The view from outside Dhaka

Our short-sighted Dhaka-centric official focus has led to uneven industrial development and increasing regional disparities, argues

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ANYONE driving down the Dhaka-Comilla road, as I did last summer, can't help noticing the continuous spread of factory buildings on either side of the road as one leaves the boundaries of Dhaka city. But, quite mysteriously, the industrial plants disappear once you cross the river into Comilla district.

The short journey to Comilla reveals both, the encouraging and the disappointing, aspects of Bangladesh's recent industrial growth. Industry is expanding, but in an uneven fashion. While Bangladesh is not a particularly industrialized country -- in 2000, manufacturing contributed only 15% of GDP, more or less the same share as in 1995 -- the pace of industrialization has accelerated in more recent years. More up-to-date data, when available, may indicate that Bangladesh, finally, is on its way to becoming a more industrialized country. But this rapid industrialization, even if it happens, may by-pass large parts of the country.

This concern arises from one simple fact, i.e., much of Bangladesh's industrial output is concentrated around the two major metropolitan centres of Dhaka and Chittagong. In 2000, the last year for which I could obtain district level statistics, over two-thirds (65%) of manufacturing GDP originated in just four of the 64 districts in the country.

Of these, Dhaka, and its adjacent districts Gazipur and Narayanganj, accounted for 50%, while Chittagong district contributed another 15%. The next 10 districts -- Narsingdhi, Tangail, Pabna, Sirajganj, Khulna, Jessore, Kushtia, Comilla, Brahmanbaria, and Sylhet -- contributed another 18%. This leaves us with a disturbing fact. Fifty, out of the 64, districts of Bangladesh together contribute only 17% of the country's industrial output.

The national average share of manufacturing in GDP (15%) thus hides significant regional variations. Manufacturing's contribution to district GDP varies from as low as 2%, in Lalmonirhat in northern Bangladesh,



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