

Empowering the disabled: A plan for Bangladesh

More than 1.5 crore people in Bangladesh suffer from a debilitating disability. Worse still, are the associated social stigmas compounding the problem. **NASIR-UR-RAHMAN SINHA** offers insight into this issue and recommends political tools to counter social barriers and promote the economic empowerment of disabled people by utilising their boundless, untapped talents and skills.

DISABLED people are amongst the most marginalised group in any community. There are numerous barriers faced by disabled people worldwide that prevent them from exercising their equal opportunities.

These barriers include:

- **Access to education** -- less than 2% of disabled children in poor countries attend school.
- **Access to rehabilitation, aids and appliances** -- only about 2% of disabled people in poor countries receive rehabilitation service that they require.
- **Poverty** -- in general, disabled people are the poorest of the poor. According to World Bank estimates, one in five of world's poorest people are disabled, and most of them fall within low and middle-income groups.
- **Attitudes and negative stereotypes** -- these are commonly attached to disability that often leads to discrimination and social exclusion.

In Bangladesh, about 1.5 crore people are disabled. Having almost no education or health care facilities, they often lead a miserable life.

The common people believe that the disabled are the curse of the Almighty -- sin of the society. Even a disabled family cannot utter that their children are disabled for fear of being humiliated in their society. It happens mainly because people here often receive evil education in place of proper education. They learn religious fanaticism in lieu of religious principles. Not only the disabled, but even their parents live at the mercy of society. However, it seems now the society is moving forward and different socio-religious organizations. Government and NGOs are doing some work to eliminate these evils. But it has been observed that nothing is done in a systematic way.

Before I write something about the disabled of our country I must mention that there are some eminent persons who have reached their peak of success due to proper care by the society. Their names appear at the end of this piece. Among them are the first President of the United States, George Washington, Christopher "Superman" Reeves, and Hollywood sweetheart and action hero, Tom Cruise. Undoubtedly, it can be claimed that if the proper impetus could be given, many of our disabled may also prove their ability and fulfilling their debut in the society.

The Bangladesh Disability Act 2001, to be more frank, has little or no effect till date. As the main thing it emphasized that it will enable the disabled to travel at half of the normal rate of fares. There are needs for special education, health care, special job quota, arrangement for their smooth movement in the public places and many other facilities, which is not possible to write in detail here. Not even one percent of the disabled knows or has access to these benefits.

Let me cite an instance. The National Disabled Foundation founded by the government of Bangladesh is situated on the top floor of a three-storied building. The writer, who is a disabled himself, met the chief of the organization and asked his opinion whether a disabled can come here using the stairs as there is no lift. He felt ashamed and told me humbly that either he would install a lift there or would move somewhere on the ground floor. But the office is still there, though a prolonged period of more than one year has passed.

Now let us not look at the loopholes but move ahead with new idea: Motivation for the welfare of the disabled who are unable to

work. This could be done through a committee headed by an NGO member who is disabled and the secretary should come from Union council chairman and members in every Upazila in the governing body.

This fund should come not only from the government, but also from different philanthropists, industrialists, and businessmen. The amount so donated must get benefit of tax relief or other form of incentive from the government. Further funds could also be provided from the Government Zakat fund and local non-profit organizations. The elected representative i.e. the Union council members, Upazila council members, and members of parliament should request the people to donate hides and skin after sacrificing animals during Qurbani to this fund. The traders should be asked to buy them directly from the committee.

The government may also request international donors to provide funds. The whole unit would be monitored by the district commissioner and the central committee should be constituted by the finance, local government, and social welfare ministries, NGO bureau, and two members from the disabled communities who are capable to lead. It should be kept in mind that the disabled can feel the pinches of the disabled more than an able-bodied person.

The aforementioned ID cards will identify the statistics of the disabled so that they can get special status. Awareness must be created among the general public to provide support, sympathy and co-operation with them in all spheres of life. The public should be made conscious through advocacy in the media, seminars, meetings, conferences, etc. that they are not ghosts or any other evil. The Almighty has sent them to test our attitude of humanity towards his creation. The admiration and love they will draw from their fellowmen and neighbors will get reward from the Almighty. So it is moral and social obligation for the able men to nurse, treat, educate, and rehabilitate them properly for their own interest. The society and the nation will prosper, economy will develop enormously. The western world and other countries which follow the Disability Act, have set good examples of their advancement. They are leading the world today and our development also can be achieved through nourishing and fulfilling the needs of the disabled.

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the disabled.

The most important task now lies in the ratification of the Disability Act 2001. Some may argue that the rehabilitation of the disabled is a gigantic job for a country like ours and it is not too easy to accommodate them. But 10 to 12 percent of our population is disabled. How can a nation develop, leaving behind this unfortunate community to remain unemployed, leading them to begging or worse?

Subsistence allowance at the rate of Tk 200 or Tk 500 per family can never solve the problem. Moreover it creates social anarchy and inconsistency. Some may say or comment that solving the problem is a gigantic one and not possible in a poor country like ours. But here I recall that we fought a heroic war against one of the strongest armies of the world. We fought united like a rock and freed the nation from the clutches of evil. So need of the hour is to get notified for selfless dedication to solve the problem of inhuman behavior we are rendering to our disabled. "Impossible" is a word found in the dictionary of fools.

Today globalization is the theme of international arena and if we are sincere and honest and really desire to solve the problem and be united like a rock it will not at all be difficult to streamline these unfortunate disabled but they can also be rehabilitated. They are being used today by the criminal godfathers of the country. As the disabled have nothing to do, no work, no food, no shelter -- they easily fall prey in the hands of the godfathers. Remember, if we can build an infrastructure for the disabled in a pragmatic way, then these deserving people can be accommodated there. The required plan and action is the need of the time.

The point comes here that Bangladesh Disability Act is there. But I humbly submit that I have gone through the Act and also its clarification given, but I believe that it needs further ratification, and in this context I must say that there are many things to be included for its proper implementation. Moreover, the Act is strong when we find it includes all sorts of facilities but it cannot be made effective in a court of law. So we can call it a mere assurance or commitment. In our country where defying a law is a normal practice what good this Act can bring for us when it has no penalty clause? It should be made a fundamental right of the disabled.

We should also admit that now the government is concerned more than ever before and many social organizations are coming up to help the disabled for removing the inequality in behavior of the people of our society. But they are still not having the facilities as are needed. Now I write something concerning the issue.

The first thing is identification by issuing identity cards for: (1) Mentally retarded, (2) Blind, (3) Deaf and dumb, and (4) Physically disabled.

Then the most important task of the Prime Minister's Office or Social Welfare Ministry is to convene a convention for the disabled. This initiative should be taken up to prepare a comprehensive plan to eliminate poverty by undertaking and suggesting appropriate ways and means to establish the disabled as dignified citizens of the society.

There should be strict laws to be enacted amending the present Disability Act 2001. The Fundamental Rights, i.e. shelter, education, healthcare, and rehabilitation and prevention of disability with provision of penalty clauses, i.e. monetary and exemplary pun-



ishment in the court of law, must be included.

Agro-based industries, e.g. cow fattening, poultry, pisciculture, small and medium size industries, wholesale market, and any other industries like the mineral water plant established by the social welfare ministry should provide encouragement to the disabled by handing over to them these projects on payment of marginal installment. This could be monitored by the District/Upazila Committee as envisaged in the Disability Act. Of course the ability of the disabled should be examined before establishing the unit and this unit must be established in villages, to reduce the population pressure on the capital city.

The training of the disabled will be conducted by the Social Welfare Ministry and different NGOs working with the fund. Fund can be generated through government, and the World Bank, ADB and national and international donors should be requested for the purpose.

One more important task that is essential is to arrange a round-table conference of only the disabled who are pioneers and executives of different organizations, NGOs, etc. This will definitely improve overall development of the country. These institutions should be set up in villages. The step should be initiated by the Prime Minister's Office.

Another thing is to keep in mind that disability is increasing every year. During last Eid, more than 100 people died and made thousand people disabled. During the last eight years ending June 2005, 45,000 people were killed and 130,000 people were made disabled by different incidents, leading them to a miserable life, not only for themselves, but also for their families.

We should work together to enable the disabled of our country to:

- Acquire skills for employment.
- Build their confidence.
- Increase independence.
- Maximize mobility.
- Stop using disability issue as a political football.

Above all, elite peoples of the society should come forward to solve the problems of the disabled of our country on a priority basis.

There are many, many personalities those who are or were disabled in this world and it is not possible to write all of their names, I am mentioning only a few of them:

Albert Einstein

The mathematician/physicist had learning disability and did not speak until the years of age. He had very difficult time doing maths in school. It was also very hard for him to express himself through writing.

Alexander Graham Bell

Bell had a learning disability. Cher has dyslexia.

Christopher Reeve

Never has a person with a disability commanded so much media attention in recent history. Christopher Reeve, crippled after a horse-riding injury, wanted to be up on his feet and wanted to stand confident too. His life is now dedicated to harnessing the power of medical research to get up and ride again.

David Blunkett

The Rt Hon David Blunkett MP is without doubt Britain's most famous guide-dog owner. Often photographed with his guide dogs - Ted, Offa and Lucy -- David Blunkett also holds the powerful political post of Home Secretary. Joining the Labour Party aged 16, he was elected to Sheffield City Council aged 22. He was the council leader from 1980 to 1987 until he was elected MP for Sheffield Brightside.

Seen as the archetypal municipal socialist, he is in many senses a traditional labour. Arguably, he is a role model for disabled people who just want to get on with their lives. Thomas

Edison

Edison had learning disability. He couldn't read until he was twelve years old and had very difficult time writing even when he was older.

Franklin D. Roosevelt

Roosevelt had polio, was governor of New York State, then was elected President of the United

States for 4 terms.

George Washington

He had a learning disability. He could barely write and had very poor grammarskills.

Goya

At the age of 46, an illness left the Spanish painter (1746-1828) deaf. He went on to create the most famous Spanish art of the 19th century.

Helen Keller

She was blind, deaf, and mute.

John Milton

He became blind at the age of 43. He went on to create his most famous epic, Paradise Lost.

Lord Byron

"Mad, bad, and dangerous to know," Britain's great romantic was also born with talipes, a clubfoot. It is said that he "walked with difficulty but wandered at will." He toured Europe Extensive and captured the popular imagination through his poetry and his personality. From gloomy ego through to satiric realism he was renowned for his writings, his sexual ambivalences and his championing of Greek independence from the Turks. Disability activist Tom Shakespeare summon him up in the following way: "Most of his poetry hasn't stood the test of time, but he as a blockbuster in his day, and like very few other heroes, his name is still used as an adjective, Byronic, meaning dashing."

Lord Nelson

Viscount Horatio Nelson is certainly Britain's greatest naval hero. His skill as a naval command is, of course, well-documented. He won crucial victories at Trafalgar in 1805 and the Battle of the Nile in 1798, during the wars with revolutionary and Napoleonic France. What is less often remarked upon is that great part of his naval career and his major victories were won as a disabled person. Going ashore following the fall of Toulon, a French shot flung debris into his face leaving him without sight in his right eye. Later, an assault on Tenerife resulted in shattered right elbow-back on his flagship, the arm

Marlee Matlin

Marlee Matlin is a stand-up comedian and an actress. Some of her films include: Dead Silence, My Party, Hear No Evil, A Bridge to Silence, and Children of a Lesser God. She captivated the world by winning the Academy Award for best actress in the film, Children of a Lesser God. Marlee Matlin became deaf in infancy due to Roseola infantum. However, deafness has not disabled her or her career.

Robin Williams

He was diagnosed to be suffering from Attention Deficit Hyperactivity

Disorder (ADHD) as a child. He never refuses a role related to

medicine e.g. Awakenings, Patch Adams, etc.

Sarah Bernhardt

The French actress (1844-1923) was disabled by a knee injury, her leg amputated in 1914, she continued starring on stage until just before her death. She is regarded as France's greatest actress: The Divine Sarah.

Stephen Hawking

Physicist/mathematician had Lou Gehrig's Disease and was in a wheelchair. He needs a computer to speak.

Sudha Chandran

This brave lady dances with a Jaipur foot. She has acted in movie on classical dance called "Nache Mayuri" and today acts in a variety of TV serials.

Tanni Grey-Thompson

Tanni Grey Chandran is a disabled athlete that most people instantly recognize. Formerly Fanni Grey, the Thompson was added following her marriage in 1999, she has competed in Paralympic Games since 1988, representing Britain. The distances were ranging from 100m to 800m. She has won four Paralympic medals, including nine gold, and has broken over twenty world records. As a wheelchair athlete she was also the winner of four London marathons in 1992, 1996, 1998, and 2001. In recent years, she has established herself as a TV presenter, including BBC 2's "From the Edge" disability magazine program.

Tom Cruise

The Hollywood star is severely dyslexic.

Walt Disney

He had a learning disability.

Woodrow Wilson

US President from 1913-1921. Had a learning disability -- he was severely dyslexic.

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