

# Life and Living in the New Millennium

Imagination is more important than knowledge  
— Albert Einstein



### Alternative Personalities of the Last Millennium

- Lalon Fakir
- Rabindranath Tagore
- Mahatma Gandhi
- Ibn-Khaldun
- Florence Nightingale
- Karl Marx
- Omar Khayyam
- Martin Luther King
- Che Guevara
- Pablo Picasso
- John Lennon

## Even a Beggar 'Dares' to Dream in the New Millennium

by Nirupoma Chowdhury

Whenever we face these street beggars, we get annoyed or sometimes behave harshly towards them. But we fail to understand the situation that compels them to beg. The simplest thing that we can do for them is not to behave rudely. Some may give alms, others may not, but behaving politely and sympathetically does not cost anything. The privileged section of the society has also the responsibility to try to rehabilitate these unfortunate people - either by employing them or by making them self-employed. Efforts to fulfil the millennium dream of all the social strata will surely make the millennium meaningful.

NEW millennium has just arrived. The whole world celebrated the advent of the new millennium. New desires, new hopes, new dreams were meant for this occasion. In our country also a great celebration took place welcoming the millennium. Media, especially the satellite channels, made the word "millennium" so popular that one of the walls of the Banani slum also greets you with writing "Happy Milenium 2000" (!) on it. Though the word was misspelt, it is noticeable that even the people living in that slum area are aware of this term. But what about those people of our country who are struggling for their livelihood? On the New Year's eve when some were partying and having fun, there were many more who were sleeping on the roadside or at the station. They have no work, no family and no place to protect themselves from the biting cold. Has the millennium brought any new hope for them?

Street beggars are not uncommon in Dhaka city. They are of different ages - from a just born child to an old person of 80 - both males and females. You meet them while waiting for the bus, stacking up in a traffic jam, or while you are at the market place. Even when you are out for your morning walk or at the educational institutions, they are seen with all the marks of poverty in their appearance. Sometimes, especially on Fridays, you need not go out, they will knock at your door and beg for help rather in a somewhat abnormal voice just to attract attention. These beggars depend upon the compassion of the privileged part of the society to earn their livelihood since we are dreaming for a better and more humane new millennium, we cannot exclude those beggars who are living on alms as they are inseparable part of our society. I was seized with curiosity that when the well off parts of the society are celebrating the millennium in various ways, dreaming for a prosperous future, what the other portion of the society who actually depend on our compassion, who are begging to earn their food with no shelter other than the street, think about the new millennium. I wanted to know about their hopes, dreams and wishes in this millennium.

Saleha is about twenty five. She came from a village in Feni district. She got married at the age of sixteen. Her husband, a day labourer by profession was demanding a rickshaw as dowry. Saleha's parents failed to fulfil his demand. Saleha suffered mentally and physically for five long years. Eventually her husband got married again and banished her along with her one-year-old son. In the mean time her parents passed away making her helpless in this cruel world. Nobody was there to become her friend in need. Unfortunate Saleha then had no other choice but to decide to go to the capital in search of a job. She tried her best to get a job to earn food for her child. First she tried for a job as a domestic worker. In all the cases she was refused as she had a child with her. Besides, people were not confident to employ her without anyone's reference who could certify her real address and honesty. Then she tried to work as a day labourer. Here also she had to leave the job as her unattended child became sick. She had to save herself and the baby. There was no other option in front of her but to beg. She does not want to beg. It is pangs of hunger which led her in this disrespectful occupa-

tion. I asked her about the millennium, which she failed to understand at first. Later she said that this does not mean anything to her. "We are poor without any possession. This might mean anything to the rich, but not to us" - this was her first expression. Saleha does not eat her food in most of the days. She tries hard to feed her baby. She has been staying in Dhaka city for about two years. Still she has not managed to get a shelter. Whatever the weather is, she has to pass the nights on the stairs of a multi-storied commercial building. She spends dawn to dusk in the streets of Dhaka - "I am compelled to beg by the sting of hunger. I am being reproached for each and every day. Some give alms, some don't. But there are people who behave harshly towards me and my baby." Saleha has to fight even against the police who are appointed to enforce the rule of law and to protect the weak and sufferer. She was harassed by them on various occasions. These are the harsh realities that Saleha has to face everyday.

When she was asked about getting married again, she answered with complete rejection. She is afraid that her husband may not allow her to keep her son, or she may be banished again for some similar reasons as had happened in the past. So she prefers not to marry again.

Though Saleha has lots of difficulties and hazards in her life, but she has to go on nourishing a dream somewhere deep inside her heart. She is only looking forward for those days when her child will grow up, when he will not need anyone to attend to him. Then Saleha will try to get a job - whatever the salary is. A job will bring change in her life. She will send her son to school at any cost. She will educate him and one day her son will get a good job in some office and then her hard days will be over for good. All her hopes, her dreams are centred around the future of her son. Her everyday hardship is for food, shelter and clothing - but her ultimate hardship is for

making her son a 'gentleman'. It is surprising that being deprived from all pleasures of life, Saleha has not yet lost her confidence. She strongly believes in her dreams about her son. A millennium dream indeed.

Few days back I found Moti pulling a trolley on a footpath in a posh area of the capital. He is about nine years old - the age which is supposed to be full of fun and away from all anxieties. But he cannot enjoy his childhood. When Saleha is struggling to earn food for her son, Moti is sacrificing his childhood to earn living for his mother and himself. He was only five when his father passed away. The whole sky broke upon them when her mother lost her legs in a tragic road accident while coming back home from the garment factory where she used to work. Days full of sorrows and poverty started. They had to starve even for three days at a stretch. Then his mother started begging on the Kakoli over-bridge at Banani. After a year she managed a trolley. Now for about three years Moti has been pulling the trolley for his mother. Meanwhile he managed a job as a domestic worker in a house. But he could work there only for three months. His employers were very rude towards him. He was beaten even for the simplest fault. Moreover the food they usually provided was inadequate for him. He was not given the salary that was promised. Still he would not have left the job, but his young heart was crying for his mother. Then he left the job and returned to his previous occupation. He started pulling his mother's trolley in the posh residential areas of the city where it is more likely to get better alms. What they earn by begging is barely enough to sustain two lives.

Surprisingly Moti knows the term millennium and what it means. According to his experience, each year on the New Year's eve there are many parties for them the following day. This time it was much bigger and much more colourful.

Eventually Moti and his mother got food which was enough for the next three days. He has watched movies on television while serving as a domestic worker. The bravery and the luxurious life of the hero inspired him. But for the time being he is eager to get a job - may be in the film industry, or in a car workshop; but never in a household. He does not feel the importance of education in life. To him it is wastage of time.

Abdul Mian is an old man of sixty. He was a farmer having landed property in his village. He lost all his possessions due to river erosion. At this old age he came to Dhaka because of hunger. He did not hear about the term 'millennium'. He only prays to God to take him away from this cruel and hopeless world. He cried aloud that at this old age none is willing to employ him any kind of work and he himself feels that his health will not allow him to do any physical work.

There are hundred and thousands of Salehas, Motis and Abdul Mians in the streets of Dhaka. Some are looking for job. Some are not guided. Some are waiting for the last breath. Whenever we face these street beggars, we get annoyed or sometimes behave harshly towards them. But we fail to understand the situation that compels them to beg. The simplest thing that we can do for them is not to behave rudely. Some may give alms, others may not, but behaving politely and sympathetically does not cost anything. The privileged section of the society has also the responsibility to try to rehabilitate these unfortunate people - either by employing them or by making them self-employed. Efforts to fulfil the millennium dream of all the social strata will surely make the millennium meaningful!

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Life, for these people, is more than difficult as far as their opportunities are concerned. But they deserve to have a promising millennium as well.

## Would the Stateless Biharis Still Remain Stateless in the New Millennium?

by Kazi Mahmudur Rahman

Drawing on from recent developments about reduction of statelessness in the International legal arena we propose that following International Law Commission's conclusions both the governments of Bangladesh and Pakistan should provide a fresh option to the Biharis about repatriation to Pakistan and integration into Bangladesh. Those who opt for Pakistan should be repatriated.

IT is the state obligation to protect the rights of its citizens, and states are accountable for the displacement of citizens both within and outside the state. Statelessness is caused by the politics of the nation-state. The Biharis, i.e. stranded Pakistanis in Bangladesh, are the victims of the partitioned states of South Asia not once but twice, are an instance of this politics. Displaced by Pakistan and unwanted in Bangladesh, the plight of the Biharis huddled in refugee camps in Bangladesh for almost 29 years highlights the responsibility of states not to arbitrarily disenfranchise their citizens or impose restrictions in re-acquiring citizenship.

The overhyped event, the coming of a new millennium has been celebrated with frenzied euphoria through out the world. Bangladesh is not an exception. Several newspapers, journals covered up various issues of new millennium. But, whether we have any thought about Lakat, a 70 year old man of Geneva camp, who moved twice in 1947 & 1971 and now only wants to move towards the graveyard, or 28 year old Jahangir of Wapda camp, Mirpur, who wants the citizenship of Bangladesh or a 12 year old girl, Rashida of Mirpur Camp, who has a desire to become a Bangladeshi film artist. These are the stateless persons of Bangladesh, the Biharis, the so-called stranded Pakistanis who exist in a limbo between their allegiance to Pakistan and Bangladesh. Will they remain stateless in the new millennium? It is time to rethink and to create alternative solution of the existing problem so that the Biharis can find their identity.

It is overwhelming to realize that we are responsible for the history of our descendants. As we begin the new millennium, we are all caught up with reminiscences of the millennium we have just left behind. And it has certainly been a flamboyant thousand years encompassing the crucial intellectual evolution of the modern man. It is mind blowing if not outright impossible to actually think about a time so much immense than our individual lifetimes.

Following the partition of British India, many of the Bi-

haris (and also many non Bengalis from outside Bihar), migrated to Bangladesh (then East Pakistan). Most of them languish in the camps today, scattered across Bangladesh waiting with a sense of despair and displacement to be repatriated to a land that refuses to give them recognition. They have been living in subhuman conditions in 66 camps for the last 29 years. Their exact number is now difficult to determine. Their number due to natural increase may have now reached about 500,000. But till now Pakistan has been following a delaying tactic in admitting these people into the country, and they continue to live on a meager UNHCR assistance.

### Stateless Biharis in the 20th century

The Great Calcutta Killing of August 1946 led to the unleashing of a wave of violence that swept across Bihar, Noakhali and culminated in the Punjab carnage of March 1947. Such violence and the subsequent partition resulted in migration of Hindus and Sikhs from the new state of Pakistan to India, and Muslims from India to Pakistan. In 1947, of a total population of 30 million people of the state, Muslims numbered 4 million. In the aftermath of the communal violence in which 30,000 Muslims were killed, 1.3 million Biharis Muslims migrated to Pakistan, of them 700,000 to East Pakistan and the rest to West Pakistan. By 1971, the non-Bengali population in East Pakistan rose to more than 1.5 million, which included Muslim migrants from other states of India.

General principles governing the national issue in consequence of state succession requires negotiations between the predecessors and successor states. Negotiation between Pakistan and Bangladesh did result in the transfer of a large number of Biharis (173,000 repatriated in 1974, 4,000 in 1979, 1,000 in 1984 and 325 in 1992) to Pakistan. But the negotiation regarding the rest seem to have come to a halt. The situation has become further complicated by the linkage of the Bihar issue with that of the al-

legedly illegal movement of thousands of Bangladeshis to Pakistan.

The Stranded Pakistanis General Repatriation Committee (SPGRC) was formed in 1976. Through mass rallies, demonstrations and hunger strikes, it has been seeking to pressurize both the governments of Pakistan and Bangladesh to continue the process of repatriation. But Pakistan's recalcitrance about taking back its citizens, remains. Afterwards, another group of SPGRC was formed by Eajaj Ahmed.

The Biharis live in 66 camps scattered across Dhaka, Chittagong, Syedpur, Rangpur, Khulna and other districts. Lack of water, sanitation facilities, women and child health care facilities have made their camps breeding grounds for epidemics.

Sanitation and shelter as well as water logging are the most important problem of the camps. Camp residents reported that there has not been any maintenance work since the camps were established. In the Geneva camp female respondents have reported that they have to wait in the queue from 2 am, to use the toilet facilities. The drainage facilities are also non-existent. Children of the camps reported that lack of playground has been a major problem for them. Besides children of the camps are malnourished. Children born in these camps, many of whom are in their late teens, are paying for the wrongs, if any, committed by their forefathers. Their plight needs to be resolved not within the narrow confines of stateless and citizenship laws but by invoking human rights and humanitarian principles.

29 years have passed since the start of the problem and it is still unresolved. It has created a socio-economic impact on them and the govt. of Bangladesh as well.

### Stateless Biharis in Bangladesh: Searching for an Identity

After 29 years in the camps there are those like Badruddin (38) who resignedly says, "If Pakistan does not accept us and if Bangladesh gives me citizenship, I am ready to stay in Bangladesh. I don't want anybody to use us for their political game. I do not know what will happen in the new millennium. I just want to be a citizen of a free country and through this I would be able to identify myself as a Bangladeshi". Badruddin lives in Geneva camp, Moham-madpur where Biharis families live crammed in an 8 feet by 8 feet room.

Now most of the camp residents aged between 15-35 do not want to return to Pakistan anymore. 80% of them were born in Bangladesh, they want to get Bangladeshi citizenship. This present view (one of them said, Millennium view) of Biharis was expressed by the one of the group leader of SPGRC. They said that two of their generations have been ruined in the last 29 years by leading a subhuman camp life in the name of false repatriation to Pakistan. More over they stated that 80% of them were born and brought up in Bangladesh. Their children study in Bangladeshi schools and speak in Bengali. Many of them have matrimonial relationship with Bangladeshis. They claimed that Bangladeshi culture is also their culture. If the govt. could solve the CHT problem, then

why the stateless will remain stateless? Could not the new millennium change their lives? Unlike the other Biharis groups like SPGRC (Nasim & Eajaj), another group named 'Bangladeshi O-Bangali Purnabashon Committee' was formed in 1996 headed by Iqbal Ahmed Chowdhury. The committee in a survey report showed that of the 400,000 Biharis, about 320,000 were willing to be rehabilitated in Bangladesh. They said that this is the beginning of a new era, and hoped that the stateless can somehow find their identity if the Bangladesh govt. can provide them with citizenship.

However, irrespective of the bargaining and negotiating stances of Bangladesh and Pakistan and the claims and counter-claims of the two sides, the basic principle is that the states are obliged to prevent statelessness, particularly when such statelessness is consequent upon state succession. Given the long-standing residence of Biharis in Bangladesh and their legal entitlement under the citizenship laws of the country, there does not seem to be much justification in denying the Biharis their citizenship status, if they so desire. The young generation (in the year 2000, many old generations also want reintegration in Bangladesh) of Biharis Muslims should not suffer for the whimsical dream of their older generation. Let us bury the bogey of repatriation.

In the context of a stalemate in repatriation there has been a shift in the Biharis' position about integration into Bangladesh. Abdul Rahim, a 60 years old man in Geneva camp said, "We are finished, just waiting for death. But the younger generations are yet not finished. I believe that still a lot of opportunities are there in Bangladesh. Besides Abul Hossain - the Benarasi sari worker in Mirpur, small kids like Anwar - a jori and sari worker in Geneva camp, Mokarram Ali - the lucrative Kabab and Biriani seller, and also lots of women garments workers like Moriam, want to run their business peacefully in Bangladesh and get equal opportunity in jobs like the other Bangladeshis. A number of them would prefer to obtain Bangladeshi nationality and settle here."

Drawing on from recent developments about reduction of statelessness in the International legal arena we propose that following International Law Commission's conclusions both the governments of Bangladesh and Pakistan should provide a fresh option to the Biharis about repatriation to Pakistan and integration into Bangladesh. Those who opt for Pakistan should be repatriated and those who express to be integrated in Bangladesh should be provided with Bangladeshi nationality and all forms of support.

While each individual case has its defining political, economic, social and demographic dimension, the stateless person needs to be looked at from a holistic viewpoint. In the new millennium, the problems of the stateless Biharis should not be considered from the point of view of politics but from humanitarian and human rights perspective. This is the dream of the stateless Biharis. Let us build a community that can fulfill this dream.

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The topic of our next issue is: **De-nuclearisation**. Creative suggestions are invited from our esteemed readers. Please send your materials to: Dr Imtiaz Ahmed, Executive Director, Centre For Alternatives, Room No 431, Lecture Theatre, Arts Building, Dhaka University, Dhaka-1000. Tel: 9661900-19, Ext 4550; Fax (8802) 8316769; E-mail: imtiaz@bangla.net.