

Making sense of poverty

Bangladesh can do better to be free of it

Poverty remains a big stumbling block to progress in Bangladesh and by extension the South Asian region. That fact has been confirmed once more by the UNDP's Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI) prepared to assess the factors related to poor living conditions in South Asia. There is, surely, good reason for Bangladeshis to feel happy about the findings, which place them slightly before neighbouring India in the index. Of the 104 countries assessed in the MPI, Bangladesh has been ranked 73, with India close at 74. Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka have been placed at 82, 70 and 32 respectively. Of course, these figures do not convey much clarity by themselves, which is why it is important that we take a look at the breakdown that allows such mathematics to be arrived at.

The MPI assesses the performance of nations on a benchmark of ten indicators which again are grouped under three dimensions, namely, health, education and standard of living. Health comprises child mortality and nutrition, while education brings together years of schooling and child enrolment. Within the standard of living canvas come electricity, drinking water, sanitation, flooring, cooking fuel and assets. Now, the MPI report notes that as much as 57.8 per cent of Bangladesh's population stand deprived of at least 30 per cent of these indicators. On average, they are deprived of 50.4 per cent of the indicators. Which all goes to show that while we may feel happy about the progress we are apparently making, we certainly cannot afford to be complacent about it. The reality is that in Bangladesh, as also in India and Nepal, poor living standards are yet the biggest factors in poverty. And close on their heels come health and education. The good news here is that for all its backwardness, Bangladesh seems to be doing better in education than some other countries in South Asia. It is ahead of India, Pakistan and Nepal in this area, though Sri Lanka remains by far the leading performer in the field. Even so, progress in education does give us reason to think Bangladesh can do better in the times ahead. And it can do that because it also happens to be doing better than India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka in health.

The good thing about reports like the MPI, particularly when they indicate progress made by nations in certain critical areas, is that they boost a society's confidence in its ability to achieve its goals. In the present instance, Bangladesh's performance is of course a matter of happiness. But the MPI, it must be noted, does not take into account such vital matters as cost of basic needs (CBN). It is in this area that a big majority of Bangladesh's people remain hamstrung by a lack of purchasing power. Which poses the interesting question: how does one define poverty and how does one measure its expansion or decline? In the present context, all the average indicators regarding poverty may be fine. But there remains too the contradiction of an increasing rich-poor gap in Bangladesh, which clearly militates against the creation of an egalitarian society.

Be that as it may, the MPI report in question is a fairly reasonable report card for us. It is also an invitation to do better.

Eviction in vain

Why is it so?

The picture in the front page of last Sunday's The Daily Star, with the above mentioned caption, speaks a thousands words about various government plans and actions to effect those, going ultimately haywire. The photograph is fairly representative of the general picture insofar as it relates to illegal construction and occupation of public land.

It will not escape the observer's notice that almost all the lands that are illegally occupied are costly prime lands, and one of the reasons why it is so is that the culprits are willing to go to the end of the world to hold on to it. We are shocked to see in the picture newly built structures on the western end of the Gulshan-Banani Lake after filling up a part of that lake. And attempts by the relevant authorities of the government have come to naught.

The natural question is why is it that the eviction drive has not been successful? It need hardly be repeated that the drive had started with a big bang. The whole effort had the support of the highest judiciary, had the full backing of the administration, and the PM had also given her full support to the effort to free public space of illegal occupation. Apart from these, the matter had the support of the environmental activists and the civil society as a whole. We are surprised at the zero output of the agencies concerned to free the lands of illegal occupation.

When a piece of public property is illegally occupied and houses are built on it, in spite of the government avowed policy to prevent that, the only conclusion that one can draw is that there is something seriously wrong somewhere. And when that piece of real estate happens to be a vital piece of land, tampering with which has severe impact on the ecology, the matter assumes a severe proportion.

No action plan can rest on a one-off act. It should be stressed that merely evicting is not enough, and neither is it an end by itself. It must be seen through by a follow up action that involves, among other things, prosecuting the illegal occupants and their sponsors. There must be disincentive for those that indulge in such acts, irrespective of their political connection. And this is perhaps one of the several reasons why the eviction plan has failed. The other being that the effort is not sustained, and of course there is always the money nexus between those that are to ensure implementation of the plan and the offenders.

We feel that the eviction drive must be unrelenting and total and, if needed, the government should create a designated high powered authority that will oversee and ensure the full implementation of the drive.



Contaminated food does not belong on our plates.

Traders in disease and death

The practice of using toxic tannery waste as poultry feed or fish meal and the business thriving on it should be considered an illicit trade, because it constitutes a grave threat to public health. The government should immediately look into the matter to assess the threat the reported trade poses and take necessary action against it.

SYED FATAHUL ALIM

THE food we eat everyday are exposed to contaminations of the worst kind. Nowadays, toxic substances are being used to preserve fruit, fish, milk and vegetables with abandon. These are instances of direct use of toxic substances in foodstuff. There are other cases in which substances hazardous to human health are not directly applied to foodstuffs, but put indirectly in the food chain.

A report carried by the Saturday issue of this paper brought to the fore such a case in which a toxic substance that has the potential to cause cancer, more particularly, to affect vital organs of the body such as the kidney and liver, is being released into our food chain by a section of unscrupulous traders. The substance is chromium, used in the chemical to tan animal hides. The report says that dishonest traders who deal with poultry and fish feed collect tannery waste mostly from the Hazaribagh area in the city where the tanneries are concentrated. They then boil and dry the chromium-rich tannery waste and sell it to the poultry feed and fish meal traders, who mix it with other ingredients and market it.

As a result, the carcinogenic component of the poultry feed enters the food chain through poultry and fish meat as well as eggs. Laboratory tests conducted in 2007 at Dhaka University and the Bangladesh Council for Scientific and Industrial Research (BCSIR) on samples of poultry products gathered from eight different districts showed that those contained chromium above acceptable limits.

This is yet another dangerous element added to the long list of poisons that we have already been consuming along with our foods. It could be further learnt that the practice of using poisonous tannery wastes in the poultry feed and fishmeal is going on for about 10 years.

Seeing that the number of patients suffering from various kidney and liver-related diseases is on the rise, the connection between the use of toxic substances in foods and increased incidence of these diseases cannot be dismissed out of hand. Furthermore, in the report, a senior doctor and head of the epidemiology department of the National Institute of Cancer Research and Hospital (NICRH) also echoed the view that the number of cancer patients is rising every year. However, the figures obtained

from hospital records on the admission of cancer patients do not imply that the higher incidence of cancer is directly linked to the consumption of poultry meat, egg and fish. In fact, the connection is statistical in nature. However, it cannot be denied that the adulterated and poisoned foodstuff we are consuming in greater amounts these days are leaving their damaging impacts on our vital organs.

Owners of some larger poultry farms, however, have assured the public that their poultry meat is safe because they do not allow any kind of contaminated feed in their farms. But how would the consumer public know for sure that the grocery shop situated on the lane adjacent to their living quarters or the hawkker knocking at the door of their apartment are selling poultry meat, fish or eggs free from the tannery product containing carcinogenic substance? Worse still, what other options are open before the helpless consumers than to shrug all misgivings aside with an air of resignation and buy whatever the hawkker or grocer offers?

People have virtually resigned to their fate and consume fruits, vegetables, fishes, poultry meat, egg, you name it, all containing a whole range of poisons from formalin, carbide to chromium and so on. These are but all about the toxic ingredients already reported in the media. But there may be other no less dangerous elements, which a section of dishonest traders might be forcing us to take unknowingly.

The government from time to time mounts anti-adulteration campaigns through mobile courts, which punish traders caught in the act of selling or stocking spurious and adulterated foodstuff or cheating customers in different ways.

Unfortunately, like the recalcitrant river grabbers, the fraudulent section of the traders, too, resume their dishonest practice as soon as the magistrate of the mobile court leaves their premise. The government has meanwhile enacted laws to protect consumers. There are pro-consumer rights bodies and other civil right groups. But people are still helpless before the power of the evil rackets that are poisoning us deliberately with their deadly merchandise.

The quarters that poison our foodstuff are few, while those who carry out their business with fairness and goodwill constitute the overwhelming majority. The common consumers cannot distinguish between them. So, it is important to identify and isolate these few black sheep of the business community. It is the business community that can do the job of isolating them better than the law-enforcers or any other quarter in order that the dealers in death can be brought to justice.

From that point of view, the practice of using toxic tannery waste as poultry feed or fish meal and the business thriving on it should be considered an illicit trade, because it constitutes a grave threat to public health. The government should immediately look into the matter to assess the threat the reported trade poses and take necessary action against it.

The matter needs to be handled carefully without causing any panic so that it does not affect the business of the billion-dollar poultry industry. And in this case, the leaders of this sector of the industry should lend a hand to the government and the public to stop the dangerous trade.

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Correcting a false start

There's no alternative to a dialogue that consolidates and puts real content into the notion of peaceful coexistence and mutually beneficial relations. These alone can free the two nations' peoples from the burden of rivalry and allow them to realise the objective of equitable development with human dignity and rights for all.

PRAFUL BIDWAI

BOTH India and Pakistan damaged their images with their foreign ministers' meeting last week -- the first ministerial meeting since the 2008 Mumbai terrorist attacks -- by refusing to start a productive dialogue. This has disappointed many of their citizens who had hoped for better relations.

Pakistan Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi was more blunt and abrasive than India's S.M. Krishna. Mr. Qureshi undiplomatically said that the Indian minister hadn't come to Islamabad with a full mandate. Yet, this wasn't the cause of the talks' failure, but its effect.

The talks failed because India and Pakistan couldn't agree on the bilateral agenda and a timetable for discussing issues of mutual concern. This failure is large even by the standards of the volatile and often tense India-Pakistan relationship.

Indian Home Secretary G.K. Pillai set the stage for the breakdown by alleging in a media interaction that Indian interrogators had obtained irrefutable evidence from David Coleman Headley, a Lashkar-e-Toiba (LeT) operative detained in the US, that Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence agency had plotted the Mumbai attacks.

The interrogation happened in June. Home Minister P. Chidambaram met his counterpart Rahman Malik in Pakistan three weeks ago, and returned assured that Mr. Malik "understood the situation and agreed

that we should address [it] with the seriousness it deserves." The issue was also discussed between the two nations' foreign secretaries.

Mr. Pillai's remarks couldn't have been more ill-timed. Mr. Krishna also didn't help matters by announcing in Islamabad: "I am here to see what action Pakistan has taken so far" on Headley's confessions. It's ludicrous to take the confessions of a terrorist collaborator as clinching evidence.

Underlying such remarks was India's preoccupation with getting Pakistan to crack down on terrorist groups like LeT. True, no Indian government can ignore the trauma of the Mumbai attacks. This concern is understandable, but not to the point of virtually excluding all other issues and risking the talks' failure. That's exactly what happened.

India didn't accommodate Pakistan's legitimate concerns, including talks about Kashmir and Siachen, non-interference in Balochistan, and improved cooperation within the Indus Water Treaty framework.

All India offered to discuss -- besides action against *jehadi* terrorists -- is trade and confidence-building measures. These issues are unarguably pertinent. But it's futile to expect Pakistan to shelve its own concerns and preoccupations.

Nor did India agree with Pakistan's proposed schedule for secretary and minister-level meetings. India was apprehensive that Pakistan would use the timelines to try to

resume the "composite dialogue" -- as if Mumbai hadn't happened.

In the end, the timelines clashed. Pakistan wanted all outstanding issues addressed in a time-bound manner. India felt that the terror issue must first be comprehensively addressed "to inject a degree of normality into the situation," as Indian officials put it. There was no agreement.

Some sharp exchanges between Indian and Pakistani leaders were further distorted by the media. An Indian paper alleged that Mr. Qureshi had called Mr. Pillai a "clone" of LeT leader Hafiz Mohammed Saeed. In reality, Mr. Qureshi only said that Mr. Pillai's remarks had come up during the talks and Mr. Krishna agreed that they were unhelpful.

However, both sides put a positive spin on the outcome. Mr. Krishna even said: "I am quite satisfied."

Both India and Pakistan must draw some lessons from this episode. The greater lesson for India isn't that engagement with Pakistan is futile, but that it should be wholehearted and cover all outstanding issues.

Secondly, rigidity on the terrorism question is counter-productive. India must recognise that a civilian Pakistani government that's considered weak vis-à-vis India will be vulnerable to extremists.

This would be especially unfortunate just when the Pakistan public is outraged at attack on the Data Darbar shrine, which underscored the Taliban's hostility to Sufism and its rejection of all folk-Islamic traditions.

India must not over-react to Mr. Qureshi's behaviour and put form and optics before substance. It has extremely high stakes in good relations with Pakistan and must press its concerns. Results from the dialogue won't be instant. But absent a dialogue, negative outcomes are guaranteed.

The lessons for Pakistan are also important. Islamabad cannot claim to be a responsible state when it hunts with the Americans while running with the extremists.

The *jehadis* have used support from Pakistan's covert agencies to create inde-

pendent power centres. Pakistan will pay for their depredations with innocent blood. It's in Pakistan's interest to put terrorism on the bilateral agenda -- but without being seen to be caving in.

Second, the only way in which Pakistan's civilian government can consolidate itself is to loosen the military's hold on power by reining in the ISI. So Mr. Qureshi is probably making a mistake in pushing an agenda that could endear him to the army and help his political career.

Mr. Qureshi has prime ministerial ambitions. But using the army's help to fulfill them would be disastrous. That course, as many Pakistani politicians have discovered, is self-defeating.

Third, no matter how hard Pakistan tries, it cannot deny India a role in Afghanistan while using that country to gain "strategic depth." India has had historically important trade and cultural links with Afghanistan.

India also enjoys a huge amount of goodwill in Afghanistan because of its well-targeted \$1.75 billion aid program. This is far better tailored to Afghan needs than Western assistance programs, which are typically routed through tiers of outsourcing agencies and middlemen.

It makes eminent sense for Pakistan and India to get into a non-adversarial relationship in Afghanistan instead of stalking each other. They should explore cooperation.

There's no alternative to a dialogue that consolidates and puts real content into the notion of peaceful coexistence and mutually beneficial relations. These alone can free the two nations' peoples from the burden of rivalry and allow them to realise the objective of equitable development with human dignity and rights for all.

In the coming weeks, Indian and Pakistani leaders must engage in introductory and find productive ways of mutually engaging one another.

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