

Poverty Still Remains Our Greatest Challenge

ONE of the objectives of President Clinton's recent visit to Bangladesh was to see for himself what progress has Bangladesh, one of the poorest countries in the world, once called "an international basket case", and "a bottomless basket", has made in alleviating poverty, and how. This was his maiden visit. He was therefore not in a position to compare the current situation in Bangladesh with the situation prevailing in the past, say, at the time of her independence. Those of us living in Bangladesh may, however, attempt to do so, if not for any other reason, but just to evaluate, what nearly three decades of our independent existence has offered to our poor people.

In April, 1973, while travelling back to Dhaka from Islamabad, where I pursued my Masters in Economics, via Kabul, Delhi, and Calcutta, I was hoping to see our beloved independent and sovereign Bangladesh marching forward to prosperity, freeing herself from the shackles of poverty resulting from over two centuries of colonial exploitation by Great Britain and Pakistan. So, soon after independence, in 1973, I did not expect anything spectacular, particularly in a war devastated economy. Even then, on the very first day of my stay in Dhaka, I received a mild shock looking at the food items on our dining table. They were absolutely plain and simple.

The last few months of my stay in Islamabad, had been rather difficult. After our M.Sc final examination was over, we, the Bengali students of Islamabad University had no other option but to take shelter in a storage godown of the Pakistan Institute of Development Economics (PIDE) after vacating our hostel rooms. The term of scholarship we used to enjoy had already expired. Cut off from our families in Bangladesh, with no source of income, we were indeed in thick soup. With a First Class Masters Degree in Economics from Islamabad University, I could

only get the job of a Staff Economist at PIDE. Besides relieving me of the financial distress I was facing right then, it would also have assured me of a bright future, provided I opted for Pakistan. But being a Bengali, I did not take recourse to that. We somehow managed to survive the following three months of our stay in Islamabad with paltry financial assistance received from Red Cross, thanks to the efforts of Mr. A.K.M. Ahsan, the Bengali Secretary of Agriculture to the Government of Pakistan, and President of East Pakistan Welfare Association. The financial support amounted to rupees one hundred and sixty only, paid in two installments. That means, we could barely spend a little over 50 rupees per month to meet all our expenses. We used to have a very simple breakfast of bread and sugar (could not afford butter). For days together we had nothing more than two chapatis (costing four annas) and a plate of dal/buffalo meat/vegetables (costing six annas) for our lunch and dinner at the dhabas frequented by the construction workers. When we got fed up with the above food, taking the university bus, sometimes we travelled to Islamabad City to visit houses of Bengali officers living there, who were kind enough to share their food with us. That is how we passed our days in Islamabad prior to our departure for Dhaka in March, 1973.

Looking at the food I had with members of my family on

by Dr. Muhammad Masum

my return to Dhaka I could feel that things were not very encouraging for the people in Bangladesh. My father at that time was serving as a Joint Secretary to the Government of Bangladesh. If food served in his house could be so poor, it was not difficult to guess the plight of the common people. Clothes were also scarce. I remember having gone to a place in old Dhaka with my father in search of cloth to be distributed through a ration shop but returned home empty handed.

How did the common people live during those days? Let me refer to a discussion I had with an NGO official at Comilla some time in 1986 while I was engaged in a comparative study sponsored by CIRDAP on the effectiveness of poverty alleviation programmes conducted by BRDB and Comilla Proshika — a government and a non-government organization, respectively. The NGO official was sharing one of his experiences with me. Back in 1973, while he was spending a few days in a village in Manikganj, every morning he used to hear cries of women and children from a neighbour's house. On enquiry he found out that before going for work, the head of the household, an adult male, ate up all the food available in the house leaving nothing for the children left behind. That caused the wild cries. When asked to explain his unusual behaviour, the man burst into tears and told, working all day long he earned barely enough to feed the

entire family a single meal at night and unless he had the leftovers next morning it would not have been possible on his part to master enough strength for his day-long work without which the entire family would have no option but to starve. This was possibly not just an anecdote. Given the fact that as high as 71 per cent of the entire rural population of Bangladesh lived in absolute poverty in 1973-74, most of the people probably were not significantly better off.

About a decade later, in 1982, I was on a visit to my village home with my family. It is located in a remote area of Rajbari district, seven miles from Pangsia, the railway station and the thana headquarters. It was a pleasant morning in late May. We were thoroughly enjoying our journey by a horse-cart along the earthen road. While singing with my two year old son, Surjya, (currently an undergraduate student of Brandeis University at Boston), the popular Bangla song, "gacher patay roder jhik mukhi" — the glittering sunshine through the leaves". I was contemplating, surely we would stay at least a week at our village home. Unfortunately, however, we could not stay longer than three days. From sunrise to sunset, a stream of beggars visited our house virtually with no break at all. We could hardly relax in peace. On the first of June, I had an extraordinary experience. It was my grand father's death

anniversary, and we arranged a simple lunch featuring rice, fish curry and a vegetable dish for the poor at our courtyard. People came from a distance of 6 to 7 miles and sat with banana leaves in front of them. Rice was served first, followed by vegetable and fish. What surprised me was the fact that even before fish and vegetable could be served, the rice served earlier had already been eaten up as the hungry people could not hold their patience even for a couple of minutes. It was indeed a shocking experience for me. Government statistics, however, indicated a slight improvement in poverty situation as population below poverty line declined to 62 per cent at the national level.

Since then, however, there has been significant improvement in the poverty situation. At the national level, the incidence of poverty declined to 47.5 per cent in 1995/96, and further to 44.7 per cent in 1999. I tend to have faith in the above figures, as I no longer see poverty the way I saw before.

Even today, with 44.7 per cent of our total population living below the poverty line, poverty remains our greatest challenge. Given the perpetuation of the pauperization process resulting from population growth on a gradually dwindling physical resource base, I would however argue that our performance in alleviating poverty has not been very poor, thanks to a variety of poverty focused programmes promoting both wage and self-employment opportunities particularly through delivery of micro credit through both government and non-government organizations. Had we however tried to stem the pauperization process through adoption of a small farmer development strategy, our performance would perhaps be significantly better.

The writer is Professor, Department of Economics Jahangirnagar University

Vladimir Putin: A Leader Ready to Rescue Russia?

by Ekram Kabir

Vladimir Putin, a politician unknown till August '99, garnered more than 50 per cent of the votes in Sunday's presidential elections in Russia. He has handily defeated other eleven candidates. His close rivals were communist leader Gennady Zyuganov and liberal Grigory Yavlinsky. Zyuganov made accusations of vote-rigging, but there seems little doubt that Putin is Russians' favorite.

Putin was virtually unknown to the Russian public when he was named the prime minister in August last year. But he had steadily built up his image and thus popularity ratings, initially on the strength of Russian military successes in Chechnya. After being named the Acting President when Boris Yeltsin resigned on December 31, he has made appealing presence by calling for a stronger state.

The slightly-rising economic indicators have also helped, as he said in a pre-polls statement: "We are electing a president whose duty will be to revive the economy, restore the country's prestige, and lead the role in the world and provide for everyone an effective system of government, stability and prosperity."

Putin's victory however has not come as a surprise at all. He was certain to win as expected. Hours before being elected as President, Putin warned people not to expect too much from him at once. "I have no right to say that tomorrow miracles will occur... If you raise people's hopes, disappointment is inevitable. I think additional difficulties lie ahead for me in that the level of the expectation is very high," he was quoted by the BBC.

Yet most political commentators are not sure what to expect. With Vladimir Putin's election to the presidency, Russia is certainly entering a new stage, both internally and internationally.

World leaders have given a cautious welcome to Putin's victory. US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright said Washington would judge Putin on his actions rather than on his career in the secret police. "He is obviously a very complicated

man, who has several strands to his background, but as we see him now, he is being very pragmatic, he is dealing with Russia's problems," she said.

Immediately after his victory, there have been calls for Putin to urgently address the continuing conflict in Chechnya. The war in Chechnya has done two things for Putin. It has drawn a line in the sand, showing that Russian disintegration would stop, no matter what the cost. Then, Russia has moved into a more confrontational position with the West. Putin knew that Chechnya strategy would increase his popularity in his country. He therefore created a situation in which he tried to co-opt Russian nationalism for Yeltsin's regime.

One of his rude remarks on the Chechens was that "the terrorists have been taught a lesson", but operations will not end until "total liberation". Western states "do not understand, or appear not to understand" the danger from Chechnya through its "nationalist" and "irreconcilable" nature. But many of his initial contacts with western visitors and journalists have given a variety of impressions.

Though he sounds confident in public, it seems reasonable to assume that Putin knows perfectly well that time may not be on his side. He understands that the oligarchs in Russia have tremendous influence within the state and the security apparatus. Convincing them to work for the greater interest of the country would be a daunting task, given Russia's post-Soviet history.

There is one rescue button, though. And it seems enough to mobilise Russians: "nationalism". Much of his future depends on nationalism. Putin has tried his best to revive Russian nationalism and create an image of himself as the spokesman for the national interest. This is quite normal for a Russian leader, because, throughout Russian history, leaders fished economic disaster by feeding the people national pride. Putin seems to be gifted at this.

He now may have to do more and build on the Chechen experience, and this is where Putin will likely face the stumbling block, putting Russia back on equal footing with the West.

How successful will Putin be in his diplomatic and political overtures? One has to wait and see.

STRANDED PAKISTANIS

How Long will They Endure Miseries?

Bangladesh and Pakistan had earlier signed several agreements, including one in New Delhi in 1973, for repatriation of the stranded Pakistanis, but the agreements have been shelved due mainly to non-cooperation from the Pakistani side.

by Mostakim Swadhin

return. Rowshan's mother since then died waiting for her husband to come and take the family to Pakistan.

Rowshan is one of the 15,000 Biharis who have stayed stranded in this dirty camp. Life has been very difficult in this camp, with 8,000 young men and women without any job. The brunt of the miseries is borne mostly by the women.

According to a survey, most women of the camp earn their livelihood by making and selling traditional cakes, stitching blankets and comforts, picking up firewood, vending smuggled goods and working as domestic helps.

And many others, mostly young girls, just end up in prostitution. The survey revealed that there are over 800 unmarried young girls in the camp and 50 per cent of them in one

way or the other are involved in prostitution, especially in Dhaka and other big cities.

Locals said most of the 800 unmarried young girls can't afford schooling mainly because of poverty. Considered outcast by Bangladeshi neighbours, the girls can hardly get decent jobs. Few offer them jobs.

Thanks to a government-sponsored programme, Total Literacy Movement, some of the girls have just started learning to read and write.

Rowshan Ara has a 20-year-old Bihari friend, Buria. Buria does not believe they will ever be able to go to Pakistan.

The thought of going to Pakistan does not at all appeal me. I would better like to settle in Bangladesh for ever and live like a Bangladeshi girl," says Buria sitting at the doors of her hut not far from a heap of garbage that attracts hundreds of flies.

She wonders what will happen to herself and her two brothers if her ailing father dies. "Some girls from the camp have gone to the cities and we hear whispering that they do bad jobs," she says.

Shamsur Rahman Shimu, Chairman of a Relief Committee at the camp, says the government provides 3.4 kgs of wheat per head a month, "but this is not enough."

He told this correspondent that once the main profession of this community was weaving and there were over 300 weaving factories, but now the number of factories is dwindling, forcing the Biharis to resort to crimes.

According to him some political parties use the stranded Pakistanis for violence or protests.

Rahman says many Biharis these days pull rickshaws, work in hotels and restaurants, weaving factories and tailoring shops while many others, including women, have been involved in illicit business like smuggling.

This ill-fated community, who supported Pakistan during the Bangladesh Liberation War in 1971, could not yet be repatriated.

Interest of Bangladesh because they are polluting our environment by living an unhealthy life."

Ishwardi Pourashava Chairman Abul Kalam Azad Mintri says, there are good souls too among these stranded people and many of them are willing to obtain permanent residencehip by marrying Bangladeshi women.

Amena Khatun, a neighbouring Bangladeshi housewife, does not like the Biharis because she thinks they are dirty. "How can they live in such filthy and unhygienic condition," she wonders.

About the allegations Shamsul Bihari, a leader of the camp, said, "It's not fair to unilaterally blame the Biharis because there are some non-Biharis too among the camp residents. So, they also bear as much of the responsibility as we do for polluting the environment."

More reports about the camp showed that among the 15,000 residents in the camp, 5,200 people have obtained rights to vote in Bangladesh. The camp, with about 5,000 tents, has only 10 sanitary latrines and 30 tube-wells, but there is no healthcare centre or any school for its inhabitants.

Apart from Ishwardi, there are 65 more Bihari camps in 14 districts of the country. The districts include Dhaka, Narayanganj, Mymensingh, Nilphamari (Syedpur), Jamalpur (Dewanganj), Dinajpur, Rangpur, Khulna, Rajshahi, Jessor, Kushtia and Sirajganj. As Bangladeshi by birth.

According to the local people, including newsmen, village headmen, political leaders, Pourashava and UP chairman, the stranded Pakistanis themselves are responsible for their plight.

Fair Nurul Islam, 35, a local Awami League leader, thinks these ill-fated Biharis should have had loyalty to Bangladesh, where they have long been staying. "These stranded Pakistanis are easily get involved in criminal activities, fueling the country's deteriorating law and order situation," he says.

Party agreeing with Islam, a newsmen, Alauddin Ahmed, 45, says: "It's true that the stranded Pakistanis had opposed the country's independence and they had suffered for this a lot. But now they should be repatriated in the greater

NewsNetwork

Section I. Invitation for Bids

Invitation for Bids (IFB)

Date: 28-03-2000

IFB No. O&M/Tender-1/127
Credit No. : 2791-BD (RBPP)

Credit Name: River Bank Protection Project

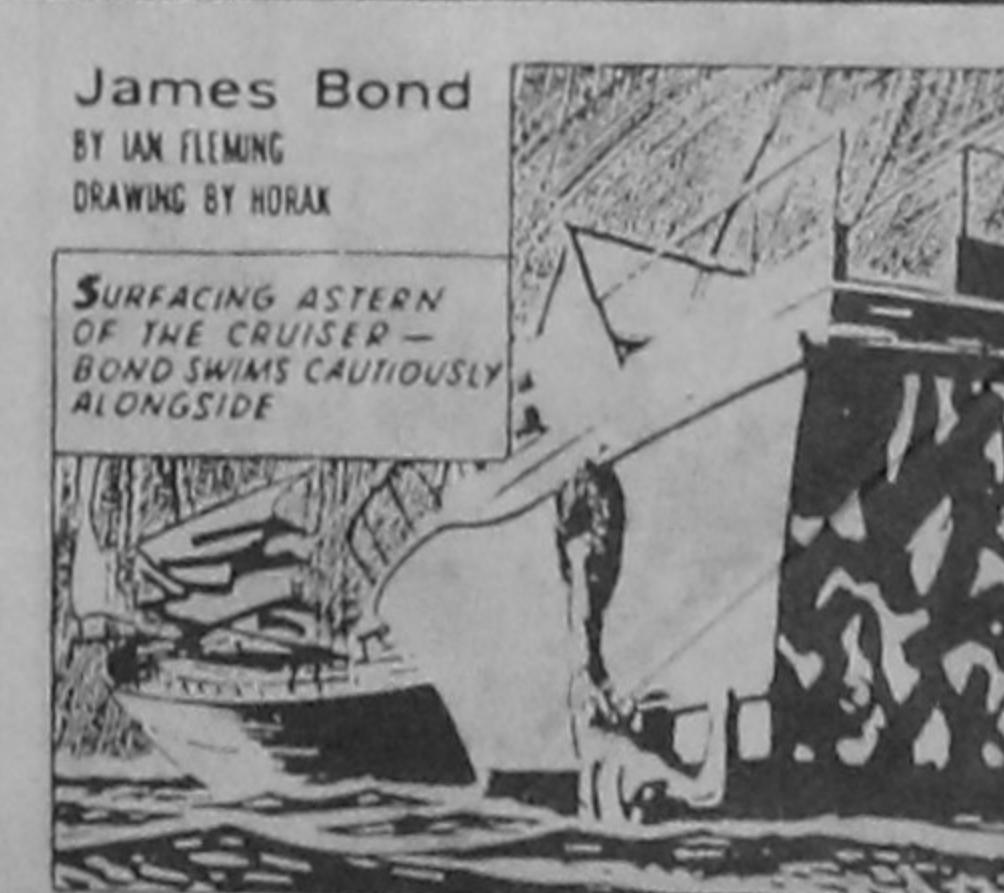
- The People's Republic of Bangladesh has received a Credit from the International Development Association (IDA) in various currencies towards the cost of River Bank Protection Project (RBPP) and intends to apply part of the Credit proceeds to cover eligible payments under Construction of Boundary Wall at BRE (Specialized) O&M Division premises, BWDB, Sirajganj.
- Executive Engineer, BRE (Specialized) O&M Division, BWDB, Sirajganj invites sealed bids for construction and completion of the following works. This invitation for bids is open to all bidders enlisted with Bangladesh Water Development Board (BWDB). In addition, foreign bidders are eligible to bid without this enlistment but if awarded contract, would be required to enlist with Bangladesh Water Development Board. Furthermore, when enlistment is done at district level, Bangladeshi contractors enlisted with BWDB in other districts are also eligible to bid.
- Bidding documents (and additional copies) may be purchased at the office of the (i) Janata Bank, Masumpur Branch, Sirajganj, (ii) Janata Bank, BCIC Branch, Bogra & (iii) Sonali Bank, WAPDA Branch, Motijheel C/A, Dhaka-1000 on non-refundable fee of Taka 400/00 (Taka Four Hundred) only, for each set during normal office hours on all working days up to 02-05-2000. Interested bidders may obtain further information at the same address during office hours.
- The provisions in the instructions to bidders and in the conditions of contract are the provisions of the Standard Bidding Documents: Procurement of Works (SBD), National Competitive Bidding (Trial Edition — January 1998, revised February 1999), issued by the World Bank Dhaka Office.
- Bids shall be valid for a period of 91 (Ninety-one) days after the bid opening and must be accompanied by a Bid Security as mentioned in Para 2 above.
- Bids must be delivered to the office of the Executive Engineer, BRE (Specialized) O&M Division, BWDB, Ranigram, Sirajganj Tel: 0751-72463 Fax: 0751-72463 on or before 12-00 hours of 03-05-2000.
- Bidders may deliver their bids by any means including Courier Service, Registered Mail with Acknowledgment Due, etc., which must reach the above office before the deadline for submission of bids. Bids received after the deadline for submission of bids will not be accepted.
- Bids will be opened in the presence of the bidders' representatives who choose to attend at 12-30 hours on 03-05-2000 at the office of the Executive Engineer, BRE (Specialized) O&M Division, BWDB, Ranigram, Sirajganj.

Md Abdun Noor

Executive Engineer
BRE (Specialized) O&M Division
BWDB, Ranigram, Sirajganj
Tel: 0751-72463

PANI-383/1999-2000
GD-292

Garfield ®



by Jim Davis

