

# A disturbing signal

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HUNDREDS of thousands of people are leaving their rural homes for the glimmer of opportunities that big cities seem to offer. This migration has transformed the cities, once sleepy towns or manageable urban centres, into bustling human hives. From Dhaka to Chittagong to other big towns there is no turning back the relentless parade. These changes in the cities have come with an awesome swiftness that has caught the administration unprepared.

Dhaka, which was designed to accommodate 9 million people at best in 1960, now teems with 15 million, with a population density of more than 18,000 persons per sq km. Now there are about 6 lakh mechanised vehicles moving on 2,250 kilometres of roads. The city is suffering from serious growing pains.

New arrivals are pouring at the rate of 3 lakh a year, crushing into a highly over-congested area. With each new wave come ever greater problems. Half of Dhaka city's population are under 22, and almost 60% of them are without regular jobs. Almost 45% of the population are slum dwellers. In recent times the slum population has been rising at an alarming rate.

The migration has been spurred not so much by rural restlessness as by catastrophes like drought, cyclone, flood, loss of farmland through river erosion and famine-like conditions in the rural areas in the lean months of Ashwin, Kartik and Agrahayan. With its quarter million pavement dwellers, Dhaka city epitomises the country's urban nightmare and bitter poverty.

Travellers may marvel at the city's gleaming skyscrapers and rise apartments, but the average family income is a horrific \$1 a day for most of the male workforce. Analysts opine that the incentives for farm activities during the last decade have been disappointingly low. Until this government came to power, farm subsidies, in the form of fertilizer, irrigation facilities, and price protection, were non-existent.

Farmlands have given way to shrimp farms in large areas of greater Khulna, Barisal and Chittagong region, benefiting only a few landlords. More so, price stabilisation and price support to farm products like rice, potato, vegetables, fruits, sugar cane and jute at the growers level have been totally non-existent.

The present government made Tk.4,000 crore available in the form of agricultural subsidy to draw the farmers to farm activities. The decision, it is believed, is yielding satisfactory result in relieving the distress of the rural populace. Despite the fact that food production has increased substantially to 3 crore 25 lakh ton in the last harvesting year, the country still suffers from a deficit of 1.5 million ton as evidenced by the rising

price of rice in the market, which is largely manipulated by the mill owners' syndicate.

The past governments in the last two decades hardly took any measures to create growth centres beyond the city limits. In many ways the cities are self-feeding monsters perpetuating their own growth in some selected areas by devouring the country's resources. Dhaka perhaps now controls about 70% of the country's money supply. Of the country's entire capital investment, more than 60% is invested in Dhaka and Chittagong.

Most of the other cities and district towns, not to speak of the rural areas, remain brazenly neglected. Roads, bridges and other infrastructure, deemed to be most essential for overall growth and mobility in business are in a bad state. This discriminatory attitude has created a great imbalance in income

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generation in the districts and has given rise to tensions and mounting discontent that tend to bedevil the good works done in some selected areas. All told, the unending tide of mass exodus to cities, especially Dhaka city, can hardly be stopped even by draconian measures with the conditions in the rural surroundings remaining neglected.

The country needs to speed up its growth momentum for a wider section of the people, and that is the only option left to halt the migration of the people to city areas. After all, people want to stay in the area they grown up in provided all facilities, including employment generation, basic needs of health and education, are readily available there.

Even when the country is experiencing recurring shortage of food items, caused by repeated floods, devastating cyclones compounded by breakdown in production and supply-side chain, neither the government nor the corporate houses in

the country seem to have shown any inclination to either establish or expand their businesses in those areas. But sensible citizens are beginning to realise that rural Bangladesh is no longer unviable, there is opportunity for those who can see.

In India, big corporate houses like Mittal, Tata, Godrej, Mahindra, Reliance and Imperial Tobacco Company have made big headway in expanding rural business, especially agribusiness.

The irony is that farmers in our country buy everything at retail price and sell their produce at wholesale price. In an effort to put production and sale on a competitive edge, innovative methods are being brought into play in many countries. Taking a cue from India, we can transform our agriculture so that the country does not remain an import-driven one and can fight the vagaries of

nature, and compensate the crop losses in the wake of natural calamities.

We can replicate what ITC in India has brought about by initiating a mass awakening through e-choupal internet services in selected villages. These internet services are run by conductors in selected centres in the villages to inform villagers about innovations in farming methods, seed quality, and fertilizer availability and application.

The government could instill those innovative methods in farming that are geared to maximise production so that companies engaged in such endeavours can transform the entire food chain from farm to firm to fork. Most firms in many states of India are not only selling products to farmers but are also bringing village produce to cities and even to markets abroad, forming a two-way transaction channel between rural India and the rest of the world.

The biggest hindrance in our country

is the lack of incentive, compounded by the farmers' inability to invest in productivity improvement. This is where private investment will make a big difference. By investing in the farmers' ability to grow more and grow better, government and companies will not only get better product for their agri-business but will also help farmers get prosperous.

During my visit to remote places in Satkhira after Aila, I saw that vast tracts of farmland being turned into shrimp farms by allowing saline water into the paddy lands. This region, once known as the granary of Khulna, is now a food deficit area. Like many other places in the country, availability of electricity is still a dream. Grameen Shakti, a solar business firm has spread the use of solar charged batteries in the houses in rural areas.

A farmer with computer learning could be a key driver in bringing about

rural push towards better living. Internet will make a new eco-system in rural Bangladesh with cheap, efficient two-way channels between villages, companies and NGOs and the government. They can get the latest farm techniques, weather forecasts, and expert advice on e-mail. They may have insights into development issues like water harvesting, on-line land records, advances in health and education services.

It is said that Bangladesh lives in its villages. But villagers need to live as well as the rest of the country for the country's growth. Rural road projects must be made easier, faster and hazard-free for farmers to get their produce to markets while communication tools will give them access to weather forecasts and critical inputs. That's the only option left to stop migration to cities.

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## Collecting pebbles on the shore

ABDUL MATIN

SIR Isaac Newton formulated the laws of motion, which form the basis of classical mechanics. As a physicist, his only comparison is Albert Einstein. Being one of the two greatest scientists the world has ever produced, Newton used to say that all he was doing was "collecting pebbles on the shore of the sea called knowledge."

Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, a great scholar of Bengal during the British period, is reported to have said something similar even though the vastness of his knowledge was compared to that of an ocean. As a schoolboy I found it very difficult to comprehend the meaning of "collecting pebbles on the shore of the sea called knowledge." Our teacher explained that it was their modesty that had prompted them to say so.

In this part of the world, school students are required to memorise their lessons. Memorisation is considered to be a part and parcel of their learning process. The best student in the class is usually the one with the most brilliant memory. By memorising

textbooks on different subjects, students get a false impression that they are learning all that they need to know. Many students often brag among their friends about their so-called knowledge.

For any student who is hard-working, it is not very difficult to pass school examinations and graduate with reasonably good results through memorisation. Surely, he will face the first hurdle when he gets admission as a research student for a Master or a Ph.D. degree.

There is nothing to memorise for a research student. He is required to investigate a particular problem and find an acceptable solution. He proceeds step by step following a logical path. If he faces any difficulty and brings it to the notice of his supervisor, he will simply tell his student with a meaningful smile on his face: "This looks very interesting. I would like to see how you proceed and solve this problem." The supervisor may give some hints but will do nothing more. The student must find a solution by himself.

The student will soon be shocked to discover that all he learned through memorisation is of no use to him. He now has to search the internet for references, run from one library to another to study the relevant topics and analyse the problem in order to find a solution. Here, he passes through the real phase of learning, not through memorisation, but through understanding. Any student who is basically intelligent can pass through this phase and earn a Master or a Ph. D. degree.

From personal experience I can say that the real learning process starts when he joins a university as a teacher after obtaining a higher degree. He must know the subject thoroughly in order to teach it, and be prepared to answer any question the students may ask. Even while teaching a known subject, he will discover many things he had studied before without understanding. He has to study the subject again seriously enough to understand it. Once he starts studying, he will come across many new unknown terms or topics. So he has to study more to learn the new topics.

He thus enters a circle dominated by an unknown and unexplored domain of knowledge. So, by trying to learn more he discovers how little he knows. Finally, one fine morning, he will appreciate what Sir Isaac Newton and Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar meant by "collecting pebbles on the shore of the sea called knowledge." I heard Prof. Abdus Salam, who won Nobel Prize in Physics in 1979, explaining this in one of his lectures when he said: "We study to expand the horizons of our knowledge and ignorance."

Academicians are conscious not only about the limitations of their knowledge but also about the vastness of their ignorance. An ignorant person is also ignorant about his ignorance. Obviously, he thinks that he knows everything on earth. For this reason most ignorant people talk more than academicians do. They do not know that by talking more they simply expose their ignorance.

On many official functions, some of our political leaders are found delivering lectures on Tagore, Nazrul and similar topics while academicians listen to them. They seem to know more than the academicians do on such topics. They enjoy talking on all subjects and for long periods.

We also have a special breed of academicians who talk at seminars and television shows on all subjects with full confidence and authority. Unlike Newton and Vidyasagar, they seem to be floating on the sea of knowledge when they talk! They either have superhuman qualities to be knowledgeable on all subjects, or they deceive people on topics they do not know! They are not true academicians. True academicians are modest, like Newton and Vidyasagar, and they usually talk less. They prefer to listen to others in order to learn more.

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# Social protection: Whose responsibility?

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LARGE numbers across Bangladesh live without secure forms of social protection, but whose responsibility is it to ensure that provisions are in place?

I recently attended a lecture which formed part of the BDI lecture series. This one, "States, Citizens and Social Protection: Reflections on the Asian Experience," was led by Naila Kabeer (Professor of Development Studies at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London) and Hossain Zillur Rahman (Former Advisor to the Caretaker Government of Bangladesh and founder and Chairperson of the Power and Participation Research Centre (PPRC)), coordinated by Syed M. Hashemi (Director, BDI).

Naila Kabeer drew attention to the work of the Social Protection in Asia (SPA) programme, which has aimed to develop a research base and voice to advocate on behalf of innovative and informed policy on social protection issues. It has tried to identify lessons from a variety of initiatives, including, for example, India's NREGA and projects with the elderly in China. She pointed out that recent years have seen a growth in interest and talk around social protection.

Too often, the provision of safety-nets has been inadequate, leaving the family to shoulder the majority of welfare provision. This has been made more visible in the wake of economic crises which place further strains on families. In places, such crises have served to kick-start or set the pace for the establishment of some longer

term social protection infrastructure (e.g. in Indonesia following the '97/'98 Asian financial crisis).

Nevertheless, despite the gains made in raising the profile of the importance for social protection in policy circles, there is still a significant amount to be learnt about how to deal with vulnerability and ensure long-term investment in social protection. In Kabeer's view, there is still some way to go in moving towards a situation where social protection is comprehensive, inclusive and institutionalised, or one where social protection "is development policy" states Zillur Rahman. In other words, where the state takes responsibility.

So what are the barriers to the state taking the responsibility to provide comprehensive and inclusive social protection? Change needs to get underway. Lessons from the SPA programme throughout Asia suggest that:

We (including the state) need to move from looking at poor and vulnerable individuals precisely as that;

There needs to be a shift from a framework which sees people as vulnerable individuals to a society of resources and capable citizens. We need to invest in ways which don't undermine people.

The tendency to react to crisis by implementing programmes in a knee-jerk nature has left a string of different kinds of interventions, but how do we make sure no-one falls through the cracks? The homeless, the urban poor, or migrant women, for example? We need a force which pulls them up and includes them. The state needs capacity and a mandate to do this.

Yet, there still remains the big question of what exactly makes the state responsive?

Under what circumstances do governments take on the institutional responsibility for social protection?

Historical analysis shows that there are moments in history where states are galvanised into action. For example, turning 100 days of employment into a right in India

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(the NREGA) was a culmination of an ongoing movement for farmers (alongside growing suicide among rural farmers) and an election. Kabeer argued that critical moments and events such as drought and floods all matter.

Civil society plays a significant and important role in laying the path for institutionalised social protection. In Bangladesh, NGOs house the large responsibility for service provision. But the question of accountability still remains. The role of civil society was highlighted as important, but not as the main provider.

Rahman also highlighted the level of innovation and diverse portfolio of social protection initiatives in Bangladesh, and

confirmed the importance of events (e.g. micro-credit being born in the wake of a famine). While he also cautioned that new risks are continually arising, particularly those presented by urban poverty and health issues. He raised an important point when discussing the social and physiological impacts of poverty and disaster, e.g. what are the psychological costs to those affected by the munga?

Kabeer drew attention to how much we take for granted the work of the people physically running social protection schemes on the ground. Local level workers are at the interface between the state and citizen and it is they who make the difference to whether an approach respects beneficiaries as citizens (ensuring entitlements) or as beggars (providing handouts). As such, she argued that more recognition and investment is needed towards these human resources of social protection.

So, to move towards a policy framework which institutionalises social protection from one which responds in an ad hoc way, is Bangladesh heading in the right direction? What kinds of moments or events need to happen here? Would comprehensive and inclusive social protection ideally ensure that the extreme poor no longer fall through the cracks?

Zillur Rahman highlighted that state resources remain a central and pivotal constraint. Raising the question of long-term responsibility and highlighting important events and moments as potential opportunities to influence seems valuable.

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