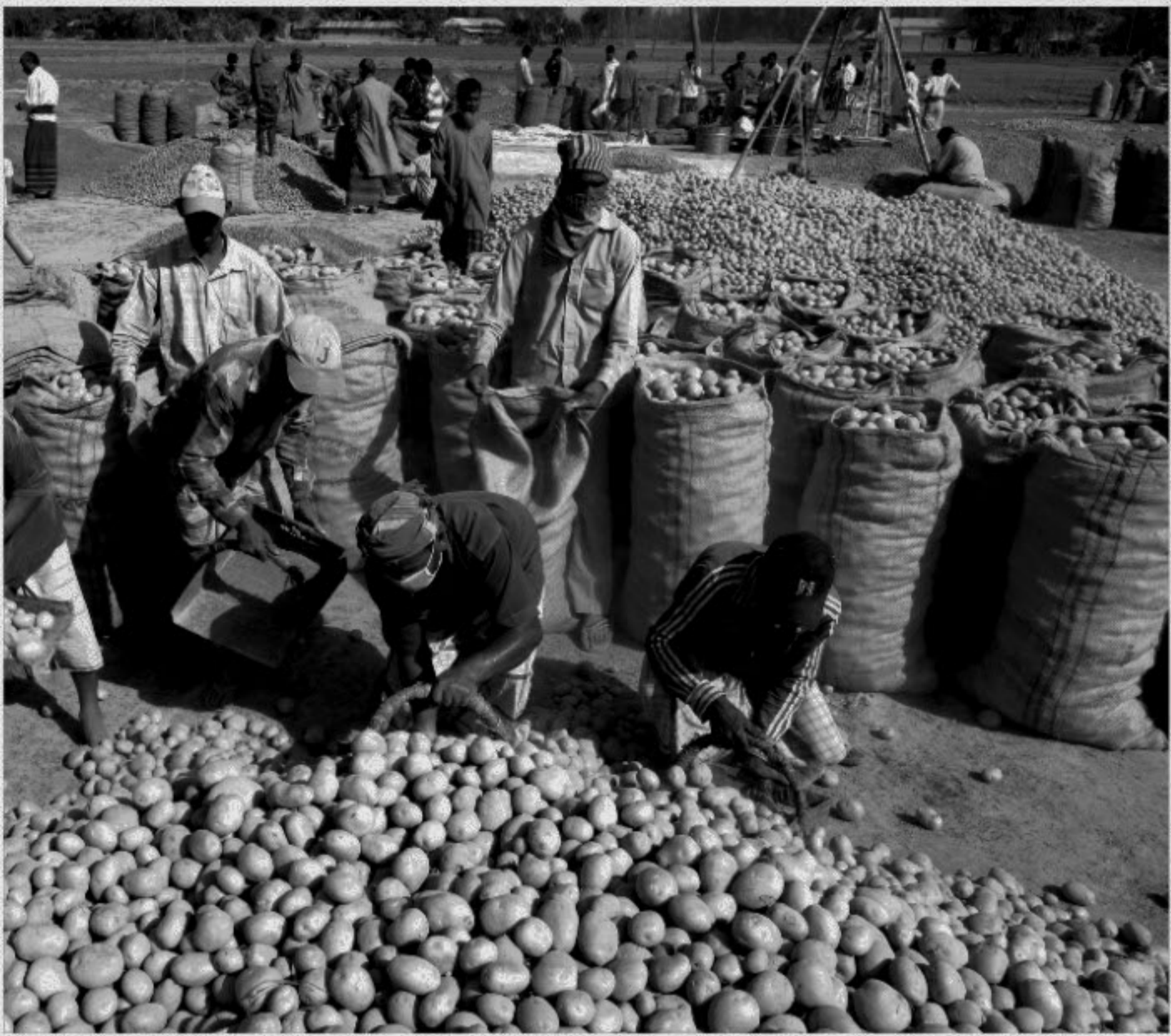


Food security versus food habit

Taking food items other than rice is not new in Bangladesh. The rural people of Bangladesh used to produce varieties of food items in the past. In my boyhood, I myself and the villagers used to take sweet potatoes, varieties of pulses and seasonal fruits as breakfast during lean season.



NAZRUL ISLAM

THE Bengali proverb *machhe bhate bangalee* (Bangalee lives on fish and rice) no more exists in its totality. Rice is there but fish has become rare on the plates of the commoners. Not only fish but sometimes vegetables and pulses also become scarce. To feed 15 crore people in a land of 1.43 lakh square kilometres area is really a challenging matter. During the last four decades all fallow lands and small and medium forests have been brought under cultivation of cereals. Most of the country's rivers and water bodies have also been turned into arable land, which has an adverse impact on our ecology and environment.

To attain food security, i.e. self-sufficiency in carbohydrate production, pertinent issues like availability of protein and vitamins, environment and ecology, sustainability etc., are blatantly ignored.

With the increase of population we have to increase food production, but we have to recognise that rice or wheat is not the lone food item on which we need to rely. No country other than Bangladesh depends so heavily on rice, which is one of the lowest-yielding food items on the planet.

The food habit situation is so bad that if you ask a person to take more potatoes than rice, he will just scold you. Hence, food security has become synonymous with rice security.

Consequently, the government's attention has been shifted to production of rice to build rice security. Even at cultivators' level, they

first want to store enough rice to meet the demand until the next harvesting season.

This dependency on rice is the main obstacle to attaining food security in Bangladesh. We may cope with the demand for rice up to a certain level with our scarce limited land resources but, at some point, we will not be able to.

For the people of this country, especially the rural people, rice is the only food. But in reality, rice is not the lone staple food for a lot of people in the world. There are hundreds of plants and plant products that are used as food.

An average Bangalee takes 600 grams of rice a day against 300 grams by a Chinese and 350 grams by an Indian. That does not mean that the stomachs of the Chinese or Indian people are smaller than ours. In fact, they take potatoes, sweet potatoes, vegetables and fruit.

The country's cultivable land at present can produce at most 3 crore metric tons of food grains. Rice, especially the hybrid and high-yielding variety, is the most energy-consuming crop, and needs huge non-renewable fossil fuel for its production. In producing 3 crore metric tons of rice, we need about 3 million metric tons of urea fertiliser, 1,500 megawatt electricity a day and several lakh metric tons of diesel to run irrigation pumps, along with hazardous ingredients like pesticides.

About 40 percent of our produced gas goes to the fertiliser factories for production of urea. Besides, more than 400 MMCF gas is needed per day to produce 1,500 megawatt of electricity. The use of our precious and limited natural gas resource to produce rice is not only unsustainable but will also put the food security endeavour at stake.

If we reduce dependency on rice by 50 percent with alternative food items and spend one-third of the energy needed in production of rice, we can produce 4 times more potatoes and vegetables. An acre of land can produce 2,500 kgs of rice but, using only one-third of the energy, the same area can produce 11,100 kgs of potatoes.

Moreover, rice is poor in terms of food value. For a human body, proteins, vitamins and minerals are the most essential ingredients. In Bangladesh people mostly suffer from protein and vitamin deficiencies. Actually, Bangladesh does not suffer from food deficiency, but from protein scarcity. An acre of rice can produce up to 180 kgs of protein against 300 kgs produced by potato. The production cost of a kg of rice is Tk.16 while it is only Tk.5 for potato.

There are other serious hazards linked to rice production. The unabated use of underground water for irrigation will soon dry up the country's sources of potable water. Underground water is almost the lone source of pure drinking water. Besides, use of fertilisers and insecticides is causing harm to human beings, cattle and the soil. Rice cultivation is also a major source of hazardous methane emissions.

So, there is no alternative to changing our food habit to attain food security. That means we must take items other than rice.

During a recent visit to China, I had an excellent experience at a restaurant. According to our habit, we ordered fish, chicken and rice. But they served green tea, varieties of vegetables, chicken, fish, scrambled eggs and finally a small quantity of rice in a cup. At home, I generally take more than double the amount of rice they served, but I could eat only half of the quantity as my stomach had already been filled up with other items.

Taking food items other than rice is not new in Bangladesh. The rural people of Bangladesh used to produce varieties of food items in the past. In my boyhood, I myself and the villagers used to take sweet potatoes, varieties of pulses and seasonal fruits as breakfast during lean season.

But gone are those days. Today's children do not know what a sweet potato is. They can't think of taking boiled pulses as breakfast.

Of course, there have been some changes in food habit in urban areas. Health-cautious people take less rice and more vegetables. But the trend should be spread to the majority of the people -- the rural ones. The age-old habit cannot be changed overnight. But programs should be undertaken on a long-term basis to explain the people that taking rice is not mandatory for leading a healthy life. There are other food items that are delicious, rich in food value, cheap and easily available.

I think that with sustained availability the message can be reached to the common people and they will change their food habit, like the many other changes they adopted in the past.

Growing of more rice will not meet our requirement, and it is an unsustainable endeavour that will ultimately fail. So, urgent steps are needed to diminish the dependency on rice. Otherwise, attaining food security will remain a far cry in the long run.

NaZRul Islam is an environmentalist.

A challenging perspective

Evidence shows that HIV/Aids and poverty move in a vicious cycle of cause and effect and, therefore, the global efforts for containing the epidemic focus on poverty as a significant determinant for its spread. Population density mixed with poverty is the recipe for any communicable disease to spread.

HABIBA TASNEEM CHOWDHURY

FOR the first time in more than 35 years since Aids was identified the epidemic seems to have been arrested, according to the 2009 epidemic data. One of the major contributing factors for the reduction is the United Nations Declaration of Commitment on HIV/Aids signed in 2001.

However, the diminishing rate of infection is just the tip of the iceberg and has not fully revealed the socio-economic consequences of HIV/Aids epidemic disrupting the productive flow of life. It is now established that HIV/Aids is not merely a health concern because its expansion encompasses all the dimensions unique to the individual it infects, the family it affects and the community that it impacts -- as such each epidemic is different.

Therefore, the new paradigm for addressing HIV/Aids is to "know your epidemic." Declining trend of infection in one region cannot fully provide the global scenario as there are now an estimated 40 million HIV/Aids cases in the world. In 2008 alone 2.7 million new infections occurred and 2 million people died of Aids related illness.

Fortunately, for Bangladesh, a "high risk and low prevalence country," the national HIV/Aids program is prepared to contain it. It has progressed extensively, covering the various aspects of prevention, care and support and treatment. But Bangladesh, besieged by a myriad of socio-economic concerns, requires pre-emptive measures that must focus on evolving issues for immediate redress.

The correlation between climate change and HIV/Aids may be an atypical notion, but the United Nations Millennium Development Goal integrating HIV/Aids as a development agenda suggests that global organisations are taking cognisance of the environment of risk determined by poverty and climate change impact.

The most pervasive result of climate change and environment degradation is population displacement. Research findings show that the growth of environmental displacement in Bangladesh is likely to be close

to about half of total population in 2020.

Bangladesh is exposed to severe natural disasters; floods and droughts are regular phenomena that force people to migrate from rural to urban settings. They end up as climate refugees in the streets and proliferating urban slums. This influx has resulted in rapid and unplanned urbanisation in Bangladesh. According to International Organisation for Migration, Bangladesh, urban population may reach about 68 million, or 37 percent of the total population, by 2015.

A substantive proportion of this segment becomes chronically mobile in search of work and subsistence. This landless and homeless mass merges with the existing ultra-poor, resulting in population increase in urban slums and burgeoning poverty.

Evidence shows that HIV/Aids and poverty move in a vicious cycle of cause and effect and, therefore, the global efforts for containing the epidemic focus on poverty as a significant determinant for its spread. Population density mixed with poverty is the recipe for any communicable disease to spread.

HIV/Aids is described as more of an urban phenomenon, hence the situation is conducive for an epidemic to set in. For Bangladesh this is very alarming.

The revised National HIV/Aids strategy puts emphasis on the external migrant labour work force as a vulnerable segment and identifies this group as being the most at risk. But the majority of the people internally displaced due to climate change related factors remain outside the social security and HIV/Aids prevention program.

NGOs, civil society and grassroots organisations are making efforts to reach the climate refugees in the urban streets and slums but, without a national policy and coordination of the government machinery, these endeavours remain sporadic and isolated.

The national HIV/Aids program is a well coordinated mechanism engaging the stakeholders and developing innovative approaches for visible impact. For the first time, HIV/Aids prevention awareness has broken the denial and silence barrier in the country through mass media.



Poverty accelerates HIV/Aids.

This progress runs the risk of failure if the program does not acknowledge the multiplying challenges. The standard way of preventing and containing communicable disease is "early warning rapid response system," which has to reach all, with focus on the high-risk segment. The national program effectively launched this design.

Now the emphasis should be on strengthening the integrated approach to initiate the discourse on climate and HIV/Aids from the perspective of "climigration," and capture the most vulnerable, under-served and increasing number of people.

In 2007, Bangladesh launched a National Action plan aimed at reducing the disease burden from current and projected risks due to climate change by empowering and equipping health system institutions in the country.

Hence, there is no reason to delay the inclusion of climate change and environment degradation related displaced population. The 7th Round of National Serological Surveillance shows that there is a concentrated epidemic amongst the injecting drug users and in one locality within Dhaka 10.5 percent of injecting drug users where found to be HIV positive.

Increasing poverty due to the impact of global economic recession, increase in climate related migration and accelerated mobility of population may change the course of the still low prevalence status and silently develop it into a generalised epidemic. Time is of the essence in addressing HIV/Aids "right now, right here and in the right way."

Health research per se and HIV/Aids surveillance, specially at the national level, needs to widen their scope to find out the implications of climate change for future impacts on health and related issues, and develop a tiered health service system strengthening process that is dynamic, flexible, manageable and sustainable to address the evolving needs.

Most importantly the government needs to focus on resettlement strategies and their implementation, mobilising the available resources and integrating them systematically into multi-sector operations.

There has to be a concerted political will and effort to reach beyond the traditional frameworks of treating the root causes of HIV/Aids.

Habiba Tasneem Chowdhury is Chief Coordinator, Institute of Hazrat Mohammad (SAW). Email: tasneem@director.ihmsaw.org

The India-China affair

CAI XIAO

ON the 60th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic ties between India and China, President Hu Jintao said the nation regards its relationship with India as one of its most important bilateral ties. China was ready to deepen mutual trust and expand cooperation with India, Hu added.

According to a notice on the foreign ministry's website, Hu and his Indian counterpart Pratibha Patil exchanged congratulatory messages on the occasion.

Patil in her message said that India's ever-growing relationship with China was of global and strategic significance. The close cooperation between the two nations will be conducive to peace and stability in the world at large.

Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao said the world has enough room for China and India to develop together. The neighbours should learn from and support each other to achieve win-win results and common development.

Despite cooperation in many fields, including fighting climate change, bilateral ties between the two have often been described as thorny, given the disputes on border issues and regional cooperation. Yet, experts pointed out that the two giants should further deepen political trust to achieve win-win results and for mutual development. Both nations have recently tried to tone down the long-standing disputes and struck a more positive tone on fields of cooperation.

India's National Security Adviser Shiv Shankar Menon said on Thursday that India and China have found a way to manage their differences over "the most complicated and difficult" boundary dispute and have decided not to allow it to stand in the way of expanding ties in other areas. "The two countries have found a modus vivendi to deal with the boundary issue and to manage their different approaches to issues where their peripheries overlap," he was quoted by the Times of India.

On their part, Chinese experts said the two countries needed to deepen political trust in order to cooperate better.

"Bilateral relations between China and India have steadily developed since the establishment of diplomatic relations 60 years ago. However, both countries' political trust should still be developed, or else their diplomatic relations would be threatened," Sun Shihai, a South Asia studies expert at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, said.

Fu Xiaoqiang, a scholar of South Asia studies at the China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations, said, "The two countries should trust each other for their civilians' welfare and safety. Although they have some divergences, they cannot be the obstacles for the development of Sino-Indian relations."

©China Daily. All rights reserved. Reprinted by arrangement with Asia News Network.

Climate change on the Asean high way

ERWIDA MAULIA

PRESIDENT Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono is leaving for Hanoi on Wednesday to attend the 16th Asean Summit, and is expected to sign new Asean agreements on sustainable development and climate change.

Presidential spokesman Dino Patti Djalal said in Jakarta on Tuesday that the president will visit Hanoi for four days, returning to Jakarta on Saturday.

But Myanmar, due to holding its first election in two decades, could again test Asean's consensus when the group that includes a monarchy, a military dictatorship, communist states and democracies turns to discuss political developments during the April 8-9 summit.

On Monday, the Indonesian Foreign Ministry said the biggest economy in the group would highlight progress on Myanmar's reforms.

Dino added the president would sign two Summit documents: The Asean Statement on Economic Recovery and Sustainable Development and the Asean Statement on Joint Responses to Climate Change.

"The joint response to climate change relates to our stance on the results of the 15th COP [Conference of Parties] meeting in Copenhagen, ahead of the next COP meeting in Mexico," he said.

"As you all know, Indonesia expects a final, binding global treaty by the end of this year, and Asean needs to play an active role to ensure the achievement of a global consensus on climate change."

Quoting a draft statement, Reuters reported Tuesday that the Southeast Asian leaders would consider ways to phase out economic stimulus policies without jeopardising recovery in the fast-growing region at the Hanoi summit.

Another draft, the "Asean Surveillance Report," says that Asean economies are expected to grow by between 4.9 and 5.6 percent in 2010, as against 1.9 percent last year. An earlier draft estimated 2010 growth at 4.5 percent.

Dino added Yudhoyono will send Vice President Boediono to represent him in the Nuclear Security Summit, hosted by US President Barack Obama in Washington DC, on April 12-13. Boediono was also expected to represent the president in a roundtable discussion on Millennium Development Goals numbers four and five on health to be hosted by UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon in New York on April 14.

©The Jakarta Post. All rights reserved. Reprinted by arrangement with Asia News Network.