

Jails are Hells

If there is anything close to hell on earth then probably it is a jail in Bangladesh. Thursday's Star report on jail inmates' jeremiad once again reminded us of this of perceived notion. It took the untimely deaths of two young men for the world to know that the Narayanganj District Jail is no more a place for a living person. A gaol with a capacity for 126 inmates it now overflows with a population of 779! Prisoners spoiling their clothes for the lack of adequate toilet facilities, and waiting for winter to have some sleep at last because it is impossible to sleep in the heat and congestion of summer — are some of the horrid details that tend to question whether we are civilised enough and if we still subscribe to the view that a jail is to reform a criminal back to a law-abiding life.

This paper has been vociferously pleading with the authorities to undertake the task of jail reform for a long time. In the aftermath of the bloody jail-break in Jessor when the whole country was caught in a consciousness frenzy about the inhuman inner reality of prison houses in Bangladesh, it was known that the committee formed with the express view of recommending measures for jail reform did a fairly exhaustive job and it was left to authorities to implement them. But nothing has been heard since then.

What is happening in the jails in Bangladesh is a twin robbing of rights of very fundamental nature. Not only is there continuing a reign of basic human rights violation as the authorities are unable to provide the minimum amenities and medicare but also people are being constantly denied of a legal right. Majority of the jail population comprises undertrial prisoners. These people suffer for months on end whereas they should not be held in captivity over three months unless they are convicted. Authorities pass the buck by referring to the tardy colonial legal system of the country for this extended confinement. But the time has come where the suffering of the jail inmates can no longer be ignored in an endless jugglery of responsibility.

It is sad that the present government which appears so sincere and positively inclined about addressing the inhuman condition of jail dwellers seems to have been caught in the all too familiar syndrome of feet dragging.

Please, wake up and act.

An Ominous Upswing

If the year, which is into its last month, stands out for the sheer volatility of resolutions adopted against incidence of violence on women and children, it seems all set to close on a highly alarming note of insecurity for those two most vulnerable segments of our society. In Dhaka city alone during the last eleven months 488 women and children were preyed on by rapists and 183 were abducted making for a monthly average of above 44 in the first category of crime and very nearly 17 in the second. Since there is a thin line of demarcation between rape and abduction, especially as far as the women or girl children went the incidence of sexual crime might well have been higher than 44 per month.

Dhaka being the capital city is supposed to be the most well-guarded among the country's urban centres. Ironically it is not. This is for the fact that the metropolitan police force is to a very large extent deployed for VIP duties, tailing political and assorted other processions and keeping an eye on public meetings of variegated persuasions. Whatever remains of the manpower is spread thin over stationary and mobile vigilante duties. While the information relay network needs to be modernised with a wide scanner coverage, short-notice arrival of reinforcements will have to be guaranteed.

The incidents of rape and abduction do not happen all of a sudden. There must have been, in most cases, incipient early warnings about them coming which needed to be heeded timely for stopping them on the track. We suggest community or ward level visit and intervention as an antidote to the barbaric crimes against women and children.

Stop This Now

Poisoning a community's water is a capital crime in many countries of the world. This crime is, however, inconceivable in the modern times.

One of Bangladesh's most precious blessings of nature is the Sundarbans. Besides yielding annually wealth worth a billion to multifarious takers, it holds the potential of immeasurably more bounty. And even that is nothing compared to its value as the linchpin holding Bangladesh's ecosystem together ensuring its position as one of the pleasantest living countries in the world.

This treasure trove has been exploited for centuries, but without harming it eventually. With the increase in man's power to plunder and kill nature, Sundarbans has fallen a helpless victim to vandals and rogues of the strangest variety. Man, it seems, is bent on seeing the end of this biggest mangrove forest in the world, one that secures the coast lands of this country against the lashings of world's highest sea tides. As if the continuous wasting of the wonderful 600 thousand hectare forest together with government failures that spur this rather than arrest, was not enough, the vandals have started to kill all life forms in its rivers and channels spread over 200 thousand hectares. First, in their greed to catch a pricey variety of shrimp they trawled the rivers in a way that killed 150 fishes to get one shrimp.

And then someone thought up to poison the rivers and water courses so that these throw up their fishes for easy catching. As a result the Sundarbans is now being fast reduced into a slaughterhouse of all forms of life living in water.

If this cannot be stopped forthwith why should there be a government at all for this nation?

The Rural Non-farm Economy

A large segment of RNFA have the potentiality to deliver higher productivity than agriculture and pull labour out of agriculture. Appropriate credit and infrastructure policies could help these grow faster and firm.

If necessity is the mother of invention, then perhaps rural non-farm activities (RNFA) duly deserve the attention of researchers and policy planners. And, in fact, they do. Even in 1970s, the area, comprising RNFA, remained almost a virgin land in terms of research interests and policy prescriptions, because agriculture constituted the single most important source of employment at that time. During 1974-86 period (and also in later years) workers employed in agriculture remained almost stagnant while non-agricultural labour force increased to triple over the same period of time. Agriculture now, reportedly, employs less than 60 per cent of the total labour force compared to over three-fourths in early 1970s. Employment in RNFA activities increased by about 8 per cent per year. The dwindling capacity of agriculture to swallow the swelling labour force could be adduced to (a) non-expandable land frontier, (b) maximum cropping intensity and (c) low employment elasticity of output.

But growth of RNFA could signal both a good and a bad news. Good news is that when agriculture prospers, NFA flourishes via increase in wages and expansion of markets for inputs and outputs. It is called "pull factor" because high remunerative job opportunities in non-farm sector tend to pull labour out of agriculture. But agriculture itself can push labour out of its range and thus cause a "push factor". It

happens generally when sluggish agriculture can no longer bearish labour force. In the context of Bangladesh, the hypothesis that paves most is that agricultural stagnation forces labour to go and eke out a living elsewhere, albeit in low productive, low wage occupations. The fierce competition results in decline in labour productivity and accentuation of poverty. On the other side of the divide, few studies have shown that strong pull factor accelerated employment in RNFA activities.

To shed some light on the various dimensions of RNFA, we present some information from a household level survey (1995) carried out by the Centre for Human Resources Development (CHRD) of Jahangirnagar University. For the entire sample (425 households from 22 villages of 22 districts), 60 per cent of the households reported that at least one member was engaged in RNFA. In an earlier study — using BIDS survey of 62 villages (1987) — Mahabub Hossain, Mstafizur Rahman and the present writer found that nearly 57 per cent were engaged in the said activities. The figures point at the importance of RNFA in rural economy. There are five principal occupations around which RNFA appears to hover: Industry (cottage), Trade, Business and Shopkeeping, Transport, Construction and Services. All of these RNFA constituted 44 per cent of total household income in 1995 compared to about 38 per cent in 1987. In other developing countries, RNFA are reported to be contributing 30-50 per cent of rural household income.

However, among the above mentioned five sources of employment, Trade and Shopkeeping continues to take the lead accounting for about one-fifth of all rural households' involvement.

Construction constitutes about 13 per cent and rural processing, meager 8 per cent. Almost 60 per cent of both landless and landowning households reported to have engaged at least one member in RNFA.

Participation in RNFA is found to vary across activities. Participation in industry, transport and construction activities seems to be poverty-driven. Excepting in services, education does not seem to influence participation. Age is found to be a statistically significant in factor influencing participation RNFA. Due to space constraint, we shall report on only estimates of value added, capital intensity and labour productivity in Rural Transport Sector: rickshaw, rickshawvan, cart driving, non-mechanized boat and mechanized boat.

Contrary to general notion (and apprehension!) mechanized boats employ 781 man-days of labour and on average 3.25 workers. This compares with 497 non-days and 2.00 workers on average in non-mechanized boats. Again, on average, mechanized boats required initial capital of around Tk 47,000 compared to 10,000 in non-mechanized boats. Labour productivity per day turned out to be Tk 130 for mechanized boat and Tk 110 for non-mechanized boat. Mechanized boats use nearly 15 times more capital but gives 24 times more productivity than non-mechanized ones.

Rickshaw and rickshawvans are mostly operated by family labour but there is considerable employment of hired labour in cart and boat operation. A larger proportion of

cart operators (one-fourth) had productivity lower than the prevailing agricultural wages. But 5-10 per cent of rickshaw and van operators and non-mechanized boat operators failed to earn a level of agricultural wage. By and large, RNFA pulled most of the labour from agriculture. Majority of the respondents of transport sector (two-thirds) reported that their economic condition improved over the last five years. Those reporting a deterioration were mostly from cart driving and non-mechanized boat operators.

In RNFA, a significant portion of employment is poverty-induced. These are enterprises which employ traditional technology and are run largely by female labour. Only technological transformation could keep them alive and able to compete with others. A significant portion of resource poor households (landless) appear to be engaged in trading and transport operations. Although these require small amount of capital, the average productivity is much higher than agricultural wage rates. The average productivity in petty trading was found to be 60-70 per cent higher than agricultural wages.

It thus appears that not all that is happening in the RNFA sector could be adduced to be pull factors. Yes a small segment of these in fact are so. A large segment of RNFA have the potentiality to deliver higher productivity than agriculture and pull labour out of agriculture. Appropriate credit and infrastructure policies could help these grow faster and firm.

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OPINION

CHT Peace Accord

Saleh Tanveer

The signing of the Chittagong Hill Tracts peace accord is currently being hotly debated among many circles. The principal opposition parties are engaged in hartial and in a massive mobilization of public opinion against this accord.

There is no doubt that the treaty calls for a departure from normal administrative patterns in other parts of the country.

The granting of some sort of autonomy to the CHT tribals raises alarms in many circles as to whether it is a prelude to an independence movement by the tribals.

It may also be forcefully argued that such extraordinary concessions will encourage other tribals in the Sylhet or Madhupur area to seek similar status.

Further, it is clear that the local council envisaged in the accord, will have the right to determine who can and cannot come and live in this area.

As one Bangladeshi never observed, why should any Bangladeshi be disallowed to live in a part of Bangladesh when indeed there are no such restrictions on the tribals?

Such concerns are indeed serious under normal conditions.

On the other hand, from a tribal perspective, being a small minority of a bigger political entity, they feel that they have had little leverage in the political process that shaped the destiny of the piece of land that they are their ancestors called 'home'.

They had little to do with the dominant forces that curved out Pakistan or the ones that brought about Bangladesh.

Our political leaders, and indeed the Bangladeshi intelligentsia at large, failed to realise that the most effective way to subsume individual tribal identity into a larger Bangladeshi identity was to make them feel welcome as Bangladeshi.

This statement holds for all minorities.

This was not going to be achieved when minority demands are met with denial and dismissal.

Further, in the early stages of the armed revolt, our response has been to send in more troops to try to contain them militarily.

We cried foul about India's

involvement, while not recognising opportunities for political settlement.

A quarter of a

century later, after we have managed to radicalize a significant portion of the tribal populace, an accord has been signed.

With the past background, it is not surprising that the terms agreed upon reflect the distrust the tribals have of Bangladeshi authorities and the military.

Given the past mistakes of our political leaders, the extra ordinary measures of this treaty should be seen as a chance to extricate ourselves from the tight corner that we put ourselves in.

There is no certainty that this will work, or that other Chakma leaders opposed to the accord will not make the treaty look useless.

There is also no guarantee that other tribal groups elsewhere in the country will not rise and seek similar privileges.

Hopefully, our leadership will have taken a lesson

and will confront such future

situations in a more sensitive manner so as to avert any such eventualities.

Those who are up in arms over the treaty provisions should ask — what are our alternatives?

If this problem was solvable militarily, we would have a solution some 20 years back.

In the long run, isn't the

integrity of the country better

protected if we mend fences

with seriously disaffected parts

of our population, rather than

try to impose upon them the

will of the majority?

This does not mean that the every demand of every group must be met — that simply we are sensitive

to their genuine concerns

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The Systems Loss in the Garment Export Industry

A Zabir

We are all proud of the achievements of the garment export sector. Most of the credit goes to the early pioneers who slowly but surely build up the market themselves during the initial period, without much awareness by the government.

They have accumulated about two decades of experience and expertise.

Still, it appears, things are not working smoothly and at routine level.

Why the small day-to-day hitches have to be brought to the

press level?

Either it is insensitive ad-

ministrative, or some sort of

pressure tactics are being em-

ployed by the Association to get

more and more favourable

treatment, some of which may

not be in public interest, that

is, may suit some vested inter-

ests only. Is this the 'darling

syndrome of a spoilt child. Let

us keep in mind the negligence of fire safety.

It would be better if the office

bearers meet the press and

clarify this non-routine way of

agitation and getting things

done. How is it that the

garment industry has not yet

reached a 'routine level of working

even after a decade?

It is a pointer that the coordi-

nation and cooperation mechanism is not working in the way it has

been planned and is being im-