

Amartya Sen, Flood, Deprivation, and Rabindranath

by Md. Anisur Rahman

Amartya's winning the Nobel Prize is a very valuable event insofar as this will give some strength to those who are concerned with ethics in the discourses of economics and development, and this may add some weight to the balance on the side of ethics. . . Rabindranath and Amartya Sen — let this trend of the Bengali Mind conquering the world, continue.

AMARTYA Sen's work on famines is his best as an economist. This masterly investigation has exposed the nature and working of some of the cruellest processes of deprivation of man by man. It takes some sense of humanism to do rigorous research on a subject of this nature and a commitment, in an environment where this kind of inquiry has not been very popular among the establishments including the economics establishment. Amartya's work on famines is comparable in its depth, commitment and message with the work on the famine of Bengal by artist Zainul Abedin. For this work alone Amartya deserved the Nobel Prize much earlier as many of his admirers have been wanting and expecting; but the Nobel Prize jury on economics had not given us the hope that one could claim this prize working on such a 'subversive' subject. On this question of ideology of the Prize I have already written (The Daily Star, 24 Oct 98).

In Bangladesh we have seen the post-flood famine in 1974, and the flood this year has been more severe. Thanks to enhanced resilience of our people and all-round social awareness including awareness of the media, we may not see quite a famine this year. But people are suffering beyond measure; countless people are spending their days without a full stomach taking one meal a day; and many are dying of acute undernourishment and related diseases and may continue to do so. The situation has evoked wide response from among the fortunate in the society by way of coming to the assistance of the flood victims. We the fortunate do come to the assistance of the distressed at times of major calamities; but we separate from them when 'normalcy' returns, and in fact become, with the objective of enhancing our own private fortunes, a party to, or make compromises with, the very structures and processes that oppress or exploit the peo-

ple and deprive them of their right to resources. This deprivation, indeed, is one major reason why during periods of natural calamities like the present flood large sections of the people get devastated — even if they stand up by their resilience — while others remain unscathed. Amartya has consistently talked of such deprivation and resulting inequalities in society, thus taking an explicitly ethical position that lesser economists have hesitated in taking.

It may be enlightening to reflect on the ultimate form of this deprivation. I do not know how far Amartya has gone in talking about deprivation of Man by Man, for I have not read all his writings; but I know that Rabindranath Tagore has gone very deep. I am drawing Tagore in discussing Amartya because Amartya had sat in Tagore's lap when he was an infant, his name was given by Tagore, and in my judgment the depth of Tagore's own socio-economic thinking toward uplift of mankind remains unsurpassed to this day. Some of Tagore's profoundest thoughts are zipped in his songs which are not only rated by some as his best poems (c.f. Sunil Gangopadhyay, "Chitto Pipashito Re", Desh, 27 Jan 1995) but also present some of his deepest philosophies of life and human relations. There is one on pain and companionship worthy of deep reflection: "mamo dukkhero shadhono", (fulfillment of my pain). A translation will always be inadequate; but let me try:

When I laid my pain at your feet
to fulfil it,
the moment that had come was lost.
Why couldn't our union be
aspiced
by your tears?
The feel was dry,
the flowers withered in the
heat of the day
amidst the apertness;
the let could not be put round
your neck.

Seemed I saw, for a moment,
pity in your eyes,
and that washed it away.
Had you given me the gift of
your pain,
it would have come back to
you
as the fruit of paradise.

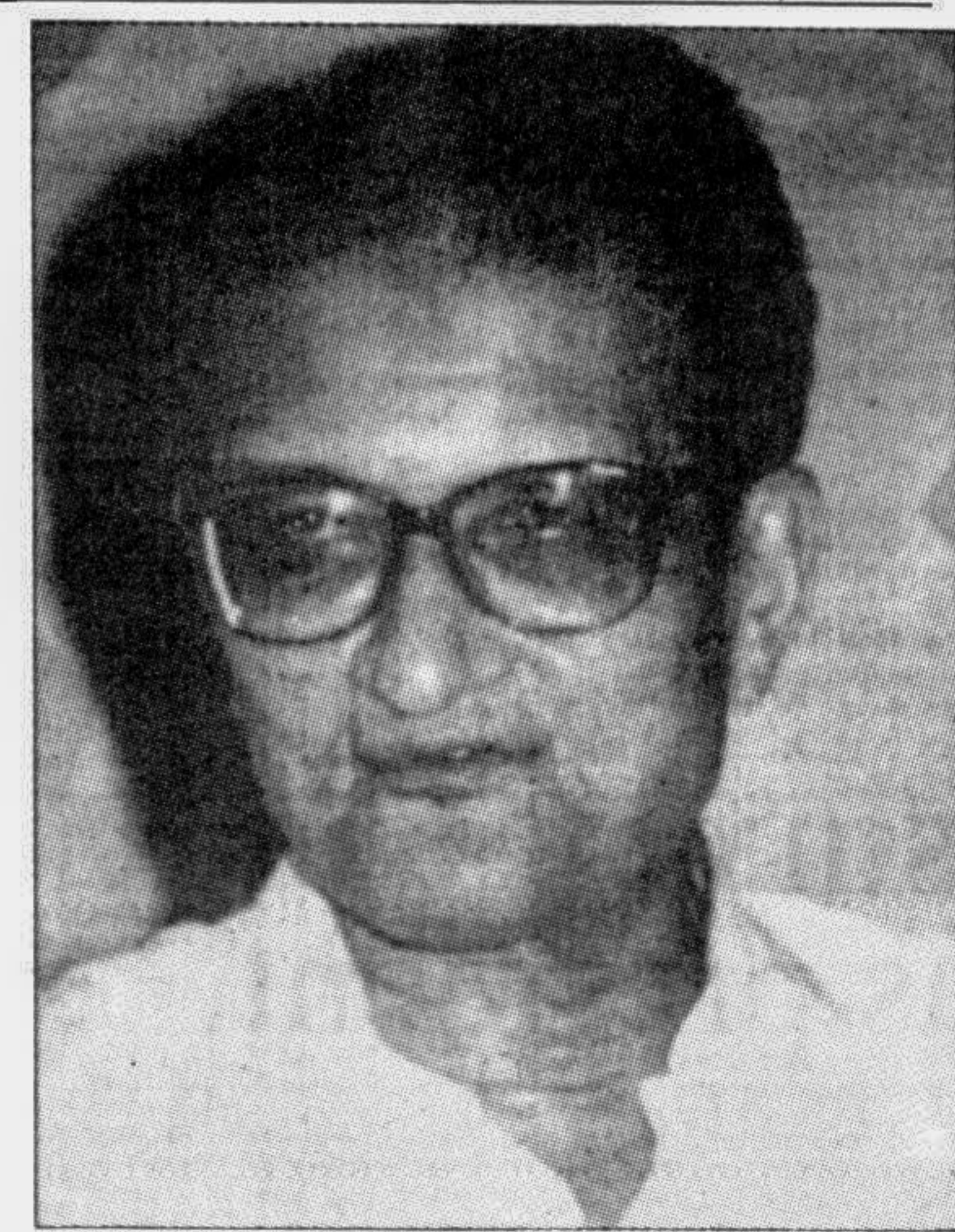
The hapless had sought a companion in her sorrow, to share in a togetherness; but she got pity instead. This is how the fortunate treat people when they are struck by major calamities like floods and cyclones. We give them relief, with pity in our eyes, and do not extend to them a hand of companionship in their suffering. This is no more than giving charity while our own ostentatious living continues undiminished. This, indeed, is the ultimate form of deprivation of Man by Man: even in times of the greatest calamities they will get from us not a hand of companionship but a hand of charity in which lies the greatest humiliation of Man — to thus kneel down with an extended hand to the giver, even to be abused if there is discipline while receiving relief (during the famine of 1974 I myself witnessed hungry people in a gruel kitchen being literally whipped to discipline them [see my discussion of the Famine of 1974 in *The Lost Moment*, UPL, 1993]). And the irony is that with such relief work it is the 'giver' who gets the glory of 'nobleness' while the glory to the suffering people for their heroic struggle to face their disaster is denied — a great deprivation and inequality even in the recognition of responses to such disasters.

During our freedom struggle many of our freedom fighters had dreamt that the nation would not thus fall apart, that the war-devastated nation would choose a path of shared

and austerity to rebuild itself. That did not happen: we rolled down along a path of deprivation, growing inequalities, and unequal distribution of suffering and glory at times of major calamities. In my assessment the most inspiring social movement this nation had after independence was the Rangpur Self-reliant Movement. While Rangpur was the district worst hit by the flood and famine of 1974, people of sixty villages who formed this movement rejected relief and the gruel kitchen completely, arranged for respectable work for the distressed, established community control over surplus foodstuff in all households in the villages, and provided 'entitlement' (to use Amartya's term) to the distressed to at least one meal a day against such honourable work. This preserved the self-respect of all, even of the most distressed; and the glory went both to the distressed as well as to the initiators of this movement to give 'exchange entitlement' to food to the distressed.

And such entitlement was not given by the "free market" nor by the state none of which, as Amartya has shown, is interested or capable of giving such (honourable) entitlement to the needy at such hours; this was given by the local communities initiating and administering compulsory procurement of surplus foodgrains, a third sector on which Tagore had also rested his hope for economic management oriented to people's welfare and to preserving the dignity of the people.

The flood in Bangladesh this year has been judged to be the worst in this land in living memory. A national austerity drive to meet this disaster would not have been an inap-



propriate response. A time had come to thus express solidarity with the suffering people at least at a time of a major calamity. An experiment could also be launched to entrust local communities with the command of foodgrains available to each locality — perhaps NGOs and the Grameen Bank between themselves could have worked as facilitators in such an experiment. Instead, we the fortunate have become active in flood relief and assistance work

retaining our own ostentatious life styles, failing to show a deeper sense of solidarity with the people. Just as we failed to show such a sense of solidarity in the task of rebuilding the nation after our freedom struggle. The thought of such national austerity drive is not just a romantic dream. England devastated by the Second World War had lunched such a drive, and even the Queen's personal consumption of food was tightly rationed (two eggs a week).

Perhaps because we are a poor nation, when we taste luxury we cannot give it up, even temporarily. But in the resulting show of inequality and the concomitant deprivation lies a source of the growing crimes and lawlessness that we are alarmingly witnessing in our social life; this is not a result only of an absence of the rule of law with which most concerned thinkers seem to be preoccupied — it will not be possible to arrest this trend just by tightening the rule of law without bringing down social deprivation and inequalities to an acceptable level. We have seen, during our liberation war when people of all classes and from all walks of life had joined hands as comrades and gone through the great hardship of life together, how even "criminals" had become transformed to show the best of them. On this we may remember Khalil Gibran's unparalleled line on good and evil: "What is evil but good tortured...?"

Encouraged by Amartya Sen

winning the Nobel Prize some colleagues have asked me if discourses and policies in development will not now turn toward people's welfare, if not as far as Tagore went but at least some way? I am unable to hope that this will happen. I am unable to hope that even in the mainstream development economies such a turn will take place. There is a fulfillment in lecturing in classes and seminars and in writing about the thinking of great men; to follow their thinking in practical life or even to profess them is another matter. Even Tagore's songs are sung mainly as entertainment and relaxation, and the influence on our actual lives of the philosophy of life and society that many of his songs contain is absolutely nil. Tagore himself did not achieve much in his practical experiments with his social and economic thoughts, mainly because most of the associates who were available to him to deliver the experiments did not really share his commitment. And Amartya will possibly stay abroad and not even try.

Yet Amartya's winning the Nobel Prize is a very valuable event insofar as this will give some strength to those who are concerned with ethics in the discourses of economics and development, and this may add some weight to the balance on the side of ethics.

Rabindranath and Amartya Sen — let this trend of the Bengali Mind conquering the world, continue.

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Efficient Relief Distribution: Cash or Kind?

by Manzur Alam

Now lets assume that the PM and one MD of a multinational company baked one hundred pita breads (ruti) by spending one hour for the flood affected. Ignoring all the cost associated with PM and the MD's travel (fuel, traffic jam, security, entourage, media contingent etc.), how much value did they add for the society?

FLOODS, cyclones and consequent relief distribution has become a permanent feature of life in Bangladesh. And therefore it is extremely important that we ask ourselves whether the current mode of relief distribution is efficient, i.e., is there any scope for improving it?

Anytime disaster hits anywhere in the world, the usual response of other human beings is to rush with relief materials, such as food (typically canned food), blankets, clothes, tents and medicine. In a disaster like earthquake — which is completely sudden and unpredictable — there is no alternative to employing professional and well-trained teams for the purpose of rescue, distribution of relief and rehabilitation.

In the case of Bangladesh's floods, the disaster is a slow and a predictable process. Accordingly, there is very little need for emergency and quick relief operations compared to what would be needed in case of earthquake or a wildfire. That is why we find all sorts of people getting involved in the relief operations; people who are not quite experienced in baking breads or rowing boats get involved in these activities. Some people derive great joy from participating in these activities. Some would argue that these activities create a sense of participation, promote empathy and fellow feeling for the sufferers.

Since I am not a social scientist I cannot comment on these social benefits. All I wish to do is comment on the economic cost and benefits of these activities. I shall argue that from an economic point of view, these activities are wasteful compared to a much simpler alternative: distributing relief in kind instead of cash. My suggestion is not new, this was suggested by many economists before including the recent Nobel prize winner Professor A K Sen.

Although for economists, it is easy to understand why cash is superior to other forms of relief, most people find this very surprising and even outrageous. In fact, if I correctly remember Professor Sen's comment he made ten years ago when he came to Dhaka, BBC stopped taking interviews from him after he made the suggestion of distributing cash among the disaster-hit people.



NGO personnel distributing relief materials among flood victims in Pabna: A typical scenario now.

pieces of bread baked (the value of labour) is no more than 100 taka. Therefore the society has achieved a net loss of 1400 taka. This is because if the PM and the MD were busy with their usual productive activities society could have gained 1500 taka but now because they baked bread instead the society got only 100 taka. The flood-affected would have been helped much more efficiently if these two highly productive persons would have devoted that valuable one hour in their normal productive activities, had added 1500 taka value to the society and have donated just 750 taka in cash to the flood affected.

Many highly productive people have followed the Prime Minister's example of baking bread. Highly productive firm managers, high officials, students, teachers, entrepreneurs have devoted time in this low productive activity of baking bread, or buying medicine, travelling long distances with cloth and other goods. Lot of workforces have employed their workforces, who are highly productive in their own businesses but inexperienced and inefficient in conducting relief activities in the production and distribution of relief goods. By doing this they have not only caused a net loss of national output, they have also contributed to unemployment of people whose time is lot less valuable.

If instead of baking bread highly productive people had simply donated money people whose opportunity cost of time is lot less, such as a poor housewife or a professional baker, could have been employed in this job. By doing the job of distribution of relief in kind instead of cash the more productive people of the society have stolen the job of these poor people without ever intending to harm anybody.

And what about the quality of these breads they have baked? There have been many complaints by the flood-affected people in the shelters that a lot of bread was not baked properly and they couldn't eat those.

Some people argue that in our country most people are unemployed in disguise and the value of their time is very little anyway. So, they argue, if some students or even working people devote some of their leisure time in baking bread, there is no loss. They also add that, if the Prime Minister's token act can motivate these people to give voluntary service, that would be a net benefit. A deeper look would show why this reasonable sounding argument is not very tenable. First of all one need to recognise the fact that even the leisure time of students and working people is valuable. The fact that they have chosen to enjoy leisure or study instead of working by itself proves that in their personal evaluation the leisure time is more valuable than that of a professional baker.

During an emergency, like the flood altruistic people have the tendency to forget that their time has other valuable uses. The Prime Minister, by her symbolic act, has simply affirmed their wrong feelings. The act of baking bread would be more valuable than any other activity only if there were nobody else looking for this low productivity job. It is hard to believe that the floods create such acute labour shortage to justify the otherwise employed ones to give their valuable time.

Moreover, the argument that we have disguised unemployment and hence these activities employ the truly unemployed is not true. Rigorous empirical studies have consistently shown that there is no disguised unemployment in countries like ours. I do not think anyone

can convincingly argue that organising a large-scale cooking or feeding operation requires only the leisure hours of some otherwise unemployable individuals.

Distribution of relief in kind instead of cash has another significant drawback. While cash does not distort choice, relief in the form of goods does distort choice. For example, suppose a family has a very sick child desperately needing medical treatment, but the altruistic individuals give them a dozen of half-baked breads and two saris. Now imagine how difficult would it be for this family to find a drug store who will be willing to give some medications in exchange of those saris! If cash was given to this family they could either transport themselves out of the flood-affected area to go to a hospital and pay for the medical treatment and other associated requirements. Giving cash does not only broaden the choice set of the flood-affected, it also shows that we respect individual freedom; i.e., we do not wrongly assume that the donors know more about the needs of poor than the poor themselves.

Certainly there are circumstances in which cash would be of no use or of little value. For example remote areas, where profit-seeking businesses are not likely to deliver goods because of high costs of transport and communication. These places are better served by relief in kind. I would argue that this type of circumstances is relatively rare and should be handled by professional relief agencies like CARE, BRAC etc. In these cases expertise is required because non-professional individuals do not have the required expertise for identifying the needy, for determining the exact composition and the quantity of their needs, for collecting and preparing the

needed materials, and for transporting the needed materials and arranging proper delivery. For the more typically flood-affected, living in non-remote areas, such as people who had taken shelter in the designated shelters in flood free areas, supply of cash would make it easier for them to buy whatever they consider important for themselves.

I believe that unless the place is extremely remote, if the flood-affected get an inflow of cash, enterprising individuals would create a regular traffic of boats carrying essential items for the flood-affected. If enough money were poured, even floating bakeries, medicine stores and floating clinics would be set up by private initiatives. It is true that the food and other necessities will be more expensive in those distant places, but those will be cheaper than transporting commodities by non-professionals. If the flood-affected people find it cheaper to buy the more expensive bread locally compared to buying bread by going to distant places, floating bakers will have customers. If these businesses do not survive flood-affected people will start transporting themselves to bring the needed items. These profit-seeking enterprises are likely to provide high quality service at low costs because competition for profits should result in the survival of the most efficient producers.

Another good reason for distributing relief in kind instead of cash is to prevent theft. While cash is easy to carry and distribute it is also very easy to steal. Specially the foreign donors have good reasons to be concerned about the prospect of their relief money being spent otherwise. Similarly individual donors when giving money to unknown individuals should have good reasons to suspect that the money will end up somewhere else. I agree with this concern and I think it is perfectly logical to donate relief in the form of goods instead of cash under these circumstances. My worry is that lots of resources are wasted even when there are no such concerns.

The last good reason I can think of for donating relief in kind is that household can donate their used items that would fetch little value in the market, while they may be of great use to the flood-affected. This is also logical and I have no problem with this case. I would have problem when I find people spending their cash to buy goods for the purpose of donation. I think I have shown that this causes waste of valuable resources. I think I have also shown that this wastage is greatest when otherwise highly productive people get involved in not only buying goods but also in producing goods for the disaster-stricken.

Only now, long after Sen have convincingly shown that people die in famine not because of shortage of food but because of the lack of purchasing power to buy, we find governments and NGOs talking about entitlement. I believe a day will come when people will try to rise above their emotional attachment to the usual practice of distributing relief in kind and accept the more logical approach i.e., consider distributing cash before considering any other form of relief.

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নিয়োগ বিজ্ঞপ্তি

গণপ্রজাতন্ত্রী বাংলাদেশ সরকার কর্তৃক প্রতিষ্ঠিত দারিদ্র মোচন ও ক্ষুদ্রঋণ কার্যক্রমে সহায়তাদানকারী পল্লী কর্ম-সহায়ক ফাউন্ডেশন (পিকেএসএফ)-এ নিম্নলিখিত পদের জন্য দরখাস্ত আহ্বান করা যাচ্ছে :

মহাব্যবস্থাপক-১	অডিটে ১৫ বছরের বাতর অভিজ্ঞতাসহ সি.এ. পাশ, হিসাবরক্ষণ, আর্থিক ব্যবস্থাপনা, কোম্পানী আইন, কর ও ব্যাংকিং বিষয়াদি সম্পর্কে ভাল জ্ঞান থাকা আবশ্যিক। বেতনক্রম ১৩৫০০-৬৫০০x৮-১৮৯০০।
উপমহাব্যবস্থাপক (কার্যক্রম)-১	কমপক্ষে একটি প্রথম বিভাগ/শ্রেণীসহ সকল পরীক্ষায় ন্যূনতম দ্বিতীয় বিভাগ/শ্রেণীসহ অর্থনীতি, সমাজ বিজ্ঞান, হিসাব বিজ্ঞান, আইনসাহ, ব্যবস্থাপনা, লোক প্রশাসন, মাস্টার্স অথবা এম.বি.এ এবং ঋণ কার্যক্রম পরিচালনায় কমপক্ষে ১০ বছরের বাতর অভিজ্ঞতা। বেতনক্রম ১১৫০০-৫২৫০x৫-১৪১২৫-৬২৫০x৫-১৭২৫০।
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ব্যবস্থাপক (অডিট)-৩	কমপক্ষে দুইটি প্রথম বিভাগ/শ্রেণীসহ সকল পরীক্ষায় ন্যূনতম দ্বিতীয় বিভাগ/শ্রেণীসহ হিসাব বিজ্ঞানে মাস্টার্স অথবা এম.বি.এ (মেজর হিসাব বিজ্ঞান) বা সি.এ ইন্টারমিডিয়েট পাশ। অডিট কার্যক্রমে ৭ বছরের বাতর অভিজ্ঞতা থাকতে হবে। বেতনক্রম ৮২৫০-৩৭৫x৫-১০১২৫-৪০০x৫-১১২৫৫-৪২৫x৫-১৪২৫০।
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সহকারী ব্যবস্থাপক-১৪	কমপক্ষে দুইটি প্রথম বিভাগ/শ্রেণীসহ সকল পরীক্ষায় ন্যূনতম দ্বিতীয় বিভাগ/শ্রেণীসহ মাস্টার্স বা সমমানের জিডি অথবা শিক্ষা জীবনে সকল পরীক্ষায় অনূন দ্বিতীয় বিভাগ/শ্রেণীসহ স্নাতক বা সমমানের জিডি এবং তৎসহ জাতীয় বেতন স্কেলে নবম গ্রেডে বা খ্যাতি সম্পন্ন প্রতিষ্ঠানে আট বছর চাকরীর অভিজ্ঞতা অথবা কমপক্ষে দুইটি প্রথম বিভাগ/শ্রেণীসহ সকল পরীক্ষায় অনূন দ্বিতীয় বিভাগ/শ্রেণীসহ স্নাতক বা সমমানের জিডিসহ সি.এ. ইন্টারমিডিয়েট পাশ। হিসাব বিজ্ঞান, অর্থনীতি, আইনসাহ, ব্যবস্থাপনা, লোক প্রশাসন, সমাজ বিজ্ঞান, পরিসংখ্যান-এ মাস্টার্স বা এম.বি.এ জিডিধারীদের অগ্রাধিকার দেয়া হবে। বেতনক্রম ৪৮০০-২৭৫x৫-৬১৭৫-৩০০x৫-৭৬৭৫-৩২৫x৫-৯৩০০।
বয়স	ব্যবস্থাপক ও তার নিম্নের পদের জন্য সর্বোচ্চ ৪০ বছর এবং অন্যান্য পদের জন্য সর্বোচ্চ ৫০ বছর। বিশেষ ক্ষেত্রে বয়স শিথিলযোগ্য।
অন্যান্য সুবিধাদি	মূল বেতনের ৬০% বাড়ী ভাড়া ভাতা, CPF, Gratuity, বোনাস, ফ্রপরিমা, আয়কর ইত্যাদি।
শর্তাবলী	(ক) দরখাস্তকারীকে নিজের নাম, পিতা/স্বামীর নাম, বর্তমান ও স্থায়ী ঠিকানা, জন্ম তারিখ, বয়স, জাতীয়তা, ধর্ম, নিজ জেলা, শিক্ষাপত্র যোগ্যতা, অভিজ্ঞতা ইত্যাদি উল্লেখপূর্বক সাদা কাগজে দরখাস্ত করতে হবে। (খ) সরকারী ও আধাসরকারী সংস্থায় কর্মরত প্রার্থীদের যথাযথ কর্তৃপক্ষের মাধ্যমে আবেদন করতে হবে। (গ) দরখাস্তের সঙ্গে শিক্ষাপত্র যোগ্যতার সনদ পত্র, মার্কশীট, দুই কপি সন্য তোলা পাসপোর্ট সাইজ ছবি, দুইটি চারিত্রিক সনদপত্র ও অভিজ্ঞতা সনদপত্রের সত্যায়িত কপি দরখাস্তের সাথে জমা দিতে হবে। (ঘ) আগামী ২৬শে নভেম্বর, ১৯৯৮ খ্রিষ্টাব্দ তারিখের মধ্যে ব্যবস্থাপনা পরিচালকের বরাবরে নিম্নলিখিত ঠিকানায় দরখাস্ত পৌঁছাতে হবে।

পল্লী কর্ম-সহায়ক ফাউন্ডেশন
বাড়ী নং-৩১/এ, সড়ক নং-৮, ধানমন্ডি আ/এ, ঢাকা-১২০৫