

# Can Bangladesh Afford to Export Gas?

The United States exports oil, gas and coal after keeping reserve of oil for 30 years, gas for 65 years and coal for 250 years for its own use. According to a seminar report of the Bangladesh Engineer's Institute, with the existing reserve of gas, Bangladesh can only meet two decades' demand.

by Golam Mokarram

BDHGHADHESH is a least developed country (LDC) with a per capita income of US \$386. Its economy largely depends on the agricultural sector though employment in this sector has almost reached a saturation point. It is a riverine country and most of its land is plain. This, in turn, helps produce various types of crops. Farmers of this country mostly use chemical fertiliser in the production process till the fifties. Then the situation started to change with revolution in the agricultural sector — per acre production of crops increased four/five times against previous level with the use of chemical fertiliser in the farmland.

But Bangladesh is still not self-sufficient in food production and every year it imports food spending hard earned foreign currency. The present foreign currency reserve of the country is less than three months' import bill. This in turn has created an undue pressure on the country's foreign reserve. Pressure on the foreign currency reserve could only be eased if the country could become self-sufficient in food production. It can easily multiply its food production by increasing the use of chemical fertiliser and developing agro-based industries.

Gas, that was not discovered till 1950s, can now help to produce fertiliser. The country used to import fertiliser on a limited scale. Gas was first discovered in Sylhet district in mid 1950s. The price of oil was six-seven times higher than that of gas the country. All power production centres used oil for generating power. Before discovering gas field in for generating power. The only exception was Kaptai Hydel Power Plant that naturally, used water for power generation.

Fenchuganj fertiliser factory was set up in the early 60s. It used natural gas as raw material supplied from Haripur gas field. Moreover, a power plant was set up in Shahjibazar to sue gas as fuel. However, the country at a later stage had to set up some big power and fertiliser plants. The manifold use of chemical fertiliser helped increase food production. Besides, the country's power plants started to use gas instead of oil that in turn saved hard currency.

For over 40 years, Bangladesh Petroleum Exporting Company (Bapex) has been involved in exploration of gas with local experts. It is learnt that most of the experienced engineers and geologists at Bapex have been transferred to different ministries. Petrobangla reportedly, does

not even have the necessary resources to properly negotiate deals on oil and gas sectors with multinational companies. This also has hampered the process of exploration of new gas fields by Bapex. Exploration of gas by foreign experts are three/four times more expensive than by local experts. According to contract with Sangu, the company will get 79.20 per cent of the exploration gas and the government of Bangladesh will only get the remaining 20.8 per cent which is an obscenely uneven treaty.

Meanwhile, lack of government funding has stopped exploration activities of Bapex in Salda-2 gas field. Bapex struck a small gas field in Salda river area under Kosba thana near the Indian border in early 1996. The government gave it funds last year to drill the second well, and Bapex succeeded in striking gas also in the second well in November last. The government on a priority basis should explore gas fields near the Indian border.

US oil company Unocal has reportedly revealed its plan to lay an under-water natural gas pipeline from Bangladesh to Andhra Pradesh in India and another surface pipeline to Delhi through Calcutta. Unocal is operating in blocks 12, 13 and 14 in the country and is negotiating for the controversial Western Region Integrated Project (WRIP) that seeks to set up a gas pipeline up to the Kushlia border. Unocal has proposed this US \$700 million project to the government to set up gas pipelines in the western and southern parts of the country. It is learnt the project could be completed with \$200 million engaging local energy experts.

The US company is planning to set up three power plants in India. The first one is a 200 MW liquid hydrocarbon gas based power plant in Bidadi, Karnataka. The second one is a consortium selected by Tamil Nadu Industrial Development Corporation to develop a 1800 MW power plant and 2.5 million tonne LNG facility at Ennore. Lastly, Unocal is partnering Maytas and IJM of Malaysia to develop the Gautami 359 MW power project in Kakinada, Andhra Pradesh. The question remains that if Unocal can set up power plants in India why it cannot set up the same in Bangladesh.

Bruce Memullen a senior energy adviser to the US mission in Dhaka, reportedly said Bangladesh could gain more by exporting gas through pipeline to India. He however, regretted the 'over-politicisation' of the gas issue. 'The gas issue should be dealt with economically, not politically', he maintained. On

the petro-chemical option of gas use, Bruce Memullen said the development of petro-chemical complex involves a huge investment and at this stage no US company is likely to be interested in involvement in such a huge investment project.

Natural gas is the prime mineral resource of Bangladesh. Power crisis has gripped the country. Most of the power plants under PDB in the country are old and dilapidated, and need major reforms. Industrial production is being hampered by power crisis. Ready-made garment (RMG) industry, the largest export earner of the country, is incurring losses to the tune of millions of Taka due to regular load shedding. But we can depend on gas at least.

To improve the power situation the government permitted some entrepreneurs to set up barge-mounted power plants to meet the growing demand in the country. However, Chairman of Khulna Power Company (KPCL), a private sector power development company, in an interview maintained that unless PDB can cut its existing 40 per cent system loss, the investment in the power sector will be limited as entrepreneurs are concerned about the Board's ability to pay the power companies. PDB is incurring huge losses every year as mismanagement, corruption and system loss have gripped the organisation. The cost of power production can be reduced if the power plants use gas instead of oil.

Foreign oil companies have been pursuing Bangladesh government to permit export of gas to India over the years. During the US President Bill Clinton's Bangladesh visit Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina said that he government would only consider the matter of exporting surplus gas after ensuring 50 years of reserve. For that purpose, the country needs to measure the total reserve of natural gas. Bill Clinton, however, reportedly proposed to send a team of energy experts to conduct a survey on gas reserve in the country.

New England Power Company (NEPC), a private sector power developer, has set up a barge-mounted power plant in Haripur under Narayanganj district. It has times urged the Titas Gas Transmission and Distribution Company to supply gas to its plant as that will help reduce the cost of power generation. It is learnt that its per unit generation cost of power is Taka 2.25 which can be reduced to Taka 1.75 per unit should gas be used in power generation.

The Haripur barge-mounted power plant was presumed to receive gas under a pressure of

375 PSIG (per square inch gas). Existing pipeline of Petrobangla has a gas pressure of 600 PSIG. Reportedly, a compressor worth 6.17 million US dollars is needed to convert 600 PSIG to 375 PSIG. This processing is a matter of three months.

For mysterious reasons the energy ministry wants the first reduced to 150 PSIG and then it should be raised to 375 PSIG. The NEPC could not understand the reasons behind the double exercise of the energy ministry which is not only time-consuming but also costly. Till date the power plant has not received the gas.

Foreign companies involved in gas exploration are propagating that Bangladesh has a huge reserve of gas and it can improve its present economic status by exporting gas. Some politicians and bureaucrats are also advocating for export of gas to the neighbouring country without thinking about the interests of the country. They perhaps never thought that gas based industries and power plants are most likely to shut down should gas reserves exhaust. Though exact measuring the existing gas reserve is not possible right now according to some experts, it is not wise to go by the speculated prospect of export earnings only.

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Nigerian politicians and bureaucrats leased out its oil and gas fields to multinational companies overlooking national interests and allegedly siphoned off million of dollars to foreign banks in the process. The country is cited as one of the most corrupt nations and is at present plagued by poverty, hunger, famine, etc.

The present total gas consumption in Bangladesh stands at around 1,000 million cubic feet per day (mmcf/d). It is expected that gas demand would rise up to around 1300 mmcf/d in 2005 at the present rate of consumption. Though Bangladesh has a vast natural gas deposit, per capita consumption of energy is still one of the lowest in the world — only 85 kgms of oil equivalent (Kgoe) compared to Pakistan's 243 kilo and India's 255 kilo. So the prudence is in the adage 'Look before you leap'.

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# Women's Empowerment: What, Why and How?

All efforts at development made by government, NGOs and international organisations will remain nearly futile unless women could be brought in the mainstream of governance and development interventions. And, that is only plausible by empowering women — through education, equitable access to resources and social justice systems.

by M. Mahbubur Rahman

WITH advancement of social science research in Bangladesh during the past two-and-half decades, the concept of 'women's empowerment' has gained currency. Particularly in development project documents, training sessions, and in participatory investigation vocabularies. A section of development activists, seem to have been using the concept more popularly and sometimes fashionably rather than going much deeper as to what it actually means, why and how to achieve it.

Women's empowerment in Bangladesh connotes more power for women in order to bridge inequalities between men and women in all spheres of life. It constitutes a powerful means of social development that encompasses cultural, economic and political dimensions of development of a pre-modern society. It also refers to a state of societal modernisation in which its entire social system shall promote equal education for men and women, provide social justice equally to women, and ensure the latter's political participation alongside men. Women's empowerment will not take place in a society where men out of hatred, hostility, jealousy, and frustration throw acid over faces of women, demand dowries as condition for marriage, and prevent them from participating in development activities. Women's free and fair access to education, employment and politics are the most powerful instruments towards their empowerment.

Almost in all cases, power is an asset that is seldom shared with or devolved to others. People wielding power are not always so 'humane' in surrendering their power to those who have less or no power at all. It is more so in a community with scarcity of power resources mainly in terms of 'economic ones', a community that is 'less exposed to education resources', giving rise to 'religious fundamentalism', and a society with

absence of democratic practice and lack of secularism. In such context, women to be empowered, have to acquire certain skills and traits and exercise them in households, and at the community level and national life. Otherwise, without gaining a certain status, women cannot be contributing members of the society. In essence, women have to strive to achieve power; a power bestowed is less prestigious, unrecognised and often non-sustainable. On the other hand, power achieved is more real, durable and prestigious.

## Why Empower?

Women in Bangladesh need to be empowered for cultural, spiritual and development purposes. Some mutually inclusive crucial reasons are: (a) women's empowerment is needed for greater realisation of their potentials as development agents; (b) empowered women get easy access to available and potential services and opportunities in the society; (c) empowered women are most likely to be good teachers, effective trainers, able civil administrators, and smart IT professionals, capable micro-credit facilitators and enabling functionaries in other development sectors; (d) women's empowerment is positively associated with fewer incidences of repression, harassment and exclusion; and (e) women's empowerment strengthens democratic values and practices, and promotes good governance with less exploitation, manipulation and corruption; (f) women's empowerment (f) raises socio-economic status and dignity of individual households in society; (g) empowered women's households have morally sound children free from bad associations, drug menace and fatal diseases; (h) empowered women have more social and political participation in societal and national life; (i) women's empowerment brings peace, tolerance and stability in society;

and (j) empowered women promote gender equality and gender balance in the society.

## How to Empower?

Basically women cannot be empowered, they should empower themselves. However, certain facilities need to be created to empower women depending upon particular value systems; one or a combination of more ways/facilities may be adopted. In the first place, women must go for quality education, not always or necessarily meaning higher education. In fact, they should be serious in education, and to its purpose and application. Second, women should compete with men in all possible sectors of employment and/or effective personal engagement. Third, more and more women should take up non-traditional economic activities such as running business enterprises, involving themselves, say, in tourism, data management, public securities and transports. Fourth, women should keep on updating themselves through continuing education with new skills and knowledge such that any piece of work could be accomplished well without having a false sense of achievement.

Fifth, women should engage in various social and voluntary activities such as those conducted by NGOs and civil society organisations. Sixth, educated, affluent and elite women should contribute more to the cause of women's empowerment at family, community, society and national levels. Seven, women should endeavour to work more in public places and fight off the trend of female subordination by venturing out of the house. Eight, following the footsteps of women in the 1997 Union Parishad elections, more and more women should contest the elections of local government institutions as well as Jatiya Sangsad.

Ninth, community, society and state level institutions

should have definite programmes of actions to directly or indirectly support the cause of women empowerment for a long-term development benefit of the country. Last but not the least, women should judiciously apply the virtue of 'woman-kindness' to enlist support from men in order for them to scale up their empowerment goals.

## Conclusions

As our democracy is limited only to a small percentage of rural elite and urban business and educated class, women's empowerment is also strictly confined to a limited few women who live in affluent urban places. Unfortunately, there are not many instances that these empowered women have played vital roles to empower other less-privileged women in the country. This situation demands a thorough re-evaluation of course of action.

All efforts at development made by government, NGOs and international organisations will remain nearly futile unless women could be brought in the mainstream of governance and development interventions. And, that is only plausible by empowering women — through education, equitable access to resources and social justice systems. Without women's empowerment, healthy gender relations cannot be established, and inequalities between men and women cannot be removed in Bangladesh.

While women should help themselves most, men and institutions — NGOs, academics and civil societies — should be more diligent to find various programmatic ways in order to empower women. This is long overdue and the problem is much bigger than what we all could really perceive. A woman-empowered society is supposed to be a more peaceful and democratic society and can be envisaged on a reflection of good governance of a political regime.

## WOMEN IN THE STRUGGLE FOR LAND

# Debhata and Kaliganj: A Case Study

by Ashraf-ul-Alam Tutu

IN the rural agricultural society of Bangladesh, the lesser the land possessed by the family, the greater the role of women in the movement of the landless of Debhata and Kaliganj thanas of Satkhira is a proof for this axiom.

From May 11, 1998, the newspapers reported on excesses committed in the process of expulsion of the landless from their homes in the villages of Kaliganj and Debhata in Satkhira district. In order to convert thousands of bighas of fertile agricultural land into shrimp 'ghers', concerted action was taken against them by the administration, the police and the mercenary armed goons of the lessees. Hundreds of landless men, women and children were injured in repeated attacks on them and a landless housewife Jaheda sacrificed her life.

In the aftermath of the death of Jaheda the popular movement that broke out spontaneously in favour of the landless, with the positive role of the print media and the advocacy conducted by the NGOs, finally resulted in the visit of Satkhira of the Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, and at a mass rally at Debhata, she assured the landless that government-owned khas lands will be settled for them. But though a few of their demands have been met, most others still remain to be fulfilled. The movement of the landless is still going on.

## Beyond the Greenery

Satkhira is on the southwestern border of Bangladesh. Debhata and Kaliganj thanas are situated south of the district town. Starting from Debhata, along an earthen road, lie scattered the villages Jhaimari, Norar-Charkuni, Kalabaria, Dhebhakhal Bhangamari East, Bhangamari West, Chhatmahal Kamini Basu, and Baburabad in the unions of Nalta and Noapara. In these nine villages of Debhata and Kaliganj thanas live 1200 families of the landless comprising a population of about ten thousand.

Due to the culture of brackish water shrimps through year after year, the natural environment of the area has been destroyed. Not only that, as a result of the terrorist activities of the lease-holders of shrimp gher, the social environment of the region has also been damaged. The only means of communication for these nine villages is the narrow earthen road partly flooded by the brackish water of the gher. This road is not negotiable by any vehicle; one has to travel on foot. The road surface is a mixture of mud and innumerable snails. Only those who have travelled on this road can understand how risky it is to walk on this muddy, snail-strewn surface. There has been no effort to develop it, in whose interest who knows!

## The Aggression

The genesis of the dispute between the leaseholders and the

landless is based on the demand of the landless to declare the land forcefully occupied by the gher owners as khas land. It is said that a secret detente has developed among the gher owners, the administration and the police. The raids conducted by the administration, the police and the hired goons of the gher-owners during May to July 1998 was a part of such secret understanding. The shrimp cultivating gher-owners of Debhata and Kaliganj wanted to continue their hold on the land.

The dispute centres around the possession of 3178 acres of government-owned khas land. A section of shrimp farmers of Satkhira district influenced the local administration to declare a portion of this land as 'Jalmahal' (water-body). In the repeated attacks committed since 11 May, 1998, the administration, the police and the armed mercenaries of the gher-owners acted in concert. The police and the armed goons fired on a protest procession of the landless on 27th July 1998, as a result of which hundreds of landless men, women and children were injured and landless housewife Jaheda was killed and the same fate awaited two innocent infants. Influenced by the rich gher-owners of Debhata and Kaliganj, the district administration of Satkhira virtually stood against the poor, helpless landless people. Neither the State nor the Constitution came to their help. The vested interests used loopholes in the laws to evict the poor from their tiny homesteads.

## Role of the Landless Women

The women of the landless families living in the villages marked out for eviction have played a courageous role in the struggle to realise their rights. Because the menfolk were already living under threat of arrest as a result of mostly false and unfounded cases filed against them by the vested interests they could not play any leading part in the movement. The women of these villages of Debhata and Kaliganj therefore courageously discharged that responsibility.

They stood in the forefront of the protest against eviction from their homes. The men encouraged them from behind. Jaheda's sacrifice is a symbol of that courage and struggle. Out of about 150 injured on that occasion, the most seriously wounded 10 were women, who had to be treated in hospital for a long time. The majority of the processionists were women.

## Baburabad is Now 'Jahedanagar'

Change of nomenclature is a common event in this country. From bridges to buildings, and from hills and mountains to scenic parks, nothing escapes

this trend for new names. But the renaming of Baburabad is not an example of silly whim. Instead it is a symbol of the breaking of the shackles by the people of the area. The illiterate landless of the area may be considered ignorant about class struggle or class-consciousness; but they are well aware of their own position emanating from their realisation of the struggle for existence. Baburabad may not attain any sort of urbanisation in the future, but by renaming it as Jahedanagar, the people of Baburabad have evidenced their respect for the supreme sacrifice of the landless housewife. This change of nomenclature is not in favour of conserving the interest of

any individual or group, instead, it is an expression of the natural evolution of history.

The Citizen's Solidarity Committee against Eviction of the Landless gave a call for dawn-to-dusk hartal in Satkhira the next day, and Satkhira citizens spontaneously observed it on July 28, 1998 to express their symbolic support. Then again on August 3, 1998, when police tried to remove the demonstrators from a sit-in, the entire Satkhira town turned into a battle-field. Although violence is never desirable, but one outstanding aspect was that the landless women took an active part in the street.

The writer is Advisor, Uttar and Organizer, Satkhira Movement of the Landless.

# Asia's "Burden of Disease"

by Leni Cifra

EVERY thousand of Filipinos, like most Asians, lose the equivalent of 259 years from illness-linked disabilities and premature deaths, the new 'Burden of Disease' indicators reveal.

In a study titled 'Health and Nutrition in Emerging Asia', the Asian Development Bank unveils what this recently-developed public health yardstick has turned up.

Co-authored University of Ulster's Osmani and A Bhargava from Houston University, this study appears in the latest issue of *Asian Development Review*.

'Burden of disease' indicators move beyond traditional but still-useful measuring rods: life expectancy, death rates, sickness patterns, etc., the two economists explain.

This new gauge adds up 'life years lost due to diseases' and early graves. It does this by factoring in two other estimates. One is years wasted by premature deaths. Filipinos live, on average, to 68 (52 in Tawi-Tawi).

The second is 'effective years' that went p-f-f-t due to disabilities inflicted by ailments.

Scientists dub the result 'Daly's'. That stands for 'disability-adjusted life-years per thousands of population.' First used in the early 1990s, this comparatively new health 'tape measure' found:

\*\*\* 'Worldwide average for total life years lost amounted to 294 years per 1,000 population' in 'developing countries worldwide.'

\*\*\* But India lugs a 344 year 'burden of disease' — a country that has a nuclear arsenal to protect the biggest number of impoverished people on earth, says *State of the World 2000*.

\*\*\* Sub-Saharan 'Performs the worst... with a burden of 574 years'. China's 178 years is the lowest among all the regions.

For the rest of Asia — including the Philippines — illness burden stands at 259 years, below the average for developing nations.

This improved analytical tool could prove handy as Asian governments grapple with the newly-tracked 'epidemiological transition.'

An earlier Harvard University and World Health Organization report — 'The Global Burden of Disease' — uses that phrase to tag radical shifts in the patterns of deaths and illnesses among the overfed in advanced countries and the chronically hungry in poorer nations.

For the first time, the number of people in the world, who are nourished and overweight, rivals the number who are impoverished and underweight — some 1.2 billion,' notes the Worldwatch Institute.

Changes in lifestyles, nutrition, income, environment, human fertility, age-structure, education, etc., trigger this transition, the Harvard/WHO study notes.

Where maladies of the poor once dominated, ailments of the affluent emerge with a

vengeance. Tuberculosis, measles, pneumonia are overtaken by stroke, diabetes, cancer, etc.

'Infectious communicable diseases give way to chronic and non-communicable disease,' Osmani and Bhargava point out. 'Developing Asia has begun to experience this' transition which industrialized nations underwent earlier.

In countries like Indonesia, the Philippines, India or Bangladesh, majority of largely preventable deaths still stem from so-called 'Old' ailments. But in richer, more urbanized places, like Hong Kong, Korea, Singapore or Germany, the risk of chronic non-communicable diseases emerges.

Treatment for stroke or cancer can be a hundred times more costly than oral rehydration for infants with gastro-enteritis. Securing good health for all will be costlier in the future, as populations age. Governments must resist pressure to skew limited budgets towards treatment of chronic disease.

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