

# From Port-au-Prince to Dhaka

The population density in Dhaka is higher than that of the Haitian capital city. An earthquake -- God forbid -- in Dhaka with such high population and construction density, ill-planned road systems, and the near absence of contingency plans, will be catastrophic.

HABIBUL HAQUE KHONDKER

ANY natural calamity is only a "natural calamity" in part. To a large extent, natural calamity, whether a tsunami or earthquake or cyclone, is mediated by existing socio-economic factors in which quality of governance plays an important role.

According to the US Geological Survey, the loss of life from earthquakes is typically 10 times higher in developing countries than in the West, and the damage can be up to 100 times worse. This is due to the quality of infrastructures and preparedness, where disaster management capability plays a crucial role.

Haiti is the poorest country in the western hemisphere, with hardly any experience in dealing with earthquakes of this magnitude.

While lack of disaster preparedness is an immediate problem and, to be fair, no administration is adequately prepared for a disaster of such a magnitude, Haiti has not only been a poor country, well known for bloody dictatorships and voodoo and also for years of poor governance marred by political instability.

On many instances of poor governance, enforcement of housing codes is a glaring one. One observer noted after the quake: "Most buildings are like

houses of cards, they can stand up to the force of gravity, but if you have a sideways movement, they all come tumbling down." The poor building standards contributed directly towards magnifying the death and destruction caused by the earthquake.

A London-based architect, John McAslan, who has been working on a project linked to the Clinton Global Initiative in the country said: "There aren't any building codes as we would recognise them." According to him, most buildings are made of masonry -- bricks or construction blocks -- which tend to perform badly in an earthquake.

Another expert, Peter Haas, head of the Appropriate Infrastructure Development Group, a US-based non-profit group that has been working in Haiti since 2006, noted that there were significant problems with the quality of building materials used.

"People are skimming on cement to try to cut costs, putting a lot of water in, building too thin, and you end up with a structure that's innately weaker," said Mr. Haas, who was on his way to Haiti to help assess the safety of damaged buildings. "Concrete blocks are being made in the people's backyard and dried out in the sun," he said. Mr. Haas said there were also "serious problems" with the enforcement of building codes in Haiti.

He said that the government did not function at all in several parts of the country, and many communities lacked basic services such as electricity, sanitation services or access to clean water.

Even before the quake, Haiti's building safety record was poor. Almost 100 people -- mostly children -- died when two schools collapsed within days of each other in November 2008. At the time, Haitian authorities blamed poor construction for the accidents.

The Sichuan earthquake in China that took a toll of over 68,000 people in May 2008 included 5,335 school students who were killed because of shoddy building construction. Initially, the Chinese government was reluctant to admit this charge, but later, upon investigation, not only accepted the allegations but also punished the people responsible.

Bangladesh (per capita income of 1,440 in 2008), like Haiti (per capita income 1,180 in 2008), is a poor country with inadequate disaster management infrastructure. Sure, in recent handlings of floods, and urban fires Bangladesh has set examples of dedicated services with minimum resources. Although these experiences are invaluable, handling an earthquake is a different story. And handling a mega-disaster is a completely different challenge.

Given the poor enforcement of housing codes and the high level of corruption in the various departments concerned with approving plans and enforcing building codes, Bangladesh risks a huge catastrophe. Rather than being a realist, one must be concerned with careful disaster planning. A major earthquake scenario must be prepared and contingency plans must be drawn.



A disaster waiting to happen.

Disaster planning is always tricky. It is almost impossible to plan for everything in advance. For example, the prison house in the middle of Port-au-Prince, which was already overcrowded (over 1,200 inmates lived in a prison designed for 450) collapsed, contributing to the worsening law and order situation.

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systems, and the near absence of contingency plans, will be catastrophic.

Haiti's crisis came in the wake of food riots, growing political instability and a series of hurricanes that killed hundreds and battered the economy. Bangladesh is not unfamiliar to such scenarios. The present political stability and relative economy buoyancy may be deceptive.

In view of the minor tremors felt recently in Dhaka and elsewhere in Bangladesh, one cannot be completely complacent. Geologists do not rule out

the possibility of a major shake in Bangladesh. Unfortunately, earthquakes do not give any early warnings. There are no storm clouds or depression to warn the people.

Under such conditions, contingency planning is of utmost importance. A national disaster preparedness plan must be drawn involving all the stakeholders. And the time is now.

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# The historic blunder

As a communist prime minister of democratic India just half a decade after the implosion of the Soviet Union, Basu would have influenced not just his own country, but the world. He would have conducted a foreign policy that understood independence without being a silly, ranting, anti-American caricature.



M. J. AKBAR

WHY did Jayoti Basu describe the decision to deny him the prime minister's office in 1997 as Indian Marxism's "historic blunder"? He was not in love with status. He had more power in Bengal than most prime ministers have in India. He was content in Kolkata and capable of mounting an offensive from the Red Fort that could shake the parameters of the Red Fort. V. P. Singh could never have become prime minister without his muscle. The decision in "historic blunder" is "historic," not "blunder." Basu realised that his party, CPI(M), had taken a wrong turn at a swivel moment in history.

A surface view might suggest that the most significant political change since 1997 has been the decline and fall of the Left, a process disguised by accidents of electoral mathematics until the slide became an avalanche three years ago. We are so hypnotised by party politics that we are unable to recognise the politics of people. The more startling fact is that the last decade has seen unprecedented growth of the Left, now a substantive presence in about 200 districts rather than in the 50-odd that used to deliver its MPs.

democracy. A look at their spread is to define what the CPI(M) could have been if it had not been blinded in Bengal and cock-eyed in Kerala. Basu saw what his comrades did not. The Left needed a quantum leap from regional satrapies by offering leadership to the underprivileged and marginalised through the colossal power of a prime minister.

A prime minister's language, perhaps even more than his policies, sets the agenda of the nation. Basu had been weaned in the Nehru era and matured during the Indira Gandhi years. He was flexible enough to mix the high idealism of Nehru with the pragmatic diction of Indira Gandhi and the edge of Communist activism to establish a national constituency that the Left forsook in the 50s. Nor could Congress have withdrawn support to him on a flimsy excuse, as it did with Inder Gujral, without paying a heavy price in the ensuing general election. Basu had street and state credibility.

The CPI(M) was impelled into the "historic blunder" because of its hypocritical approach towards Delhi. It has always sought influence without responsibility. Its very junior brother, CPI, had no qualms about joining Deve Gowda's coalition government. The CPI(M) forgets that heavy flirting does not beget babies; nor, logically, can

atheists pray for immaculate conception.

An analogy from the history of Marxism is irresistible: the Basu blunder was akin to Lenin telling Kerensky he had no time for the Kremlin, but pointing out that he be consulted each time Kerensky wanted to name a provisional governor. It is, perhaps, all too appropriate that the CPI(M) is Marxist and the CPI(M-L) is Marxist-Leninist.

The CPI(M) has never fully understood its own potential. When, after the split from the CPI in 1964 it rejected the Maoist-extremists of Naxalbari, and decided to work within the framework of nationalism, democracy and a bourgeoisie-capitalist economy, it became the first instance of what should be called the New Left.

The Old Left was already mired in stifling party dictatorships, and unable to recognise the temper of a world shifting towards the accountability of individual choice. As an increasingly stable democracy, but with enormous social and economic disparities, India provided the perfect environment for the creation of a New Left template.

The CPI(M) was meant to use the system to whittle away its imbalances and shape a society that would never have been perfect but would certainly have been more egalitarian. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the CPI(M) could have provided an example, if not leadership, to the Left in Africa, Latin America and Asia, filling a huge vacuum that is still empty.

The fall of the Left does not mean that the world does not need a leftist voice or agenda; perhaps it has rarely needed one more urgently. As a communist prime minister of democratic India just half a decade after the implosion of the Soviet Union, Basu would have influenced not just his own country, but the world. He would have conducted a foreign policy that understood independence without being a silly, ranting, anti-American caricature.

There are substantive reasons why the epic struggle between Right and Left seems to have tipped in favour of the former. The Right has displayed the ability to compromise, in theory and practice, on the rim in order to protect the core. The Left has surrendered to demands of its core constituencies, like trade unions, even when they had become unsustainable and counter-productive.

Basu was the Cromwell that the modern Left abandoned in a fog of uncertainty.

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# Sweet as sugar

We need to sustain the cultivation and production of sugarcane, which is a food-cum-cash crop and the only source of white sugar. As far as the long-term is concerned, it is imperative that we explore the potential for economic development of the sugar and gur sector.

G. C. PAUL

SUGARCANE is the primary source of sugar, gur and juice production in Bangladesh. Even though date palm and palmyra palm meet a little portion of our requirement of gur and syrup, sugarcane ranks first in satisfying our demand for sugar. Sugarcane is the only source of white sugar in Bangladesh.

According to FAO recommendation, 13 kg per capita sugar is required in a person's diet, which means that about 1.82 million tons are needed for 140 million people in Bangladesh. Against that national requirement we are producing only about 0.15 and 0.55 million tons of sugar and gur, respectively. To narrow down the deficit of sugar and gur, both vertical and horizontal expansion of sugarcane production is needed.

At present, horizontal expansion of sugarcane cultivation is very difficult, competing with other short duration high value crops. However, there is great scope for vertical expansion through increasing yield of sugarcane and some other suitable short duration multiple intercrops with modern varieties and cultivation technologies.

Again, sugarcane is commonly kept as a ratoon crop, which gives poor yield but contains high sucrose. Thus, adopting methodical multi-ratooning of sugarcane with intercrops, high yield of sugarcane and other companion crops can be achieved from the same land.

Sugarcane belongs physiologically to C-4 crops, which can face and survive abnormal situations. It has higher potential for utilising atmospheric carbon, giving higher biomass yield, and mitigates higher carbon concentration due to green house effect.

Nowadays, sugar surplus countries are switching to bio-fuel production, and it will be difficult to buy sugar from outside due to shortfall in the international market. Hence, the government should patronise sugarcane production with a definite long-term vision and mission to meet our own demand for sugar and gur.

We need to sustain the cultivation and production of sugarcane, which is a food-cum-cash crop and the only source of white sugar. As far as the long-term is concerned, it is imperative that we explore the potential for economic development of the sugar

and gur sector. Sugar and gur should be emphasised in the context of food supply and nutrition.

The demand for sugar and gur will increase proportionally to our population growth, say by 30 percent by 2030 - from 1.80 million tons to 2.34 million tons annually. Sugar and gur production should be utilised to its maximum potential through adopting modern varieties and production technologies of sugarcane developed by BSRI. There is also evidence that mill recovery rates, currently less than 8 percent, can be increased to 9 percent by taking necessary steps.

For gur production, an improved power crusher will ensure juice extraction rate of 65 percent, compared to 45 to 55 percent by the traditional country crusher. It is a matter of defining and implementing policies that will facilitate the production of sugar and gur from about 400,000 acres of land under mills and non-mill zones by 2030.

White sugar has an established place in the diet of mostly of those living in urban areas, while gur has an estab-

lished place in the diet of those living in rural areas. Both are, of course, mainly produced from sugarcane.

Sugarcane technology and infrastructure: The technological infrastructure of sugarcane should be considered in terms of both functions and institutional arrangements. At present, technological infrastructure for sugarcane exists only for mill-zones provided by BSFIC.

Ownership and control of sugar mills: Sugarcane is cultivated by the farmers, and the mills basically process the cane supplied by them. The number of sugar mills and their crushing capacity should be increased. There may be three different types of ownership and control of sugar mills: nationalised industry, cooperative ownership, and private ownership.

Development of the gur sector: The main problem of the gur sector is lack of governmental intervention. There has been very little extension, and virtually no distribution of improved seeds or cane-specific credit. However, the market for gur appears to be relatively efficient, responding to supply changes and providing profit to the gur makers. A national gur technology unit should be established by the government.

Protecting the domestic market: An



An increase in sugar production is imperative.

appropriate policy for threshold price of imported sugar is needed, and it should be protected with a variable tariff. The threshold price has to be fixed in the light of: (a) implied maximum price of sugar for consumers and (b) the operating costs of BSFIC, including the price paid for the cane.

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