

Economic Incongruity

THE IRRI-BIDS study to analyse capital-centred "changes in socio-economic conditions, food scarcity and access to urban services since 1991" has come up with a few intriguing micro-economic quotients, portraying overall a grim picture. That wealth of the rich—five per cent of the Dhaka population—has almost doubled in less than eight years could itself have been a positive bit of information, had it not meant that people at the other end of the scale have gone poorer. Although per capita income of slum-dwellers in general has increased from 165 US dollars to 250, on the whole "the income share of the bottom 40 per cent on the per capita income scale has declined from 17 to 11 per cent." The study also reveals an increasing 'rural-urban migration' that poses a Herculean demographic challenge for the city-planners. If this unbridled influx continues at its current pace, demographers fear, "Dhaka will become the fifth most populous city in the world by 2015 with a population of 19.5 million." With the capital already bursting at its seams, the scenario speaks of a potential demographic disaster.

Economic implications aside which require policy redressal, the study report underscores the dire need for measures towards dispersal of the booming capital population. Centripetal nature of the country's economic activities is indeed the primary reason behind the rural-urban migration, causing immense strain on the urban services. Therefore, first and foremost, there is the need of centrifugal distribution of employment through creation of economic epicentres away from the capital. At the same time, efforts must be made to improve communication between the capital and its peripheries. In our view, that would ease up the city's housing problems since more people will opt for residence in the suburban area at a much cheaper cost. While encouraging suburban development, it would also enhance individual savings, thereby indirectly bringing about a positive trend in the economy. The planners, to that end, should contemplate setting up of railway lines on the embankments encircling the capital and also launching of shuttle trains to facilitate commuting at affordable costs.

Unlike other major metropolises of the world, we have not been able to promote suburban housing primarily because of a poor communications system. Investment of time and money in that area would definitely lead to proper demographic distribution, reducing the pressure on the capital. On the other hand, creation of economic epicentres would result in increased income generation that will energise the country's economy in the long term.

A Meeting at Last!

THE coordination committee formed in October, 1996 for synchronised action in the public service sector of the metropolis has suddenly surprised its members by coming out of hibernation after nine months of its last meeting. Reports have it that the chairman of the committee LGRD Minister Zillur Rahman and co-chairman Mayor Mohammad Hanif, despite being elite members of the powerful ruling party do not see eye to eye on many subjects and their cold attitude towards each other is responsible for this committee going into a limbo for such a long time. Nobody knows why this important body, set up after Mayor's proposal for a 'Metropolitan Government', was kept in a state of suspended animation to the misery of the taxpaying millions of this bulging metropolis. Since some of the decisions of the committee were not effectively carried out by the relevant authority, the members felt it useless to spend time on this committee.

Harsh criticism in the national press about the callousness of the DCC and other utility providers has been cited as the main reason for the Mayor to call a meeting of the Committee last Thursday. Dhakaites are somewhat familiar with the tug-of-war between the LGRD minister and the Mayor of Dhaka. But they never could imagine that this would lead to such a massive inattention to the problems of Dhaka City. Minister Zillur Rahman's assurances to the people of Dhaka to turn this town into 'tilottoma' (a paragon of beauty) by March 1997 have long gone by default. Instead it has become a large garbage can—for all to see.

Rather than talking loud and hollow concentrate on the job you are entrusted with. The people want action, not the rhetorics.

Let's Do It Here

THE smile on the faces of six acid-burn victims—Ruma, Jyotsna, Nomita, Monira, Khadija and Nurunnahar—make us grateful to Corporation Darmoestatika of Spain. Supported by the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) and the British High Commission, the Spanish corporation financially contributed in carrying out surgery on the ill-starred girls, who were sent to Spain for treatment in November last year. Given the grim fact that acid-throwing remains a social scourge in the country, there is a large number of victims of it waiting to be treated. They are passing through a tunnel of pain and anguish with their mutilated faces to the barbaric act of their tormentors.

At this juncture, our conscience becomes overcast with shame that it's always a foreign philanthropist who rises to the occasion in helping the victims to be socially rehabilitated. Similar gesture from our elite is badly awaited. A ray of hope, however, can be seen; for, reportedly, one of the privately-run hospitals in Dhaka is trying its best to treat acid-burn victims. Wishing their initiative all success, we want this to be replicated by others. We urge the health and welfare ministries to work out a mechanism for bringing in foreign experts to train up local hands to handle the acid victims independently. Then the native philanthropists should come forward to lend a hand.

ALL roads lead to Dhaka. Dhaka is the capital city, the pinnacle of power and the port of progress. All the central government headquarters are housed in Dhaka. It's the nerve centre of trade, commerce and industry. So, people from all around and of all walks of life tend to flock to Dhaka in search of bread and butter. In 1995, Dhaka with a population of 8.5 million was the 23rd largest city in the world. By 2015, Dhaka is expected to grow as the 5th largest city with a population of 19.5 million.

How are the people of Dhaka doing in terms of their socio-economic parameters? Has fortune favoured the settlers rank and file? Well, not much of research on this score seems to be in evidence excepting a recent attempt by Mahabub Hossain (IRRI, Manila), Rita Afzal (BIDS) and Manik Lal Bose (IRRI, Dhaka office) to glean the changes over time. Using a multi-stage random sampling method the researchers reached 800 households of different economic strata to assess the situation. The periods compared was 1991 and 1998—a difference of seven years.

One could be happy to note that the per capita income of Dhaka City residents has almost doubled within a period of seven years! The annual growth rate of income is estimated to be at a robust 10.6 per cent per annum. The average per capita income is estimated to be Tk. 40,500 (or USD 843) at the current exchange rate. But the per capita income for households in slums and squatters is esti-

Dhaka Displays Dismal Disparity

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mated to be USD 253—only 23 per cent of the income of households residing in non-slum settlements. The incomes for residents of slum and squatter areas in the city are similar to the income for all rural households in Bangladesh implying, perhaps, that migration could hardly mitigate their economic sufferings. The findings further show that in 1998, nearly 39 per cent of the income of the people in Dhaka originated from trade and business, 33 per cent from services, 14 per cent from renting out properties and 5 per cent from remittances. The annual growth rate of income was the highest for property owners (22 per cent) and it was the lowest for households engaged in services. The 1998 survey shows a highly skewed distribution of urban income. For example, the bottom 40 per cent of the households own only 11 per cent of the total income while the top 10 per cent own 42 per cent and the top 5 per cent own 31 per cent. The Gini ratio for the concentration of per capita income was estimated to be at 0.53 for the sample which is considered extremely high compared with the concentration of rural income (Gini ratio 0.42 for 1995).

The researchers noticed a drastic deterioration in the distribution of urban income for 1991 through 1998. "The share of income for the bottom 40 per cent in the per capita in-

come scale declined from 17 to 11 per cent over the period, while the income share of the top 5 per cent increased from 17 to 31 per cent. Even the income share of the middle 40 per cent declined from 40 to 31 per cent". In search of the reason as they were, the researchers observed that income from trade and business contributed to nearly half of the income in inequal-

per cent was a meagre 2 per cent. Although the human capital is less unequally distributed than the ownership of financial capital, the inequality has been growing as shown by the higher concentration ratio for the current investment in the education of children than the degree of inequality in the level of working members. Unless positive action is taken to reverse

them out from rural areas. The perception of the households about the change in well being was reported in the draft report. The perceptions of the respondents themselves suggest fastest improvement in the poverty situation in Dhaka compared with rural areas despite inequality in urban income.

Wealthy Dhaka does not seem to accommodate a healthy population. In another survey undertaken in 1995 for rural households, 88 per cent of the rural population reported to be healthy but the survey in 1998 in Dhaka found that only 34 per cent of non-slum and 18 per cent of slum dwellers reported to be healthy. Occasional illness was reported to be a phenomenon by nearly two-thirds of urban and 16 per cent of rural

population. While urbanization goes hand in hand with economic development, the nature and pace of urbanization should be in tandem with available facilities. The policy implications from the findings tend to suggest that devolution of power base from the centre to the local level is a must to arrest migration to Dhaka. Quite obviously, development of transport and telecommunication infrastructure between rural and urban areas appear as a precondition for promoting incentives to live in rural areas. Again, development of educational facilities for children in poor households with focus on technical education is needed to allow a better return to investment for high school and college dropouts.

ity, income from properties 26 per cent and the income from service derived from human capital 29 per cent. Thus, about three-fourths of the differences could be adduced to have originated from those activities which are not very much labour intensive to moderate the differences. Admittedly, these sources require education and financial capital that the rich generally have more access to than the poor. That the ownership of capital is becoming further skewed is indicated by an even higher degree of inequality in current investment. The share of the top 5 per cent of the households in investments made in 1991-98 was 55 per cent while the share of the bottom 40

per cent was 2 per cent. The situation by providing better access to capital and education for the lower income groups, the income in equality will further worsen.

The study, however, observed a substantial improvement in the poverty situation. For example, in 1998, only 19 per cent of the urban population could be considered as poor and 11 per cent as hardcore poor. This compares with, respectively, 42 per cent and 27 per cent of 1991. Among the poor nearly 87 per cent lived in slums and squatter areas and these groups of settlers are those landless and marginal ones who migrated from rural to urban areas to eke out a better livelihood. Ample economic incentives pulled

Beneath the Surface

by Abdul Bayes

Of Nepotism and Favouritism

Can we expect the administration to be completely free from nepotism and corruption? However much we would like to see that, the reality is, given the current socio-economic and cultural environment in Bangladesh, political nepotism and corruption will continue. But we can at least make a good faith effort to start a process for reducing the political favours that are enjoyed by a selected few.

SOMETIMES the general public seems to overlook certain irregularity in governmental affairs. Such irregularity may become a popular topic of conversation but the public don't get agitated or incensed over it. However, once in a while, irregularities in governmental action become so obvious and revolting that it seems to touch a certain chord in the public's mind.

The latest allegation of nepotism involving plot allocation by Rajuk appears to be one of those events. As soon as the news broke, it galvanised public opinion against a blatant and shameless act of unfair practice and misuse of public trust.

Last year, Rajuk invited application from individuals interested in a plot in Gulshan, Banani or Uttara. Given the high price of private land in Dhaka, a large number of applicants filed their application along with the deposit money. Those applicants who are familiar with how things work in Bangladeshi politics knew that strings had to be pulled. Those who could, pulled some strings; and those who couldn't, simply waited for their lucky stars to smile.

Reports in the media suggest that lists of successful applicants had been made and revised several times by the authorities concerned. During Mohammad Nasim's tenure in charge of the Works' ministry, a list was finalised. When Engineer Mosharrif Hossain replaced him as the new minister

in charge of Works', he scrapped the old list and made up a new one. When the names in the final list came out in the print media, it looked like a who's who in the Awami League administration.

Following the publication of the list, an uproar broke out among the general public. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, sensing the general mood, did the right thing. She cancelled the allocation of plots and ordered Rajuk to draw up a new list. She deserves credit for at least implicitly acknowledging the irregularities involved in the initial allocation.

Nepotism is nothing new in Bangladeshi politics. Previous administrations had also tried to take care of their own. Stories of how the cabinet members in the Ershad administration used public funds to develop areas in the Gulshan lake and then distribute the land among themselves had circulated in the political circles for years. Similar stories can also be heard about the BNP regime. However, what differentiates this particular incident from the previous ones is the extent and magnitude of nepotism. The blatant nature of nepotism

and the naked act within the ruling circle of looking for each other's interest has surpassed the previous regimes'.

The most unsettling part of the whole episode is the arrogance and insensitivity of Engineer Mosharrif Hossain. It appears that "conflict of interest" is not a term found in his dictionary. As the Minister concerned under whose directive Rajuk distributed the plots, it was his responsibility to see that allotment is done fairly. What does he do? He starts with an allotment in his own name. When asked about it later, he says that he got it as a freedom fighter and not as a minister. C'mon, give us a break!

In recent memory, I have hardly come across an incident involving such misuse of public trust by a cabinet member. In any other country, the minister would be out of his job by now. But in Bangladesh, he might

even be rewarded for looking after his party stalwarts. I remember when Sheikh Hasina sacked Afsaruddin Ahmed from the cabinet for evicting slum dwellers. If that incident of eviction calls for the sacking of a cabinet member, let the readers decide what this incident of plot allocation deserves.

If you step back and think about the whole episode, you will realise that Engineer Mosharrif Hossain did more harm to Awami League and its reputation than what the BNP had succeeded in doing through its agitations and long marches. With supporters and cabinet colleagues like this, Sheikh Hasina doesn't need any help from BNP in hastening a nose dive in her government's popularity.

Our prime minister talks about fairness and transparency in policy making. However, the secrecy in which

frequent electricity failure many roads and streets are plunged into darkness after sunset. It then becomes very difficult and risky to move from one place to another and cross the roads. Moreover, most of the time, the rickshaws ply on the roads and streets carelessly and recklessly without any lamp or light fitted on the body of the vehicles causing innumerable accidents, hitting, striking and injuring pedestrians and passengers but neither the DCC nor the DMP take any action against it.

There are thousands of rickshaws plying on the city roads and streets using different number plates of various organisations other than those issued by DCC. But neither the DCC nor the DMP catch hold of the rickshaws using such fictitious numberplates.

Aren't DCC and DMP by not performing their duties and responsibilities efficiently and honestly violating rules themselves?

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To the Editor...

Containing prostitution

Sir, Efforts are being made to politically solve the age-old social problem of the [Tan Bazaar] prostitution trade, with disastrous spill-overs. The 'damage-control' (a military term) is out of control!

This trade is as old as civilization itself, and no country could eliminate it—a biological urge which seeks outlet regardless of administrative, political and social elimination measures. Regulation and control, yes?

Any regime in power should not try to be original and inventive. The realities have to be faced, and what cannot be done should not be tried officially. There are also local human weaknesses, for example, rent-seeking or land-grabbing opportunities by some of those who are secretly keen to misuse power and influence (some names appeared in the press).

There is vast amount of literature on the subject, and no fresh research and non-development is necessary. There are a host of options to choose from, as tried in other countries for centuries, suitable for every type of culture (morality and real truth are independent of culture).

The public expect the authorities to finalize practical schemes in phases, and implement the same, without getting emotional about the trade which cannot be wished away.

A Husain
Dhaka

Learn from India

Sir, As an industrialist, I would like to bring the following points to the government's notice for taking appropriate steps to save the country's industrial sector.

The first step I'd like to suggest is to stop discouraging import of consumer products (finished products).

Today all kinds of low quality consumer items from India have flooded the local markets. In contrast, India discourages imports from Bangladesh by imposing the so-called countervailing tax even though they're a signatory to WTO as well as SAFTA agreement. Their customs officials also try as much as possible to discourage imports into India. Though India

should like to bring in the dustbins/garbage tanks on the main roads and streets which block the movement of traffic and create traffic jam. Moreover heaps of garbage are piled up surrounding the dustbins/garbage tanks for days together and sometimes those are set on fire by the municipal employees which emit heavy smoke and bad smell and make it very obnoxious and dangerous for the pedestrians as well as for different vehicles to pass by.

Due to loadshedding and

regarding the usage of land mass, disturbing agriculture, we have to say that 99 per cent of hand moulding brick manufacturers use silt, clay, thereby ensuring that silt formation is reduced in river beds for easy flow of water, otherwise in areas other than cities, where low-lying areas are also filled with silt during floods, it would have become dangerous by now. Whereas cement, being one of the elements of concrete block, is also imported.

Because of the high cost of production of clay products, and of its other beneficial properties, it is costlier than any type of concrete products. Moreover coloured concrete products gradually lose their colour after two years.

Western countries also use concrete blocks as an alternate construction material because of its low cost. But an insulation membrane is also added along with the blocks, which in any case is quite costly thereby using of concrete block increases, and the insulation membrane has a fixed life span, which starts deteriorating after 7 years.

Hares Ahmed Chowdhury
Administrative Officer,
Mirpur Ceramic Works Ltd.
Dhaka.

DCC and DMP violating rules?

Sir, DCC have placed many dustbins/garbage tanks on the main roads and streets which

block the movement of traffic and create traffic jam. Moreover heaps of garbage are piled up surrounding the dustbins/garbage tanks for days together and sometimes those are set on fire by the municipal employees which emit heavy smoke and bad smell and make it very obnoxious and dangerous for the pedestrians as well as for different vehicles to pass by.

For ecological balance, for making bricks or blocks of clay, the matter can be solved by using fuel efficient kilns, and for conservation of forest region. Fuel other than wood can be used. We at Mirpur Ceramics are therefore practicing the same.

A Zabir
Dhaka

regarding the normal Postal Department in providing the normal routine services expected when visiting any post office? According to the data collected personally by me, two-taka stamps are in short supply the majority of time I visited the post office in my area.

The second finding is that the 'normal' Tk 2 stamps are not available all the time, because special anniversary stamps are being issued too frequently (it is not cheap to produce these in small quantities at the security printing press; and rarity of a stamp has its collection value for the stamp collector).

Why the average annual requirement of stamps of different denominations cannot be calculated for planned management of a public service? This very question is redundant, and should not be asked!

A Zabir
Dhaka

governmental policies are being made and implemented are sure to raise some eyebrows. In this context, the issue surrounding the purchase of MIG-29s from Russia and allocation of blocks to foreign companies for oil exploration comes to mind.

What should be done now in order to control the damage and ensure that something of this nature doesn't happen in the future? As I had mentioned earlier, the prime minister showed sharp political acumen in scrapping the allotment list and starting afresh. However, only this step may not bode well with the general public in order to demonstrate the willingness and sincerity of the administration in getting at the bottom

of the whole plot allocation process, it needs to be investigated how this entire scheme was perpetrated. Reports suggest that junior officers in the prime minister's office designed the scheme. If that is true, she has to put her own office in order first. If necessary, heads should roll!

Can we expect the administration to be completely free from nepotism and corruption? However much we would like to see that, the reality is, given the current socio-economic and cultural environment in Bangladesh, political nepotism and corruption will continue. But we can at least make a good faith effort to start a process for reducing the political favours that are enjoyed by a selected few.