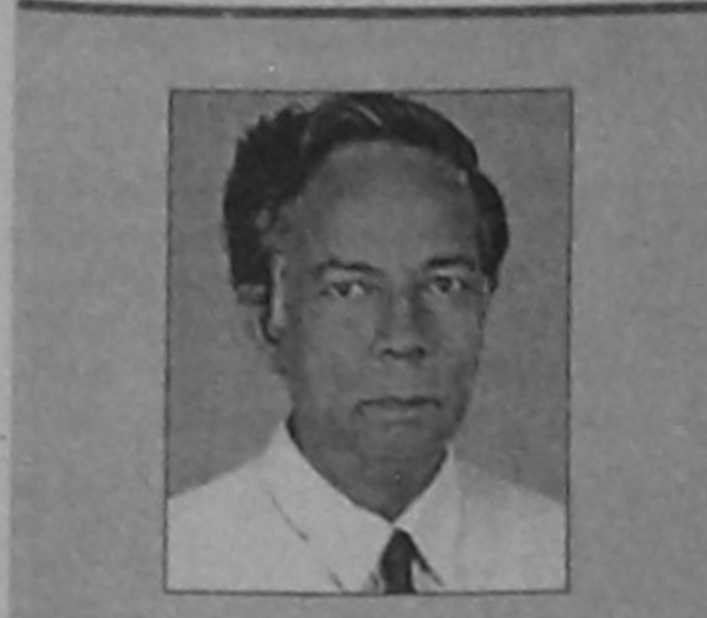


Joblessness tears social fabric



MD. ASADULLAH KHAN

WITH the country steeped in endemic corruption, prices of food grains going beyond the purchasing power of people, inflation mounting and unemployment surging up, disappointing news items like 'Dream turns into nightmare for three lakh Bangladeshi workers in Malaysia' -- even after paying a hefty sum of money to manpower agents in Bangladesh -- (The Daily Star, Feb 9) and an earlier report that 'Thousands languishing in Saudi Arabian jails' -- for illegally entering Saudi Arabia -- appear to be most disturbing.

Six years ago when Shamsur Rahman (nicknamed Shamsu) got a job as a welder in a construction company in the UAE, festivities broke out at his home at Kaliganj, 40 km from Satkhira district headquarters. As the demand drafts trickled in, the modest house began to show signs of prosperity: a brick-built house, a colour TV and fans and even a electric light.

Earlier this year Shamsu returned, for what everyone in the family thought would be a short holiday. But he was a completely different man. Subdued and tense, and not stepping out of his house even to meet his old comrades. A few days later he broke the news to his family: he would not return to the Gulf because the UAE Government had refused him a visa extension.

45-year old Abdus Salam of Magura village of Satkhira district, now works as a vendor of cut piece, saree and lungi in the Uttara satellite town. He worked for five years in Oman as a labourer and with his earnings

he bought 2 bigha of paddy land near his village home. His was the same case as Shamsu's. He could not find a job and running a family meant dipping into his meager earnings. When that dried up, he sold his land and when that money was exhausted he left home for Dhaka to try his luck in the streets of the metropolis. His misery is shared by

people looking for jobs.

The alliance government in the past days remained totally oblivious of the gigantic issue of people's life and living and tinkered with some poverty alleviation measures that served little purpose. The country now, as a report released by Human Development Research Cell says, has about 40 million able-bodied unemployed labour

basic industries based on rural products, these large cohorts of people will be descending on the metropolis in an ever increasing number tearing the fibre of society.

Things have gone frighteningly wrong in North Bengal. The whole North Bengal comprising Rangpur, Dinajpur, Kushtia, and even the south western part of the country

compounded by food deficit and soaring prices of essentials and joblessness. To be sure, the huge influx of people from the countryside to the urban centres is adding to the problem, but ironically these new arrivals have become the latest victims of trap, deceit, system's contradictions and inefficiencies. The country now struggles under an

the alliance rule in consequence of their greed, inefficiency and management failure has stifled the growth and functioning of viable industrial plants in the country rather than facilitating them.

Coming back to the trend of young people, in the age group 20-40 trying to flee the countryside where they were born and had their early education with deep emotional attachment for the native environment, we see in a matter of months frustrations writ large on many of their faces because of their inability to find any means of living and supporting the family. These people sold off their last resources like land and jewellery and started their journey to the land of promise (!) -- Gulf countries and Malaysia. But the dream has turned into a nightmare for many.

Md. Asadullah Khan is a former teacher of physics and Controller of Examinations, BUET.

We regret

Recently an article was published in these columns, without mentioning names that talked about a particular family in Bangladesh each of whose members are successful professionals in their own right. The article was malicious, sweeping, full of innuendos but contained no facts. Such a piece should never have been published in our paper, which has tried to uphold a standard of taste and value that this article did not remotely represent.

Today we write for three purposes. First, to apologise to that renowned family whose reputation and dignity have been unfairly and undeservedly maligned. Second, to apologise to the readers who have been so badly served by such a tasteless piece of writing. Thirdly to raise a core ethical question as to whether a columnist has the right to malign individuals, families or groups without any proof. Just the fact that no names were mentioned cannot be a licence or a justification to write irresponsibly, especially when individual reputations were at stake. Journalism will lose its moral high ground if such personal attacks, however camouflaged, find their way into our publications.

This paper also failed in its responsibility. For the sake of ethical journalism and for greater public respect for our profession such pieces should never be published in the form that we did. The fact that we have chosen the occasion our anniversary to write this 'note' is only to emphasise that ethics of journalism was, is and will always remain our highest priority.

Mahfuz Anam
Editor-Publisher

BITTER TRUTH

Garments industry that remains as the vital sector for labour employment and export potentialities is heading towards a chaos because of the dissatisfied labour front. Mills and factories that still exist cannot be run properly because power outages are chronic. But if nurtured properly all these industries may be booming and viable concerns catering employment to a large cohort of engineers, technicians and labour forces. Bureaucratic machinery during the autocratic Ershad regime and later in consequence of management failure has stifled the growth and functioning of viable industrial plants in the country rather than facilitating them.

Abdul Hamid of Gazipur area 40 km from Dhaka city. He made Tk. 40,000 a month as a cook in a Bangladeshi restaurant in Medina, Saudi Arabia. But visa restrictions prevented him from returning to his work place in 2007. He now runs a roadside teashop in Gazipur court area. Shamsu, Salam and Hamid are metaphors for today's Bangladeshi migrant workers.

The vast mass of unfortunate, nay gullible job seekers trekking their path to the metropolis have fallen in the trap of some unscrupulous manpower agents and job swindlers, operating in collusion with some corrupt officials as revealed in a report published in The Daily Star on February 12 last quoting taskforce officials of NCC (National Coordination Committee to combat Corruption and Serious Crimes) designated to investigate irregularities in NHA (National Housing Authority) affairs. The taskforce report said that many people who were recruited to NHA had to pay Tk. 4 lakh to 4.5 lakh to a former minister including others of the immediate past elected government. Some of them did neither get the job nor got the money back. That's a tale of some greedy ministers (!) who swindled off unpretentious young

force. The report says that every year a 15-lakh labour force is adding up to the existing number and only about 5 lakh people can find whole time job during this period. Small wonder, most of these disgruntled youth, hard pressed by poverty and unemployment are being drawn to the ranks of the extremist elements that perhaps promise a tantalising future for them. Tragically, the past government through blatant betrayal of its ideals and promises has failed to reach out to the struggling populace in the whole countryside. The penalty for ignoring the masses, their interests and not providing them with jobs has resulted in chaos, spiraling crime-wave, and waves of economic refugees to the capital city with further chances of falling victims to many more unscrupulous and greedy hands.

It would be quite naive to think that the country can be turned into an oasis of peace, stability and prosperity while the teeming millions are steeped in squalor and poverty. The future of a country that was once so rich in promises seems to be fraught with dangers and hopelessness. Right at this moment if the rural areas with its vast populace are not strengthened with job opportunities that means creating infrastructural facilities for some

including Jessore, Khulna and Barisal suffered almost abysmal neglect. Seldom an industry was set up in these places nor there was any effort to boost up agricultural productivity there. Leaving aside the sad plight of the people of North Bengal, the situation in the industrial sector also looks grim. Now only 14 Jute Mills with about 45 thousand labour force have been struggling hard to retain their existence in place of 77 jute mills employing 2.5 lakh labour force in the earlier days.

However, in an environment clouded by dark scenario, the decision taken at the Council of Advisers' meeting in the Rangpur circuit house on February 3 last about improving the plight of the Rangpurians threatened by munga, river erosion and joblessness through setting up some basic industries, skilled labour training institutes, Benarasi silk industries and ensuring uninterrupted power supply for Boro crops in this season is certainly a welcome gesture. People expect that this move would be a break from an ad-hocism that has defined the collective mentality of our people accustomed to letting events shape their destiny.

The economy of the country is, undoubtedly, in a bad shape

apparently bloated bureaucracy, lavish public spending and a collection of monopolies and cartels barely familiar with the concept of competition. The jute industry which did much in the past to make the country bloom is now almost totally extinct. At the same time, when as a number of countries are dismantling their state-run economies, Bangladesh in many respects remains mired in a mixed pattern that has ceased to contribute anything worthwhile because of lack of initiative, incentive and entrepreneurial dynamism.

With jute mills, steel mills, textile mills, shipyard and BMTF already extinct or on the way to in the industrial sector, garments industry that remains as the vital sector for labour employment and export potentialities is heading towards a chaos because of the dissatisfied labour front. Mills and factories that still exist cannot be run properly because power outages are chronic, unpredictable and devastating. But if nurtured properly all these industries may be booming and viable concerns catering employment to a large cohort of engineers, technicians and labour forces. Bureaucratic machinery during the autocratic Ershad regime and later during

EMPOWERING THE POOR

Let their voice be heard

MD ABDUL KADER

THE structural factors which perpetuate poverty in Bangladesh include little access of the poor to economic and political resources. Poverty, as a multi-dimensional deprivation is the inability of people to meet economic, social and other standards of well-being. The multiple causes of poverty are either internal or structural or induced (man-induced and/or policy-induced) and certainly linked to low income, lack of education and poor health. But, there is a growing emphasis on considering poverty as a direct result of inadequate policies and ill-designed development programmes, such as those preventing sustainable access to social services or productive assets (e.g. land and financial resources) and thus hampering economic empowerment.

In order to be effective, policies have to combine sound technical analysis with the political support and legitimacy that emanates from the poor themselves. Unequal social, economic and political relationships between 'the haves' and 'the have-nots' expand poverty. Therefore, as being poor means being powerless, combating poverty necessarily means empowering the poor.

Economic growth is a necessary condition for poverty reduction. In order to stimulate economic growth, developing countries need to address issues such as creating stronger incentives for investment from domestic and foreign sources, fostering international economic links, providing broad access to assets and markets and reducing risk and vulnerability. An enabling environment for investment is essential to create jobs, increase capacity and raise productivity, laying the foundation for future economic growth.

Bangladesh is a large village consisting of 85000 small village units of 150 million people where only 25 million live in the urban areas. Most of the country's rural people are unskilled peasants and largely depend on the only resource of land, irrespective of their titles like agricultural, sharecropper and sharecropper-cum-owner and owner.

It has been observed that 95 percent people of the country are involved (directly or indirectly) with land, and the directly involved people are not less than 80 percent of the total population. Land is the base of our society, economy as well as culture. Land is a principal element of source of power and means of production. So the poverty reduction effort should start from land.

The concept of land is closely allied to that of land as assumption goods whereas land resources include all surface resources that man uses in his daily life. But the distribution of land ownership pattern both in urban and rural areas is extremely unequal and skewed. The unequal distribution of

resources and economic discrimination are also evolving poverty. Most of the lands are privately owned, privately developed and privately used. But there is a wide range of public sector involvement starting from land laws to land record, registration, and information storage. Government interventions together with private sector initiatives govern the land use pattern.

As far as land management is concerned, there are a large number of government ministries, directorates, city corporations, pourashavas, union parishad, thana parishad, zila parishad, zila authorities, etc involved in both rural and urban areas. As such no single agency is responsible for the execution of any project of land policy or administration. But the responsibilities of each of these agencies are not clearly spelt out. Therefore things are never done clearly to the convenience of the common man, and the poor are extreme sufferers.

Rights are universal, they apply equally to everyone, and they are indivisible. All rights are equally important; no one right or set of rights takes precedence over another. The intent of a rights-based approach to development is the achievement of all human rights for all. This includes civil and political rights and economic, social and cultural rights (e.g. rights to health, education, shelter, land, livelihood). Development through rights based approaches sets achievement of human rights as a central objective of development. Development programmes guided by human rights focus on respecting human dignity, achieving fairness in opportunities and equal treatment for all and strengthening the ability of local communities to access resources and services.

Rights-based approaches are concerned with individual and group entitlements to basic services and livelihoods which comprises people, their capabilities and their means of living, including food, income and assets; aim to strengthen the claims of the most vulnerable, such as women, children and minorities, to the social, political and economic resources that all should enjoy.

Poor people's voice on rights-based approaches is important if institutions are to become more responsive; it is related closely to the concepts of social and political capital, and the need to change structures and processes which create inequalities in livelihoods. Voice implies institutional capabilities to speak to and be heard by those in positions of power and control of policy, resources and services. A distinction can be made between voices 'of' and 'for' the poor. Voices 'for' the poor refer to organisations, groups or individuals who are not poor themselves, but speak on their behalf. This is often the premise behind advocacy, lobbying and policy formulation work. Enabling voice is the premise

behind social mobilisations.

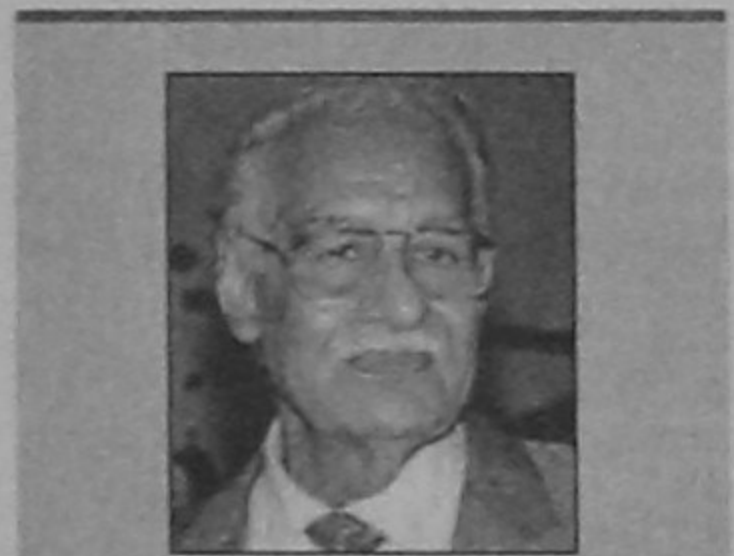
Such voices when heard and joined by policy makers themselves, make efforts to converge. For instance, the UK Department for International Development (DFID) has allocated \$65 millions for eight years (2007-2015) to establish and operate a Challenge Fund for the Economic Empowerment of the Poorest in Bangladesh, in partnership with the government of Bangladesh. The programmes aim to help at least one million people to lift themselves out of extreme poverty and achieve sustainable livelihoods by 2015. The Challenge Fund will finance NGOs to implement (a) large-scale projects designed to bring rapid benefits to large numbers of extremely poor people and (b) smaller projects designed to develop innovative approaches to reduce extreme poverty. All projects funded by the Challenge Fund aim to sustainably improve the lives and livelihoods of extreme poor people within the lifetime of the project.

Strategies for tackling global poverty have begun to emphasize the importance of better governance, and the need to empower poor people to become their own advocates. The basic tools of poverty reduction are access to jobs, credit, education, and healthcare, as well as infrastructure like electricity, sanitation, roads, and irrigation. But delivery of these tools is inevitably affected by the efficiency and transparency of government institutions, and particularly by their accountability and accessibility to the poor. The need for better access and participation is especially acute among the poor. When poor people are allowed to make their voices heard in political processes and local decision-making, and to insist on their rights in court, they are better able to protect their lands and claim a share of government resources. They are less likely to become victims of government decisions on parks, roads, dams, and forest concessions that often dispossess them of their lands without adequately compensating for.

Making this kind of empowerment happen may, at the beginning, require specifically targeting the poor in participatory exercises, such as rural needs assessments, that build the capacity to participate. It will also require improving legal aid and disseminating information on legal procedures so that the poor know their rights. Promoting decentralisation that devolves real control over local resources to rural residents can also be a powerful way to empower the poor. Attention to including women in decision-making circles will also be crucial for effective empowerment of poor communities since women make up a high percentage of the poor.

Md. Abdul Kader is Executive Director of Samata.

Uncertain Pakistan

KULDIP NAYYAR
writes from New Delhi

PAKISTAN is not a failed state. It is an uncertain state which can take any course: theocratic, despotic, semi-democratic or just chaotic. When I visited Karachi and Lahore a few days ago, I found hardly anyone who was optimistic about Pakistan's future. However, the country is not falling apart as is the general impression.

Different forces: religious, political and criminal are competing among themselves for more space. In the short run, they are heightening fears and in the long run they are threatening the country's integrity. Ultimately, the confrontation may well be between the political forces and the extremists. The nation's fate depends on the outcome.

The late Benazir Bhutto, who has become taller than her executed father Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, turned out to be prophetic. Her hand-written testament says: "She feared for Pakistan's future in the face of extremism and dictatorship." Indeed, the extremists are present all over the country, including Lahore, Karachi and Islamabad. But they have not affected the day-to-day life.

A bomb blast here or a stray killing there is a daily occurrence. But this is no longer a handiwork of the Afghan Taliban, who seem to be observ-

ing a ceasefire after Islamabad's undertaking not to disturb them from Waziristan and the parts of Swat Valley they occupy. The real culprits are the Pakistan Taliban, the creation of successive governments, which at one time dreamt of Afghanistan as their satellite to get the much-wanted "strategic depth." They still have the support of the ISI and the 35 percent of the army men who are reportedly jihadis.

repeated observation. This refers to the calculated efforts made first by the late General Zia-ul-Haq and then President General Pervez Musharraf to "Islamise" Pakistan and to encourage the extremists so as to stall the liberals and still their cry for democracy.

Unlike the extremists who have a strain of understanding running throughout their organisations, the politicians are

and lessening incomes, is a confused and disillusioned spectator. That is the reason why he does not come out on the streets. He does not see anything for himself in what is going on, except a change in masters. Religion may be opium, but it gives him the promise of "a better tomorrow" than today. He too wants Musharraf to step down, not because he is a dictator but because he has not

in the country, justified violence as natural fallout of people's anger over the assassination of their leader.

It was like what Rajiv Gandhi said when 3,000 Sikhs were killed in Delhi after Indira Gandhi's murder:

When a big tree falls, the earth is bound to shake. The vacuum that Benazir Bhutto's killing has created is hard to fill. The unity of thought can do so. The PPP can provide an alternative. A person like Aitzaz Hasan, who is under house arrest, can lead the party to implement its ethos of a left-of-the-centre society, with pluralism as its base. He is also acceptable to Nawaz Sharif, leader of the second largest party, Muslim League (N).

Aitzaz led the lawyers' agitation to have Chief Justice Iftikhar Muhammad Chaudhry reinstated. The challenge to Aitzaz is Zaradari who would like to be the prime minister. The post-election scenario is not a happy one. Rigging appears inevitable and may arouse the people's wrath. Political parties are not in a position to check it. Neither Nawaz Sharif, nor Zaradari has the base which can quell the disorder if it engulfs the country. I could see the gathering of a storm during my trip. The anger over Pakistan's deficiencies is at present focused on Musharraf. He may step down if and when General Ashfaq Parvez Kayani, Chief of the Army Staff, taps his shoulder and tells him to go.

This happened when General Yahya Khan asked General Ayub Khan, then at the helm of affairs, to quit. In that case, Pakistan will be back to square one and even the semblance of democracy may go. But this time, the army rule may not go unchallenged. The public has had enough of it.

Kuldip Nayyar is an eminent Indian columnist.

BETWEEN THE LINES

When a big tree falls, the earth is bound to shake. The vacuum that Benazir Bhutto's killing has created is hard to fill. The unity of thought can do so. The PPP can provide an alternative. A person like Aitzaz Hasan, who is under house arrest, can lead the party to implement its ethos of a left-of-the-centre society, with pluralism as its base. He is also acceptable to Nawaz Sharif, leader of the second largest party, Muslim League (N).

It has been reported that some of them did not fire in the midst of hostilities in Waziristan at the Taliban on the consideration that they were Muslims.

The kidnapping of the Pakistan envoy near Peshawar may not have been done by the Afghan Taliban. It may be a plot by the Pakistan Taliban to show their clout. My feeling is that the Pakistan Taliban, spreading from the NWFP to other parts of the country, is a real danger to the nation. They are the extremists, the product of madrassas where they have been brainwashed. They look longingly at the Hisbul and other extremist organizations, which were once a terror.

What is frightening is that they, with an appeal to religious sentiments, are gaining ground. There is none among the politicians to challenge them openly because of the fear of mullah or Maulvi who can denounce them at mosques. "We are reaping what we have sown," is the off-

a divided lot. They are fighting among themselves. True, all of them are fiercely agitating for the removal of Musharraf who stops at nothing to hurt or even eliminate them. But what they lack is the unity of purpose.

The mere word, democracy, cannot bring coherence. They seldom meet and do not ever discuss the strategy to retrieve the country from the military rule. Their egos and claims verge on the point of arrogance. They would rather accept Musharraf than anyone from among themselves to lead. They hold their durbar, a feudal relic which Pakistan proudly retains. At the durbar, they pontificate about democracy and equality before an array of psychopaths and retainers. Feudalism is still too deeply entrenched in the country to allow the idea of equality to germinate.

The common man, groaning under the burden of rising prices

improved his lot.

Again, the military has little to relieve him from his greatest predicament: how does he send his children to school and at the same time sustain his family? It is not that he does not get angry but he tends to be sectarian in expression because that is how he has been brought up in the atmosphere that has prevailed in Pakistan. There is a great divide. I was not surprised to find the people at Sind Club in Karachi singing the praises of Musharraf.

Yet, it was the common man who went wild in Sind in the wake of Benazir Bhutto's assassination. Railway stations were set on fire, costing the exchequer roughly \$20 billion. Shops were looted and even police stations were attacked. There was no law but only disorder for three days. Asif Ali Zaradari, Benazir Bhutto's husband and the interim president of the Pakistan People's Party (PPP), the largest