labour, per se, should be outlawed, whether this should be selective to particular industries and activities and, where operable,

the specific nature of the restraints which should be imposed on the employer. More to the point, a meaningful mechanism of monitoring and enforcement of the law should be put in place along with a set of sanctions for law breakers. Till such a machinery is in place apart from trade unions, social organisations should incorporate a "child watch" component into their programmes to arouse public concern against the worst forms of child abuse.

Domestic service is an area where the largest number of children are absorbed, and where it is harder to monitor the welfare of an individual child. One of the things that we need to press for is a code for domestic workers, both adult and children, laying down minimum prerequisites of service. Provision has to be made for working children to have both time off for rest and time for schooling, as well as adequate remuneration in relation to the means of the family employing the child. This will be a task of some magnitude and will again have to, at the outset, address the issue of whether, and to what extent, such interventions can be pressed without pricing child labour out of the market for particular categories of households.

Unfortunately, specific programmatic initiatives for children originate largely from the concerns of aid donors such as UNICEF. Aid programmes targeted to serve children, whether administered by NGOs or government departments enjoy an episodic existence with a shelf life largely determined by the budget commitment of the donors. There is little in the way of a national plan for children which will develop programmes for them which will take careful cognizance of the social realities within which children have to sell their labour.

It is the contention of this writer that the difficulties that exist in the implementation of policies directed towards the removal of child labour and child prostitution arise as much from a social order where child labour becomes part of family survival strategy, as from our acceptance of these evils as inevitable because of the enormity of the task of rectifying them. If we are able to mount a successful campaign designed to expose to ourselves to the understanding that, when any child is harmed in a society, it is all our children who are harmed, it is then and only then that our policies will bear fruit.

News Analysis: "Milk Miracle"

Reuter reports from New Delhi

INDIAN politician girding for general elections have charged headlong into a debate over whether Hindu statues drink milk.

In the world's biggest democracy few issues escape the grip of politicians and pundits, and what Indians were calling the "milk miracle" was no exception.

What started as uncanny reports of Hindu idols in Delhi sipping sacred milk offerings snowballed last week into a worldwide phetionomenon as frenzied Hindus converged on temples to see for themselves.

Some swore it was a miracle. Others said it was a ruse. But the debate between believers and scientists over the plausibility of the "miracle" was quickly overtaken by charges and counter-charges by politicians jockeying for an advantage ahead of general elections due by mid-1996.

Right-wing Hindu parties wasted no time in claiming the milk marvel had political significance. The Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), a religious organisation close to the main opposition Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), said the devotional excitement showed a Hindu age was in the offing.

"This is not an ordinary event but a divine one and a prophecy," VHP leader Acharya Giriraj Kishore said.

Secular parties led by Prime Minister P V Narasimha Rao's Congress Party accused the Hindu right-wing led by the BJP of perpetrating a huge hoax to whip up religious fever to win votes.

Welfare minister Sitaram Kesri said the Rashtriya Swayam Sevak Sangh (RSS), a Hindu fundamentalist organisation, had spread the rumour with midnight phone calls that Lord Shiva and his retinue, elephant-headed son Ganesh were sipping milk.

Congress spokesman Vithal Gadgil blamed the BJP, which has led a controversial campaign to build a temple to the Hindu God Ram at a disputed Muslim mosque site in the northern town of Ayodhya. The mosque was razed by Hindu zealots in 1992.

Lord Ganesh to win the Lok Sabha (lower house) elections," he said.

Communal tensions can have awful consequences in India, where reports and rumours spread like wildfire through close-knit, extended families and densely populated cities.

Thousands of Sikhs were killed after former prime minister Indira Gandhi was gunned down by Sikh bodyguards in 1984 as bands of enraged citizens took out their frustrations on the religious minority. After the mosque at Ayodhya was razed, thousands were killed in ensuing Hindu-Muslim riots.

"In the last 24 hours, the fires of faith have been rekindled in the Hindu community," the Asian Age said in an editorial.

"We shudder to think of the consequences which may accrue if such strong emotional responses are manipulated by forces inimical to communal amity and unity of the Indian people as a nation," the Pioneer newspaper said.

The Asian Age said politicians with a vested interest in religion "are already predicting a Bharatiya Janata Party victory in the next general election, thanks to what happened on Thursday" (Sept 21).