

Poverty –the most prevalent of all diseases

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GEORGE Bernard Shaw saw in poverty the greatest of evils and worst of crimes compared to which all other crimes are virtues and all other dishonour chivalrous. In Marxian analysis primitive accumulation plays approximately the same role as original sin does in theology. And from this original sin i.e. accumulation of wealth dates poverty of the great majority of the people who despite all their labour have nothing to sell but themselves as against the wealth of the few that increases constantly.

Economists have defined poverty as having insufficient income to provide minimum standard of living. In mid-1990s extreme poverty has been quantified as consumption equivalent to one US dollar a day applicable to one third of the total population of the developing world (550 million living in South Asia alone). ILO estimated that number of people belonging to this group increased in 1990 compared to five years earlier with the largest concentration of poverty being in rural areas compared to urban areas, beneficiaries of development, which did not "filter down" as expected by economists. In short extreme poverty is destitution or absolute poverty, while relative poverty is the condition of comparative less command of goods and services in relation to other segment living within intra-community, intra-country, or intra-region.

Poverty is not a recent phenomenon suddenly staring at us with demonical malevolence. Indeed the people today had never had it so good since time began. Concurrently from the beginning of history social stratification or

societal division based on wealth, power and status has been a defining characteristic of civilization.

Since men have always been endowed with compassion, all religions since the dawn of history preached to the non-poor about his duty to the poor; the growth of powerful Western civilization started to codify this relationship. Social stratification took global shape with the advent of colonisation and poverty began to be globalised. In the initial period the colonial masters used the conquered territories to provide them with goods for consumption and trade. With the beginning of industrialisation the colonialists used the colonies to provide them with raw materials for industrialisation. The benefits garnered by the industrialised countries however were not shared with the colonies. With the end of the Second World War when colonies started getting their independence they came to be known as developing countries or the Third World; now defunct Soviet Union, East Europe and China are referred to as the Second World; and the post-industrialised (service and information-based) economies came to be known as the First World.

Some philosophers expressed the belief that every society, formed and governed since the advent of history, was based on the belief in the notion assumed as FIRST PRINCIPLES which included, inter-alia, that it is necessary for a large portion of mankind to exist in ignorance and poverty to secure the remaining part such degree of happiness as they now enjoy (Scottish socialist and philosopher Robert Owen 1777-1858). Prophetic yet undisputable. Deprived portion of mankind has the possibility of moving up vertically. While the deprived and the rich segments of the society do not need to have fixity in physical and geographical sense, the basic premise has held good since time immemorial.

Causes of poverty are many and identifiable overpopulation, unequal distribution of resources, inadequate educational and employment opportunities, environmental degradation, certain economic and demographic trends etc. Bangladesh is often cited as an example as having one of the world's highest density of population (950 person per square kilometre) with majority of the people engaged in low productivity manual farming as opposed to Holland and Belgium (both having high population density) practicing mechanised farming and involved in high-tech industries

and nance (despite our High Court's suo moto ruling declaring Fatwa – edict by Muslim priest – as illegal) because political parties even in imperfect democracy have to go for elections where power lies mostly in the hands of male chauvinists.

Barring forced ligation/vasectomy population control has to be achieved through socio-economic evolutionary process. State interventions as in China and tried in India during Indira Gandhi's Emergency Rule did not produce desired results. Some degree of coercive persuasion may produce results e.g. financial incentive for

urban areas and to other countries. Thus intra-country and inter-country migration takes place. Lest we forget in the flow of this narration that the root cause of migration is extreme poverty. Intra-country movement of population does not necessarily add to national wealth in the absence of productive employment in urban areas. On the other hand existing unemployment, disemployment and disguised unemployment rampant in urban areas are further compounded by the addition of rural people overstretching the already inadequate provision of civic facilities and

oil and manufacture of durable goods by low wage workers in factories located and operated by multi-national corporations in poorer countries, they would have no hesitation in practicing cultural racism or a system of apartheid in rejecting immigrants from developing countries. Centrality of unequal distribution of resources as a legacy of colonialism between the two worlds to the present discourse on poverty is inescapable.

Poverty mostly makes victims of women, children, old and the disabled. While women with their traditional lower status in their

mirage. The minorities are always in the forefront in intra-country migration (in search of security among other minorities) and inter-country migration in the hope of a better future where they again fall into the vicious circle of poverty.

UN Secretary General Kofi Annan unequivocally stated that good governance was the single most important factor in eradicating poverty and promoting development. Studies have shown that weak governance has been responsible for persistent poverty and underdevelopment in many countries and regions. Good governance demands transparency, participation, responsiveness, accountability and rule of law. It must ensure respect for human and fundamental rights; participatory democracy; non-discrimination based on race, religion, ethnicity class, or gender; enacting economic and social policies aimed at eradicating poverty etc. Society must defend diversity, pluralism, and the right to be different within a tolerant society. Regrettably it has been found that the judicial system often is more diligent in prosecuting the poor than the crimes committed against the poor. The police in particular has been found to be unresponsive and corrupt – making false arrests, accusations, and imprisonment, with release conditional on large bribes, collusion with the criminals etc. Law enforcement were also found to be brutal – harassing street vendors, raping women who registered complaints, beating up innocent people etc (Human Development Report 2002). Additionally the judicial system reinforce these biases by failing to punish the police abuses. The deprived who suffer from social exclusion and police brutality see the political elites as visible and resented symbols of repressive authority increasingly dependent on muscle power to

secure the fruits of basically bureaucratic-authoritarian regimes.

Third World urban-bias of development contribute to furthering the abysmal depth of poverty in rural areas. "The most important class conflict in the poor countries of the world today is not between labour and capital. Nor is it between foreign and national interests. It is between rural class and urban class. The rural sector contains most of the poverty and most of the low cost sources of potential advance; but the urban sector contains most of the articulateness, organization and power" (*Politics and Society in the Third World* – Mehran Kamrava).

Bangladesh remains a poor country, one of the least developed ones. Yet from a country as a "landscape of disaster" with a "catalogue of woes", we seem to have received recognition as a lead performer among LDCs having achieved accelerated economic growth; reduced fertility and child mortality rates; and declining incidence of income poverty. Persistent negative images flashed in the electronic and print media appear to have taken a turn for the better despite periodic unwelcome focus on us due to reports of Transparency International and other reputed bodies. Since fundamental relationship has been established between democracy and economic growth we should be on the consolidation of the democratic process and frustrate all attempts of any possible return of command economy in order to give our people the quality of life they deserve.

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For decades population planning and control has been one of the policy priorities in Bangladesh. Present low population growth rate is a direct result of these efforts. Conservatism translated into preventing girls from going to schools as soon as or even before they reach puberty and their early marriage before the legal age particularly in rural areas defeat governmental and non-governmental organisation's efforts to control population growth. Practice of polygamy is also a contributive factor. Male dominance over the female body and the primacy of male will in procreation regardless of the female's consent or protest are social factors to contend with. Legislation against polygamy is difficult in Islamic countries. So is legislation and more importantly its implementation against male domi-

two children family; denial of promotion to higher position or higher scale of pay if the family size is found to be larger than optimum; denial of medical and other facilities in such cases etc. But such persuasive coercive policy can only be exercised in governmental sector which employs only a small segment of a country's population. This would not work in rural areas where a male child is seen as a security blanket for the future and a field hand in farming. Perverted use of Malthusian population theory is practiced in many developing countries where girl child is killed at birth with silent acquiescence of local rural society notwithstanding existence of strict laws prohibiting such practices.

Overpopulation in rural areas and resultant extreme poverty leads to exodus of excess population to

adding to congestion, pollution, slum based crime etc. In case of inter-country migration however labor, compared to other factors of production, is far less mobile. Trade Unions' defence of jobs and rise of far right political parties have combined in putting a strong nationalist restriction on immigration. Rise of Jorg Haider's party in Austria; the second position secured by Jean Marie Le Penn in the French Presidential elections; election plank on immigration of the recently defeated CDU Chancellor candidate Edmund Stoiber are clear signs that developed countries do not want to encourage immigrants from the Third World however much they may talk of globalisation. While developed countries may not have any qualms to practice neo-colonialism through import of inexpensive natural resources including

countries (which both they and male segment of their society take for granted) may end up in sweatshops (illegal factories) or sold into prostitution, the children and the other categories who depend on the meager income of the women become victims of malnutrition, disease and in cases of extreme poverty; of death by starvation. Fate of the ethnic and racial minorities, object of prejudice of the majority class, are worse. In societies, both affluent and poverty ridden, the minorities are denied rights, fair treatment, educational and employment facilities. As they constitute the soft underbelly of the society in any turbulence the minorities become the first victims and being poor their shock absorption capacity is virtually non-existent. Since power is vested in the hands of the majority legal redress to victimisation is often

Fasting in Islam

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ROZA is a Persian word. *Roza* or *al-Siam* (in Arabic) must not be equated with normal fasting. There is a gulf of difference between *Roza* in Islam and mere abstention from food and drinks. *Al-Siam* is something much sublimer, much nobler, more exalted and majestic. "It is an armour", declares the holy Prophet of Islam (peace be upon him), "with which one protects oneself" (bukhari). It calls for full exercise of self-restraint on all the senses and limbs – a total and absolute control on all evil acts and desires, control of not only wrath, malice, arrogance, greed, jealousy, hatred and enmity, but of all indecent and unholy dreams and desires. The holy Prophet (pbuh) ordains: "So let not him (who fasts) utter immodest (or

foul) speech, nor let him act in an ignorant manner, and if a man quarrels with him or abuses him, he should say twice, "I am fasting." (Bukhari). Abu Huraira (RA) testifies that the holy prophet (pbuh) said, "He who does not give up uttering falsehood and acting according to it, Allah has no need of his giving up of his food and his drinks." (Bukhari).

Al-Siyam indeed is something unique. It enjoys, in the eyes of Allah, a divine grace unparalleled by any other act of piety and worship. According to a *Oudsi Hadith* (Utterances attributed to Allah outside the Holy Quran), the Most Gracious and the Most Merciful Allah, in His infinite mercy, declares: "A man's work belongs to him. A good deed is repaid from tenfold to seven hundred times. Fasting belongs to Me and I repay." (Bukhari).

The holy month of Ramadhan

The holy month of Ramadhan has come back once again with all its pristine glory and divine excellence to enable us to learn self-restraint, to temper us in the kiln of Taqwa to provide us with a divine privilege, a unique opportunity to receive Allah's Mercy directly from Him. Let us celebrate it in a befitting way, not through lavishness and sumptuous Iftars and Sehris, not through extravagance and prodigality, but through Taqwa and Tarawwih, self-restraint and meditation, prayers and penance.

occupies a unique place in the Islamic Calendar. It is the only month which has been explicitly described and analysed in the Holy Quran. The very fact that the Revelation of the Holy Quran commenced in the month of Ramadhan, which is the ninth month of the Arabic year, testifies so eloquently to the sanctity, serenity and divine excellence of this holy month. The Holy Quran authenticates:

"Ramadhan is the (month in which was sent down the Quran, as a guide to mankind; also clear (Signs) for guidance and judgement (between right and wrong)" [2:185]. What is more, it was in this sacred month that *Hazrat Ibrahim* (peace be upon him) was blessed with the divine *Sahifa*. It was in this month of majesty that the holy *Taurat* reached mankind through *Hazrat Musa* (peace be upon him). It was again in this holy month that the sacred *Zabur* saw the light of day through *Hazrat Daud* (peace be upon him). Last but not the least, *Hazrat Isa* (peace be upon him) had the privilege and honour of receiving divine *Injil* on the 12th of this auspicious month. A good number of *Ahadith* also testify to the divine excellence and eminence of this sacred month. Abu Huraira (RA) reported God's Messenger (pbuh) as saying, "When Ramadhan begins the gates of paradise are opened, the gates of *Jahannam* are locked, and the devils are chained." (Bukhari and Muslim).

Sal'man al-Farisi (RA) told of God's Messenger (pbuh) saying in a sermon which he delivered to them on the last day of *Sah'ban*: "A great month, a blessed month, a month containing a night which is better than a thousand months has approached you people. God has appointed the observance of fasting during it as an obligatory duty, and the passing of its night in prayer as a voluntary practice It is a month whose beginning is mercy, whose middle is forgiveness, and whose end is freedom from hell." (Baihaqi in *Shu'ab al-Iman*).

Ramadhan is derived from the word *Ramz* which means "to burn", "to scorch". The root meaning of *Ramadhan* is "excessiveness of heat, they month was so called "when they named them according to the seasons in which they fell, this month agreed with the days of excessive heat", or because the month is supposed to burn away the sins of men. (*Ghiyasul-Lughah, in loco*). Some say that it is one of the names of Allah, but there is no authentic or reliable authority to testify to this claim.

Fasting is divided into two main categories -- (1) The *Fard* or the obligatory fasting and (2) the *Tatawwu* or the voluntary fasting. The *Fard* fasting comprises the *Ramadhan* fasting, the *Kaffara* or the Fasting of Atonement and the *Nadhr* relating to the taking of a vow.

Allah ordains in the holy Quran: "O ye, who believe! Fasting is prescribed to you as it was prescribed to those before you, that ye may (Learn) self-restraint." (2:183)

Al-Siyam or the Fasting during the holy month of Ramadhan, one of the five pillars or *Arkans* of Islam, is

obligatory for every Muslim provided he or she is in full possession of his or her faculties. There are, however, exemptions for temporary causes, such as menstruation or child-birth bleeding and persons in sick-bed or on a journey. The exemptions clearly signify that Allah never wants His *Bandas* to suffer and undergo self-torture. The Holy Quran clearly says: "Allah does not want to put you to difficulties. (He wants you) to complete prescribed period and to glorify Him in that He has guided you: and perchance ye shall be grateful". (2:185).

Al-Siyam or the Fasting is indeed an ancient form of worship, prescribed for the Muslims as well as other nations which preceded us, ever since the time of *Hazrat Adam* (peace be upon him). According to the commentaries of *Al-Manar*, "Fasting is an ancient form of worship recognized by previous religions even heathen ones. It constituted an essential part of every religion. It was known to the ancient Egyptians, from whom it passed on to the ancient Greeks, who used to enforce it, principally upon their women. The Romans also observed Fast and the Pagans in India and elsewhere practise Fasting to this day". Fasting in different forms was also in vogue among the Hindus and the Buddhists, the Christian and the Jews. According to *Al-Manar*, "The best-known and oldest of Christians fasts is that of Lent, which precedes Easter. It is the same fasting period as observed by Moses and Jesus (peace be upon them) and his apostles." The Christians were categorically commanded by their Prophet to fast: "Moreover, when ye fast, be not as the hypocrites, of a sad countenance..... But thou when thou fastest, anoint thine head and wash thy face" (Matt. 6 : 16, 17). Again, when the Pharises objected to Jesus' disciples not keeping the fast as often as John's, his only answer was that when he would be taken away "then shall they fast in those days" (Luke 5 : 33-35). Moses (peace be upon him) himself fasted for 40 days to qualify himself to receive that Divine Revelation. Jesus (peace be upon him) also fasted for 40 days in the desert and commanded his disciples to do the same.

Islam introduced a new meaning, a new vision, a new idea, a new spirit into the institution of Fasting. For the first time in history, Fasting was blessed with a systematic regulation, a scientific method, a noble justification. In the days before the holy Prophet (peace be upon him) Fasting meant the suffering of some privation in the hours of mourning and sorrow. Islam intro-

duced a revolutionary innovation. *Al-Siyam* stood not for mere suffering or abstinence but for an institution for the moral uplift and spiritual elevation of the human soul. A Muslim Fast never indicates mere abstention from food and drinks and sex, and Fasting in Islam in never meant for self-torture. It is undoubtedly stricter than other systems of fasting, but it provides alleviations

for special circumstances. The restraint from the animal instincts for food, drink and sex enables the attention of a man or a woman to be directed to higher and nobler aspects. Fasting in the light of Islam helps him or her overcome lusts and thereby sets us at the mouth of the road leading to perfection – perfection to be achieved through prayers and penance, *Taqwa* and *Tarawwih*, contemplation and acts of charity, total restraint and abstinence from all evil acts and thoughts. The self-restraint or *Taqwa*, indeed, has to be a voluntary effort comprising the elements of caution, alertness and fear of Allah. Benign Providence Himself loves this glorious and voluntary effort and this attempt at self-restraint by his *Banda*. In the words

of the holy Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), "By He, in Whose hands Muhammad's soul rests, Allah prefers the bad breath of one who fasts to the fragrance of musk" (Bukhari and Muslim).

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