

Attention to Urban Poor

Classification of poverty into urban and rural straight jackets is basically flawed. They are the two sides of the same coin: landlessness, pauperisation and destitution in the original habitats driving the uprooted to a tantalising city life and leading up to urban slumming and poverty.

Who does not know urban migration has to be stemmed at the roots — the villages? But even there we seem susceptible to erring on the side of rural poverty. We tend to ignore the magnitude of urban poverty as something of a parasitical, environmental problem better addressed clinically rather than with compassion.

Against this lopsided background to poverty alleviation measures where scarce resources are getting too thinly distributed over the countless pockets of rural poverty, the 30 million US dollar ADB fund being placed entirely for slum uplift in Dhaka City comes as a relief. Meagre though the amount maybe for the size of the problem, the sure-footed way it is planned to be utilised makes us hope that the project's efficacy will not only be of pioneering value but also be worthy of replication.

Susana Price, the team leader of the Urban Poverty Reduction Project (UPRP), being jointly undertaken by the government and the ADB, can feel assured of support from the media in her good work.

The ADB study on urban poverty provides a sound statistical base for the endeavour: dwellers of some 2,700 environmentally hazardous slums and those to add to that number shall need 140,000 houses over a period of four years. The work is to begin next year with 90,000 absolute destitutes.

Three features of the project strike a responsive chord with us: Not a farthing, will be doled out with the emphasis being laid on skill development for income generation, marketing guidance will be given to vulnerable small scale enterprises, and the physical conditions of the existing slums would be upgraded with access to water, gas and sanitation facilities provided to them. The rules in force, as far as extension of amenities to the slums goes, need to be changed. Dhaka has been surprisingly without night shelters, so let's have them in a good number also.

But there is a word of caution we sound: attractive slums could draw more of the rural poor to the city. An effective antidote would be to insist on economic returns on loans given.

God speed to Mr. Zahid

Time was when we used to take a lot of pride in the fact that we don't have old people's homes. That we didn't need them was because of a social-familial system that is better than the west's which haven't yet evolved any humane deal for their senior citizens. It is now time that we meekly eat our pride and own up that we don't really know what to do with our elders past eighty.

A process of constant pauperisation in the villages have had an erosive effect on the traditional joint family system and its economics and the enviable humane interdependence it was based on. In the cities the same thing happened but in a different style while a young man succeeded in life he thought he made it alone and wanted to enjoy the fruits of it alone — by going for a nuclear family. Although in most cases the success was funded by squeezing out the last paisa of the family, there was for most of the successful ones no going back to the village home or even the urban family.

Mr Khatib Abdul Zahid had in his early years seen old people only to be jeered at and slighted. Inult in place of respect that was he saw and it pained him. After realising his bit of success he set up an old people's home by himself. A wholly different kind of home, to be sure. First, a lot of space — 20 acres — under a big blue sky and surrounded by green spreading up to the horizon — broken only by fish ponds the earnings from which support the home. To be life-giving the home would now need a children's school and/or playhouse to be tended by the more mobile of the inmates.

It will be hard convincing a proud son to send his father — and what about his mother, has Mr Zahid thought about that? — to this retreat? But a flat, bought or rented, is no place to accommodate a father from the old world. We believe after some time Mr Zahid and his philanthropy will win if not just now.

It is not often that such news of altruistic idealism comes from this land. We wish god speed to Mr Zahid's hopes of opening more and more of such homes across our country and even in the lands of SAARC as dream by him.

Little Relief

Although rain came intervening yesterday afternoon in the heat-cum-humidity wave that made people writhe in complete helplessness with electrical load-shedding to top it off, we are yet to see an end to this. The Bangla month of *Aswin* is highly unpredictable. There ought to be sustained downpours which seem possible though given the overcast skies one saw well into the evening yesterday. Basically, the depression in the Bay must all be a matter of the past to let the south-western monsoon flow in, both for circulation of wind inland as well as splashes of rain.

Aside from the high temperature and humidity, it is the lack of wind blowing, a foliage moving or leaf rustling anywhere that made for most of the hardship. And imagine waking up at the dead of night by the awkward sensation of a perspiration-soaked pillow. Between a fan and an air-conditioner there was no line of demarcation because the leveller power cut was too real. But then it is worth probing if some select areas were as a rule spared the inconvenience of load-shedding.

As for the record 37.5 degree Celsius in September, please know that even stretches in Antarctica which had remained ice-capped all the year round through the centuries have melted this year. Global warming is a threat on hand.

TRUTH hurts. Journalists are pledged to write what is true and support what is right. This pledge, if upheld, can turn out to be unpleasant sometimes by making enemies in some cases or face with critics. But we still have to go on, as Edgar J. Mohn wrote: "A lie has speed, but truth has endurance. I do not intend to hurt anybody's feelings or make enemies, but attempting to uphold the truth."

The Slippery Axe

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina will soon celebrate her 100th day in office and obviously the time would be scrutinised by many eminent people, with no dearth of praises. Thus, instead of getting lost in the company of big names, I would devote my write up to the other side and focus only one issue — The Slippery Axe.

The Premier has repeatedly said that state power was not important to her, but the well-being of the people of this troubled country and her aim was to strengthen democratic foundations. But, I think state power, at least in Bangladesh, has a bias — the leader is always told all is smooth and fine. The pledges and orders were being carried out. But it is not so in reality.

I have come across number of people who have complained that Sheikh Hasina's government has so far not taken any step in seriously dealing with the "culpits" in the administration who are really responsible for corruption and inefficiency. They have "managed" to save themselves from the government's "Slippery Axe".

There have been changes in

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the Foreign Office, but allegations are high that some have been spared, despite their much published role in out of the way "allegiance" for the past regime. But some who had played no political role have got the axe. Some are "super turn coats" and they cannot be loyal to anybody, but themselves.

The telephone, by no means a luxury now, is one of the major headaches of subscribers and the telecommunications minister only has to visit in disguise to find what goes around there. There are two sides: a senior officials are too busy with meetings and project visits, and their subordinates have no power to carry out the functions in their absence, and b) at every tier there are people who enjoy telling you "come tomorrow" everyday you visit, unless you have enough power to either not to fall into their trap or getting out of it. One elderly subscriber was so agitated during an audience with a senior official that he complained helplessly "no offence met", but some of your people are visiting my residence to help me get my telephone... I think I have already spent enough by coming to this office for so many months."

The widely circulated daily *Ittefaq* reported on September 13 about an illegal telephone connection that has cost the Telephone and Telegraph Board Tk 900,000. Follow up and action please when genuine subscribers are suffering.

Pangs of Life...

The government should have honest people in all sectors to be its private eye and help take stern actions after thorough investigation and hearings, not unilaterally, on the basis of reports. Let the leaders abandon whatever makes the AXE SLIP-PERY.

No More from "Dreams Books," Please

My martyred father had dreams BUT who cares? Except for Bangladesh' birth, I think all of his other "Known" dreams

establishing facts that helps in brewing hatred among their supporters.

The past government of Begum Khaleda Zia found some kind of dream that president Ziaur Rahman, Bir Uttam, saw and Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's administration is following suit by finding dreams of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman wherever they are going and whatever they are doing. Frankly we are tired of these dreams and constant use of the words "present govern-

ment." I think it is time we started saying "the government" and "we are doing this or plan to do this." At least then we will be assured that the two leaders did not leave behind their "Dream Books!"

The Prime Minister has acted promptly by creating two high-powered bodies to probe into the incident. We hope that these reports would be made public to help us understand what led to such brutal killings.

The solution in the scenic region's chronic problem, some believe, lies in the fact in recognising the tribal community not as minorities, but as indigenous group like the Red Indians in the United States let us not hamper their lives or destroy their culture, but instead help flourish those. Turn the area into one of the country's best tourist destinations in a way that would not disturb the life of the tribes and also help add a significant amount to the national exchequer. Hats off in advance to a early political and practical solution to Bangladesh's woes.

IN FOOL'S PARADISE?

by Nadeem Qadir

have not become a reality as we celebrated, as we marked, 25 years of independence. We did not really have a good celebration so far!

The first session of the Seventh Parliament was stuck with the past, I think it was a fight of respected lawmakers of delving into their mutual hatred as otherwise there would have been more acceptance of historical facts, but not abuses for assassinated leaders. The people I have been great fans of the premier's radio or television "therapy," were unanimous — the politicians have failed to show magnanimity in accepting what is true and what is not. Both sides must not cross the limits in eas-

ment. I think it is time we started saying "the government" and "we are doing this or plan to do this." At least then we will be assured that the two leaders did not leave behind their "Dream Books!"

The Hill Tracts — Bangladesh's Woe

The massacre of the Bengali-speaking woodcutters by unidentified, but possibly Shan Bahini insurgents have shaken the nation. It is also a signal to the government, which has all three lawmakers from the ruling Awami League from the region, that it was high time to act to end the long dispute or face reputation of

Not the Whole Truth, Mr Ershad

Former president Hussain Muhammad Ershad, MP, does deserve praise, as he has already been, for his one-hour-long speech in the Parliament on August 27. I admit it is late to praise him, but I am helpless because I have to take up issues on the priority and also because this column is fortnightly. Apologies for that.

Mr Ershad has rightly called for an end to abusing the post leaders, but in the long run not only newspaper commentators,

but also Bangladeshis in general have questioned large parts of his "historic speech" — the first since he was jailed. I will not deal with whole range of issues, but only one. Mr Ershad told the August House that he gave Ziaur Rahman the house of the deputy army chief (turned army chief's house), turned president's house) and one in up market Gulshan residential area in line with his belief that army was a "family."

"I told my army that General Zia was our general... his children, are my children... I am telling the truth, nothing but the truth," he said that day, as the lawmakers from the two major parties, with great surprise, put up their best performance — "complete silence and with total concentration."

But is it really the truth Mr. Ershad? Had it been so, you would have treated other helpless families of your colleagues in the same line. He said, "the freedom fighters are the greatest sons of the soil." Mr. Ershad can be praised for all the monuments he constructed in memory of the great war of independence, but I would like to request him to ask his soul does he truly think so.

One martyred freedom fighter's family was told by an official his regime "you live on the (unimaginably meagre) pension we give you from our salary." You did not look upon the same way about rightful requests of a helping hand from that family. The widow has suffered untold suffering since the birth of this country.

The country will be much benefited once Mr. Ershad speaks the "truth, nothing but the truth."

Challenge for Democracy

by Kabir U Ahmad

The simple norms of democracy call for a period of at least three months for the incoming government to settle down in power and to formulate its policies on various issues before it can face barrages of questions from the opposition benches. It hasn't happen in this Parliament nor did it happen in the previous one.

PEOPLE who have lived through the military and civilian rules of Pakistan and Bangladesh must have realised painfully that dictatorship and autocracy of any kind can corrupt and destroy the roots of decent human values, social fabric and the pace of genuine economic progress. It is a great fortune that the people of Bangladesh had to suffer the tyranny of these dictatorships of Pakistani and Bangladeshi types. But one good lesson that the people have learnt from these regimes is that there is no alternative to a properly functioning democratic government. They wouldn't like to see again the emergence of dictatorship and autocracy of any kind in Bangladesh.

However, although the recent popularly elected government has been in office for only about three months now, it is sad to see that the outlook for the future of democracy in the country is slowly and gradually getting bleaker. The simple norms of democracy call for a period of at least three months for the incoming government to settle down in power and to formulate its policies on various issues before it can face barrages of questions from the opposition benches. It hasn't happen in this Parliament nor did it happen in the previous one. From the beginning of this Parliament, exchanges of harsh words and militant gestures between the members of the Treasury and the Opposition benches, and the Opposition attempt to take the issues from the Parliament to the streets at

this stage seem to be pushing the two sides to an open confrontation.

Over the last few days, some independent reports of intimidation in the September 5 by-election seem to have added fuel to the simmering fire. It is unfortunate that a country which has fought for the establishment of a democratic government and suffered so much in the process in terms of loss of life, properties and economic growth over the last quarter of a century cannot free itself from the shackles of deep-seated belligerencies between political parties. It looks like the country is going to go through another phase of parliamentary boycott, strikes and street battles in the near future when all indications show that the economy is just beginning to recover and march ahead. There is a need for hard-nosed analysis of the problems and quiet reflections on the part of every well-wisher and the leaders of the political parties before the situation deteriorates further.

Back to the Basic Values

It would be useful to remember that decency, decorum and refinement in parliamentary language are the essential qualities of democratic behaviour which are simply the externalisation of democratic attitudes.

Attitudes come from values. Democratic values endows every individual with equal rights to think and express his/her opinions freely as well as fulfill his/her obligations to society. If everyone has the same rights and obligations, everyone has to listen to others with mutual respect and tolerance. This is the basic lesson of democracy. One may have a deep scar in his/her heart about someone else, but if he/she is a democrat, he/she cannot be bare and crude in his/her language against that person. He/she has to have some sense of self-control and restraint. If an injustice is done to someone, the law of the land must take care of it. He/she cannot take law in his/her own hands.

It must not be forgotten that crudity provokes crudity and refinement provokes refinement. Abandonment of tolerance and respect for others is a vice towards intolerance and violence which is a sure road to autocracy and fascism. History is littered with examples of intolerance drifting into fascism in many countries. No well-meaning person would like to see such degeneration taking place in this country. The simple classic virtues of tolerance, respect for others and restraint in one's expressions and behaviour have to be cultivated and practiced at all costs.

Dangers of Repeating the Past Precedents

Threats to democracy seems to be coming from the precedents created in the recent past from March 1994 to March 1996. The prolonged boycott of Parliament by the combined opposition, break-down of all negotiations between the government and the opposition by foreign and domestic negotiators, agitation on the streets leading to large number of deaths, destruction of private and public properties, disruption of the port, railways and other transports which damaged the economy, resistance to February election at gun-points and eventually forcing the government to resign and hold another election under a neutral caretaker government. If this scenario is repeated by the present opposition with equal militancy, which seems to be what they are up to, then a similar chain of events can be expected in very three to four years in the country.

In that case, one can forget about peace and security, economic development, poverty alleviation and social justice which the country badly needs, and also quite rightly, the present government seems to be deeply committed to. On top of this, the law and order situation will further deteriorate and anarchy will prevail on the

streets which may eventually destroy the prospects of a stable democratic system in the country that everyone was looking forward to.

Is There a Way Out?

A number of steps could be taken by the government before it is too late to arrest the drift towards anarchy. In the first place, a law should be passed in the parliament with at least a two-third majority to introduce a change in the Constitution prohibiting the boycott of parliament for more than a specific number of days (three or four days consecutively).

Constitutional experts of the country can be called upon to give the government appropriate advice on this. In the second place, at the time of political strikes, economic services of ports, railways, airlines, river and road transports, industrial and commercial establishments should not be interrupted. Similarly, if the political leaders are interested in the welfare of their future generations, they should leave out all educational institutions from the jurisdiction of strikes. Individual students at their own risks can join the strikes, but the educational institutions should remain open. In the third place, the protesters have their democratic rights to organise marches and rallies but have no rights whatsoever to

kill and injure other people, intimidate others to join their ranks, burn public and private properties.

During the political turmoil of 1994-96, newspaper reports had it that about 90 people were killed, hundreds more were injured, over two thousand public and private vehicles were burnt and destroyed, a number of gas stations were burnt, newly-built railway station with expensive equipment in Chittagong was burnt and many houses were put on fire. To add to this, thousands of small shops and business firms were looted. Exports and industrial productions worth thousands of crores were lost. These excesses must be made punishable by enacting new laws through Parliament. In the fourth place, all government officials, both civil and military, must be required to stay strictly neutral and non-partisan.

There is a need for passing laws to make such activities punishable under the laws of the land. The new government is still in its early stage of administration and its popularity as well as moral authority have not been eroded yet. It can take initiative in negotiating these vital issues with the opposition and try to reach "consensus" and enact appropriate laws. If these laws can be put in the statute books and can be enforced, there is hope that in spite of strikes and turmoil on the streets, a lot of damages can be minimised, infrastructure of the economy will be saved from destruction and the economy can be kept moving. Both democracy and development can have a future in the country.

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.

How can farmers be given protection?

Sir, The Voices page of 20th August posed an interesting and pertinent question: "How can farmers be given protection from sharp decline in prices of agri-products? The panel comprising a cross-section of our intelligentsia who have given their views viz:

Panel members: A DU Professor and a student, an advocate, a research fellow and a government official.

Their recommendations:

1. New technology to boost production.
2. Government should buy and store products from growers.
3. Import to maintain availability.
4. Government should fix and control prices at farmers level.
5. Stop hoarding.

It is amazing that such eminent personalities are still advocating age-old remedies which have utterly failed over the years and have been instrumental in bringing the Bangladeshi farmers to their knees. "Boost production" — then what? Will this surplus not result in further depressing prices? "Fix and control prices" and "buy and store" — where are the funds and the storage space? Will this not result only in increasing number of palms which require greasing?

"Import" — what a simple solution, no matter if indigenous producers and entrepreneurs become bankrupt as a result of the import of cheap wheat. Our traditional crops — rice, wheat, tea, jute, tobacco, sugar-

cane etc have their own economics, but it is the horticulture which suffers from seasonal gluts followed by periods of shortages or non-availability. The DU student did give a practical suggestion i.e. streamlining the transport system to feed the urban markets, but even this has limitations.

The answer is available all around the globe where previously poor nations have frog-leaped into the developing or even developed categories. Taiwan, Chile, Costa Rica of the '60s and Thailand, the Philippines, Malaysia, Indonesia, Kenya. Sri Lanka in the recent past have taken steps to consolidate their agricultural base by farsighted policies which have included:

1. Practical micro and macro responses.
2. Consolidation of growers through contract farming of high yield and high value crops and through diversification. Growing specific crops on demand.
3. Realistic fiscal reforms and tariff structure and the creation of a corporate culture which does not look down on agriculture.
4. Last but not least, by the establishment of small/medium/large agro-processing industries in and around the growing areas with all their backward/forward linkages. This has stimulated the rural economy, siphoned surplus produce, given fair prices to growers, reduced wastage and increased export earnings and most important, generated employment.

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Change in the management of financial institutions

Sir, It does not require a binocular or a microscope or even a periscope to observe the plight of the public-owned financial institutions in our country. It can easily be discerned that these institutions have been incurring a huge financial loss over a long period of time and the salient cause that should be mentioned first is the ineffective and inefficient application of their supreme power by the management. During the last five years the party in power exerted their influence upon the selection of the candidates for the management in the institutions. In those cases party affiliation was considered as the single criteria rather than the competency, experience, academic and integrity of the candidate. Due to this deceitful selection they did nothing for the well-being of the nation.

So, now it has become indispensable on part of the present government to reform the highest authority of these financial institutions with a view to infusing a fresh impetus into this sector. We expect that this government would not follow the footprint of the past and there would not be any vestige of indifference and irregularity in selections. We think that the party that led the liberation war under the leadership of the nation's father Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman would extirpate the reign of corruption and misdoings from these financial institutions. It is our expectation that this time the selection would be in a fair and impartial manner and no servile, obsequious and spineless persons would get chance in the management of the institutions. The present government must scrutinize each and every case judiciously keeping in mind its commitment to the people. In a word, the Sheikh Hasina's government have to rise above their party interest

and the demand of the nation must be satisfied at any cost.

While I am writing this letter the government has already made some changes. Two former MDs and a DMD of Agrani Bank, Bangladesh Agricultural Bank, and Sonali Bank has been appointed as MD of respectfully Agrani Bank, Bangladesh Agricultural Bank and Sonali Bank. We highly congratulate these changes and look forward to see what they do in their new places. We expect that the government would also be very much conscious about the selection of the rest. They must remember that financial success of a government is the measurement of their political success. So, if Awami League wants to come to power again with the mandate of people they must reach the country to a economically viable place.

I would like to request the present government to bring forward a clear picture before us with the extent of losses in all the financial institutions and identify the real offender to award them lawful punishment. Hopefully, that will exterminate all malpractices from the sector.

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Contentious issues with India

Sir, Having signed the controversial 25-year India-Bangladesh Friendship Treaty in 1972, are India and Bangladesh now poised to sign a more controversial Water and Transit Treaty?

We hope both the Indian and Bangladesh leaders have rightly realised the gravity of the problem. The 25-year treaty is going to be buried in its natural grave in 1997. Public opinion never favoured the friendship treaty. There are strong arguments against the friendship treaty.

India signed between India and Bangladesh this would instead of cementing the relationship between the two countries plunge the friendship and goodwill between the two neighbouring countries into chaos, confusion and complete darkness.

We are neither anti-Indian, nor pro-Indian. We are rather pro-Bangladesh, first, and pro-Bangladeshi, last. We want accountability and transparency in our administrative and diplomatic policy programmes. We need courage, foresight and heart-to-heart exchange of views to know our past lapses, omissions and errors.

Why did we allow India trial running and commissioning of illegal and unlawful Farakka Barrage without finalising and settling our rightful share of the Ganges water? Who suffered the colossal loss — India or Bangladesh?

Why did we fail to take over Tribhanga on the one hand and to hand over Benarshi and the other hand simultaneously? Who suffered the untold sufferings — India or Bangladesh?

Why did the Indian Navy hoist Indian flag on our territory of Talpa-Talpa Island and took it over by force? Why did we not refer the matter to the United Nation to seek justice?

Why have we allowed and renewed river transit facilities with India again and again? Why has New Delhi refused our due share of the Ganges water for over last two decades despite our objective and sincere goodwill, friendship and high regards for India?

Why has New Delhi failed to respond to our repeated requests for Ganges water despite the friendship treaty?

Let us call a spade a spade, rectify our past lapses, omissions, and errors and ensure that our people and the country do not suffer any more for lack of foresight, diplomacy and efficiency of some of our political leaders and bureaucrats. Would our Members of the Parliament irrespective of gov-

ernment and opposition benches kindly help solve all our contentious issues with India in a rightful manner?

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International Literacy Day

Sir, I had an opportunity to read the article titled "International Literacy Day — Understanding Quality Education" written by Shamse and Mahmood Hasan in your paper dt. 8th September 1996, in the Focus page.

The writers have written elaborately the merits and demerits of our present education system. So, the improvement depends on the implementation of the present scheme by impartial administration. Here we like to point out some indicators to improve our literacy rate to achieve a star-hat in the international level.

(i) From SSC level to masters degree level, we should allocate some marks in the final examinations against submission of a certificate from the local chairman of the UP stating that the candidate has taught a person at least to sign/write his name.

(ii) In every village, there are mosques and local madrasahs for religious teachings. These institutions should be used to teach people how to sign/write their names.

(iii) Local educated persons should be encouraged to teach persons to write their names etc.

(iv) The last but not the least point is to start night schools locally by the primary teachers etc.

M Ali
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