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Causes of poverty in Bangladesh

In response to the letter “Why Are We Poor?” by Miraz Ahmed (April 5) I want to say something about poverty in Bangladesh, especially the reasons behind it.

Before showing the causes, I would like to delineate the present situation of poverty in Bangladesh. Around 31% of the rural population presently suffers the indignity of chronic poverty low consumption, hunger and under-nutrition, lack of access to basic health services, illiteracy and other deprivations for more than a decade. About 24% of the total population currently lives in extreme income-poverty. About 19% of rural households cannot have ‘full three meals’ a day; about 10% subsist on two meals or less for a number of months every year. While Bangladesh has come out of the “shadow of famine”, the problem of starvation still persists. However, 47% people are staying below poverty line and 28% of our population



tion still persists. However, 47% people are staying below poverty line and 28% of our population

lives under the extreme poverty line. About 40 million people go to bed without meal

every night. This observation shows that Bangladesh is a country of poor. Although, several

international organisations like IMF, World Bank; Government and Non Governmental organisations have been working for the alleviation of poverty but the success in the field is very negligible i.e. 1% or 1.8% at best each year. Statistics show reduction of poverty in the last five years (1999---2004) from 44.7% to 42.1%. But according to the principles of Millennium Development Goals (MDG), we have to reduce poverty by 1.15% every year.

Now what are the causes of poverty, which was the question of Miraz Ahmed. As regular readers of DS we can give the following points as the causes.

- A. Rapid growth of population.
- B. Inequitable distribution of land, income and productive assets.
- C. Death of chief wage-earner.
- D. Incapability of chief wage-

earner through accident, illness, and old age.

- E. Chronic irregularity of work.
- F. Largeness of family.
- G. Low wage.
- H. Habits drinking, betting, and gambling.
- I. Careless housekeeping for improvident expenditure.
- J. Chronic shortage of cash.
- K. Absence of food reserves.
- L. Natural calamities (river erosion, cyclone, tidal surge, excessive rain).
- M. Under developed communications system.
- N. Lack of education and skilled labour.
- O. Lack of administrative fairness and accountability.
- P. Limited access to public services.
- Q. Lack of mass people's participation in local government etc.

M. Mony & S. Maruf
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How is it possible?

The prime minister said that she & her government didn't know about the existence of Islamic militants in Bangladesh before August 17, 2005. This went beyond the limits of credibility because her government had banned the JMB in February 2005, which was behind the countrywide bomb attacks on August 17 last year. The pertinent question is if they didn't know about the existence of the Islamic militants why did they ban JMB then?

It's obvious that the role of the government before August 17 was quite questionable. Most of the newspapers in Bangladesh published the news of the potential threat of Islamic militancy. They gave the facts and details. They relentlessly tried to pursue the government to take action against militancy, but they failed. At that time the government said that the Islamic militancy was a déjà vu created by the media. They also withdrew the Time Magazine from the newsstands because they published a feature about the potential threat of militancy. If they took necessary steps at that time, some innocent people might have escaped death.

After all, it's Bangladesh, where nothing is impossible. Farmers demand electricity but receive bullets. Law enforcers kill people without trial. Strange!

Solaiman Palash
East Jurain, Dhaka

BBC debate on Bangladesh

The media and people concerned were so much enthusiastic to acclaim Steven Sackur (famous for 'Hard Talk') was in Bangladesh to arrange a debate on the democracy in the country. I was also counting days to watch the programme and at last that great day came. But this programme could not cross the line of my expectation. Those who watch BBC regularly must know how lively the other debate programmes are (for example the Doha Debate). There was scope to make it like those. The thresholds of my dissatisfactions are here:

The panel to speak for consisted of a minister, one opposition leader and Tareq Masud from Bangladesh. Why the number of persons was so small?

Young generation's thoughts influenced this programme. But why were they in the audience panel only? I have seen many debates on India issue in BBC where young leaders like Sachin Pilot represent the young generation and argue on behalf of them. This panel could invite Tareq Zia, Joy Wajed or Mahi Choudhury to make it more lively.

For whom this much talked about democracy stand? Obviously, for the people. Why the people of Bangladesh are again and again bringing the tainted, despotic political leaders back to the parliament? Why they are not casting vote for the people having a much better image? The NGOs are struggling to groom the people for a meaningful democracy. But where were they in the panel?

The lawyers have played a crucial role in strengthening our judiciary, to smoothen the path of democracy through the stockpile of public interest litigations. This panel really missed lawyers like Barrister Tania Ameer, Tanjeb, Sara Hossain and needless to mention the name of Dr. Kamal Hossain.

Now coming to the issue- democracy. Democracy is more than having an election every five years. It depends on institutionalisation. It contains the issues like appointment of election commissioners, separation of judiciary, caretaker government etc. The allegation is there that the government is interested to have a man of its choice as the chief of the caretaker government. Such points could be discussed critically, rather than revolving around the issue of election and its reaction only.

The most striking disappointment came from the audience in Bangladesh. Few questions were thrown to maintain the formalities and most of the time the audience remained busy in clapping rather than give their strong arguments, questions and comments. (I am really in doubt whether the young people who came had any idea about how the audience usually shake the panels in the other debates of BBC.)

However, Steven Sackur's initiative deserves praise and perhaps this is the first such debate in Bangladesh. But next time, my request to the BBC: please take care to bring more people in the audience who could talk for Bangladesh.

Sharin Shajahan Naomi
Law department, Dux

Our education

There are many well-known proverbs on education. Among those one is -- education is the backbone of a nation. But which type of education is the backbone of a nation? Many discussions, seminars, and meetings have been held on this point. The statesmen, policymakers and educationists gave their opinions on the issue. But since the birth of our independent Bangladesh, no concrete and effective policy has been taken.

Last year, a new system in the secondary education level was introduced. But our decision makers are yet to find anything that will serve our purposes satisfactorily.

Rashed
Thanaghat, Mymensingh

When we commit it!

Your paper reported (April 14), quote: “Policemen, armed and wearing goggles, entered the mosque and arrested four persons.”

Imagine the reaction in Bangladesh if these had been US or British personnel barging into some mosque in Baghdad or Basra.

There would've been protest rallies, flag burnings, marches to embassies & tons of hot air released at speeches by politicians & religious bigwigs.

But now that the incident has been committed by our so-called police at home (Kansat), no one objects. Perhaps it doesn't count as desecration when WE commit it.

Readul Islam
Kalyanpur, Dhaka

What are they doing?

What are the ministers and MPs doing? Do they at all think deeply for their motherland? Or they simply

come to power to meet their own needs? Are they really committed to fulfilling their promises that they made to people before election? I am sorry to say that the answer to all these questions will be: “NO”. These ministers are not doing anything. They cannot see anything beyond political gains.

I strongly request the people of this peace-loving nation to think about this issue and take a stand on it.

Minhaj Ahmed
Uttara, Dhaka

Finding clean candidates

Much is being said and written about clean candidates in our news media and in various meetings and seminars. But who will bell the cat? Apart from some independent candidates, most of them will be nominated by the parties. This nomination process in itself is tainted, for public image alone is not the criteria. The real driving factor for the party is either money or muscle in that order. For money can even buy muscle, if muscle is not directly provided.

The old saying “Cleanliness is next to Godliness” is non-existent in Bangladesh, where the people who count are generally without principle, and morally as unclean as can be visualized-- in thoughts, words and deeds, barring a few. These rare few will not probably need all the fingers of both hands to count them.

The fact of life is, we preach democracy but practice autocracy in a totalitarian dictatorship format which reminds one of the governments of Germany and Italy of the early 1940s. Our governance format is a mixture of Mafia and Nazi based practices combining the worst of both, with rewards

provided for the perpetrators of these activities down the line. This is graphically reiterated by Shanta's case. I can predict the foot dragging of this legal exercise for years to come till the aggrieved is worn out monetarily and mentally and a quiet hush in the sideline is engineered. Shanta's saving grace is her close relatives in important places. Any other person would have been trampled down or done away with through crossfire, or otherwise.

In such an ugly environment; whether we like it or not; this is what actually takes place. Where then can we find clean people to govern us? With tongue in cheek, I feel we are not possibly fit to exist as free people in a civilised and rational environment of governance.

The right of realistic participation in parliament based on personal values, consciousness and judgment has been trampled down by disallowing voting across party lines in the house of parliament. MPs can vote on party lines only, not based on beliefs and personal values. No wonder, parliament proceedings are so dull with only two polarised viewpoints available. Beginning from here what else but cronyism can survive? Democratic practices, if any, are hijacked by the party top rankers to do or undo what only they think is proper. The rest are but a herd of followers for voting only if needed.

Till we cannot sort out this issue and unshackle day to day administration from party interferences and opportunism at all levels of government; we will only get what we deserve. This we have been seeing around us since the creation of Bangladesh. Finding and putting up clean candidates will remain an uphill

task where the whole election process revolves round money spent! This process is unfortunately lubricated and driven by money and muscle (coming by means fair or foul) and not political programme or popularity which should be the democratic norm. What chance then is there for a clean candidate? Can one wonder why fundamentalism with its trickle down funds (foreign religious aid?) reaching the largely uneducated masses coupled with very strong religion based beliefs are expanding in less developed rural areas.

They are becoming popular day by day compared to the current practice of popular secular politics mired by cronyism and corruption at all levels. The voting pattern in future elections beyond 2007 will demonstrate this fact and should not surprise anyone.

Political realist
One-mail

Stranger than fiction

Cover story of the Time, Asian edition of April 10, 2006, has again proved the axiom “Truth is Stranger than Fiction”. Mr. Alex Perry, the writer of the article “Rebuilding Bangladesh,” portrayed a completely different image of the country from what he depicted in his article captioned “Deadly Cargo” on October 21, 2002 issue of the Asian edition of the same magazine. Like some of the fellow patriots, I wrote to Time, refuting the points stated in the said article with facts, which was appreciated by its editorial board.

It is appreciated that Mr. Perry has correctly realised the potentials of Bangladesh, although late, and I hope the other writers of different internationally reputed journals and also

some journalists of local media, who are indulging in defaming Bangladesh through their write-ups/columns would realise the truth and shun their partisan attitude, and put their efforts in establishing the truth and contribute in “transforming Bangladesh into a land of guarded optimism” as stated in the write-up of Mr. Alex Perry.

A.K.M. Fakhru Alam
Dhaka

Scarcity of English newspapers

Nowadays everything is undergoing change with the advancement of science and technology. In Bangladesh our young friends seem to prefer constantly watching different channels of television from where they never learn anything that could be helpful in future life. Thus our future generations are going to be deprived of proper education to cope with the present challenges of the age of advancement.

They have forgotten to have the habit of reading English newspapers and journals from where they can collect many important features and writings of many learned and distinguished persons and thus they may improve their general knowledge of the world affairs. In this respect, I should ask the learned teachers and policymakers of our education sector to kindly think of the dire need of the hour.

Nowadays we do find an acute shortage of good English teachers from school to university level. University or college teachers are always found engaged in more than 3/4 places as part time teacher and thus all are running for money.

It is really amazing to note here

Fuel prices

A bunch of economists, led by Dr. Wahiduddin Mahmud, joined in the chorus of IMF, World Bank and ADP and suggested a steep rise in the price of fuel (New Age, 9 April 2006). This is total bunk to me. The polygonal agencies always suggest regressive and repressive measures such as fuel price and interest rate hike, job retrenchment, tax enhancement

and monetary contraction. Our local experts, in my humble semi-economist opinion, cannot in clear conscience join in the same choir and sing the same discordant tune to cause misery and suffering for the people.

What happened to welfare economics rather than blind, uncaring and insensitive subservience to World Bank and IMF detrimental prescriptions?

I think the whole premise is faulty. The government is not giving any subsidy on the cost of crude oil. The so-called paper subsidy is due to the very high tax and duty on fuel oil.

You would think these economists will have something better and more beneficial to brainstorm, rather than playing the compliant role of WB, IMF and ADB appeasers.

Omar Khasru
On e-mail



Kuakata fishermen need lighthouse

I sailed out with a few fishermen into the Bay, and they said that a lighthouse would make a great deal of difference. Indeed, as evening came down around us, I could imagine what it would be like with a storm darkening the horizon. I'm sure installing one lighthouse would save many a life.

I wonder how many lighthouses there are along the Bay. The people of the entire region depend heavily on fishing for their livelihood. We should try to make an inherently hazardous occupation less unsafe than what it is now.

Iftekhhar Sayeed
Dhanmandi, Dhaka