

Population: Asset or burden

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WORLD Population Day-2011 was observed on July 11 throughout the world under the leadership of United Nations (UN), as well as in Bangladesh through different programmes, to raise awareness on global population issues. In 1989, the governing council of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) recommended that, in order to focus attention on the urgency and importance of population issues in the context of overall development plans and programmes and the need to find solutions for these issues, July 11 should be observed by the international communities as World Population Day.

The theme of this year's commemoration is "The World at 7 Billion," set by UNFPA to call attention of governments, communities and individuals to understand the global population issues for taking remedial actions. This Day is observed annually to reaffirm the right to plan for a family. It encourages activities, events and information to help make this right a reality throughout the world.

The unprecedented decrease in mortality, which began to accelerate in the more developed parts of the world in the nineteenth century and spread to all parts of the world in the twentieth century, is one of the major achievements of humanity. Also, life expectancy has increased from 46.5 years in 1950 to 66 years in 2000-2005, and is expected to rise to 76 years by the year 2045-2050 (WPP, 2008).

It is estimated that in 1 AD, there were 300 million people in the world. This number was 400 million and 500 million in 1250 and 1500 respectively. According to a United Nations (UN) estimate, the world population reached 1 billion in 1804; rose to 2 billion 123 years later, in 1927; to 3

billion in 1960; to 4 billion in 1974; to 5 billion in 1987; and to 6 billion 12 years after that in 1999. It was nearly 7 billion in 2010 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010) and is projected to reach 7 billion on October 31 this year.

The scenario in Bangladesh is quite similar to the depiction of the rest of the world. According to the United States Census Bureau, in 2010 Bangladesh's population was 156.12 million while the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) estimated that it was 164.4 million. At present, the total population is 142.3 million and the growth rate is 1.34% according to the Fifth Population Census (BBS, 2011).

These differences in the estimated total population are creating a huge debate throughout the country and are also a serious matter for the development planning of the country. But, it is hoped that this number may be in between these figures. The average age at marriage (especially for females) is still lower than expected. When women are married at an earlier age, they have longer reproductive life span, leading to the birth of more children. In 2010, Bangladesh's National Population Policy aimed to achieve the



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replacement level of fertility of 2.2, but it still hovered at 2.5.

Notwithstanding the debate about the size of the population, the reality is that the population is increasing at an accelerated pace. Whether this large population is an asset or a problem remains the main concern. When population increases, it demands various basic components (e.g. food, shelter, health facilities, educational institution etc.) for the fulfillment of basic necessities. Therefore, it creates complex problems for a country like Bangladesh, where 31.5% of the population is still living under the poverty line (HIES, 2010).

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The total number of manpower of the country is 57.1 million. Of them, 54.5 million are employed and 2.6 million are unemployed, or looking for jobs (MS, 2010). If we provide employment for the 2.6 million people, they can easily participate in the country's development. Contraceptive prevalence rate (CPR) is still not so high (55.8%) and 17.6% have unmet need for contraception (BDHS, 2007).

More than 40% of the population are illiterate (HIES, 2010). As a least developed country, Bangladesh has made a considerable progress since independence in 1971 due to the various initiatives taken by the successive governments.

However, progress is much slower than expected.

The population is increasing, and it will be difficult to manage unless efforts are accelerated. No government has been able to find a solution to this vital issue. Theoretically, many strategic documents and policy papers seem to be sound and implementable but, in reality, outcomes are yet to be discernible. If we can treat our population as a resource, and can properly utilise their potentiality, the overall development of the country might become

possible. We should think of them as them an asset rather than a burden.

Though it is difficult to provide employment opportunities for such a large population in a country like Bangladesh, the government should try to solve it by empowering them. It is also difficult to control the population growth through contraception methods or other family planning methods because of the conservative society.

Considering these issues, the government should control the population growth by effective implementation of various policies and programmes related to family planning and population (like greater incentives for those having one child). A law fixing the minimum age for marriage should be enacted.

Also, the government should try to create employment opportunities in the development sector by training skilled manpower through various effective skill enhancement programmes.

Hence, the governments needs to be inventive in renewing and revising the strategies and approaches (e.g. family planning programmes, population policy, skills enhancement programmes etc.) to meet the current challenges, and not merely resort to the failed old policies packaged in new covers.

Policy makers, planners, social scientists, statisticians and the authorities concerned should formulate the policies and plans, speed up the effort in limiting population, and evaluate the population dynamics and its impact on the development goals and vision. Only then can the population of the country become an asset.

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The absurdity of the absurd poly-tricks

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THE assault on Zainal Abidin Farroque has left a bitter taste in the mouth. While (in its defence) the Treasury was quick to remind us that the police had carried out similar attacks on Mohammad Nasim, Motia Chowdhury and Saber Hossain Chowdhury during previous BNP regimes, the opposition as well as the civil society were equally quick to add: but you promised "Change." How can you change if you keep on repeating the same mistakes?

For me, the parliamentarian, who is an orator and rhetorician by default, was simply using the "main" weapon that he had in his arsenal -- words, albeit fair and foul. The police, on the other hand, were simply using their simplest weapons that they had in their arsenal -- sticks, albeit sleek and straight. Now, whether they overstepped their limits and intruded on each other's space while exercising their weapons is anybody's guess! I am more interested in the absurdity of the whole drama.

Unfortunately, none of the TV channels showed an uncut version of the attack. The longest video footage that I have come across starts from the shot in which a senior police officer accosted the chief whip, saying (free translation): "You cannot break law and ransack vehicles." The chief whip smirked, saying: "****you and your law can go to****." He tried to use his mobile phone to capture the image of the perpetrator. The officer then said, "You son of a **** I will slap you so hard that your teeth will come off." Farooque confronted the officer and dared him to. There was a minor scuffle in which the officer lost his balance and fell down. He was quick to jump onto his feet and he and his colleagues went after Farooque.

The next shot showed Farooque on the ground surrounded by a group of police, party workers and media people. His T-shirt had been taken off. The next one showed Farooque with an injury with blood trickling down left side of his head. He was flanked by his party people. One was crying, "Blood. Blood!" and tried to show it to the camera. Then the next shot showed Farooque running towards NAM quarter, and police chasing him.

porters and lifted him by the hands and the feet; his back was bruised by the concrete roads. Then they put him on the back of a police van; by that time some supporters of Farooque requested for his release and tried to pull him down from the van. The van sped off even before Farooque was properly placed. It could also be due to the supporters who pulled him from the van. Farooque had a nasty fall. He was later rushed to United Hospital for treatment.

After the uneven match between word and sticks in Act 1 of the political drama, we

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move to Act II. The police officer was saying: "None is above the law. He cannot hit someone in uniform. We reacted in self-defence. He should know that embargo under Section 144 was imposed in the Parliament compound." He probably parroted the pep-talk that he had learned in Police Academy. The opposition dug dirt and identified the said police officer as an ex-Chhatra League man and interpreted the attack as a pre-planned one to silence and humiliate the most vocal and defiant opposition member. "This is the end of democracy and it testifies the fact that we are living in a police state."

The government mouthpieces who appeared on TV were very moralistic: "Dignity has to be earned; disrespect breeds disrespect. Farooque has brought it to himself because of misdemeanour." The opposition mouthpieces were prophetic: "God forbid! Similar beatings await those who are defending such heinous attack."

I am actually taking a break from preparing slides for my class on Beckett's Waiting for Godot. The absurdity of the situation and the meaninglessness of words have led me to

write this piece on an area alien to me. I don't claim myself an expert on politics, but as a student of literature and culture, I am moved by the words that have gone into circulation. Like in the Beckettian universe, we are experiencing entropy in which the world and the people in it are slowly but inexorably running down in a quicksand of time; the end is not in sight, but we are witnessing the endgame nonetheless. The hope is hopeless. The characters in this drama of life therefore take refuge in repetition; they repeat their own actions and words and often those of others -- in order to pass the time. The TV talk-shows are cases in point.

Words. Words. Words. But none of them make sense. They say what they do not mean. They mean what they do not say. They act contrary to their words. So how are we to make sense of the political spectacle that unfolded before our eyes?

The virtual world of television has added a further twist to reality: editing, selection, canned interpretation and exaggeration/underestimation are removing us further from reality. Politics is fast becoming a media circus and we are fast becoming victims of media spin. Our politicians are acting it out for the media. In their allotted virtual space, some of the politicians are trying to get maximum coverage with minimum efforts. No wonder, some of them call hartals so that they could watch the consequences on TV.

This morning I saw a press conference with one opposition leader and twenty media personnel. I have a radical proposal to make: Let media ban this political circus for two weeks. Let the electronic media tell the politicians that it will not cover any of their ideas unless they go to the parliament and sort it out like parliamentarians. Let words fight against words in the concrete arena designed by Louis I. Kahn, and not inside any virtual arena. Let the nation decide whose words have got honey and whose words have got venom. We, as voters, shall decide who is right and who is wrong; who deserves the carrot and who deserves the stick. For God's sake: don't tell us what is right and what is wrong! And please don't use sticks to teach us the difference between right and wrong. Because, we the public, know it all!

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LEST WE FORGET

Abu A. Abdullah: Some sweet recollections

ABDULLAH SHIBLI

WHEN I heard from Kazi Belal that Abu Abdullah passed away a few days ago, a kaleidoscope of images flashed through my mind; our first meeting at the Bangladesh Economic Association's (BEA) Conference at TSC in 1976, our regular nightly adda and jalsha in Medford in the late '80's, the musical soiree at his apartment in Dhanmandi in the summer of 1990, and then my last encounter with him following the brutal attack by an intruder that left him partially blind and scarred his face but could not take away his calm demeanour and his peacefulness that I had always seen.

Abdullah Bhai, as I always called him, was well-known to me even before I met him. As a student of the Economics Department in the seventies, we were regaled by our professors and Economics alumni by stories of his brilliance, his performance in the B.A. (Hons) and M.A. exams, and his erudition and scholarship. In the 1960s, the best and the brightest of Pakistan's economics graduates and faculty members gravitated towards Pakistan Institute of Development Economics (PIDE). When PIDE moved its office to Dhaka in October, 1970, Abdullah Bhai was out of the country on study leave, and I subsequently heard about his active role during the War of Liberation in the US.

However, our paths crossed many times during the peripatetic life that we experienced. Our first encounter was probably in Mymensingh where we both lived for a short while and only a few blocks away. His nephew and niece and my brothers and I were in the same school, and would often hang out at their place in the evening.

He subsequently left for Dhaka College, and then attended Dhaka University. When I started attending Dhaka University in the 1970s, Abdullah Bhai had already graduated and left to pursue higher studies in Economics at Harvard University. When he came back to Bangladesh in 1976, I was a Lecturer in Economics at Dhaka University.

It is in that setting that I met him again at the Second Annual Conference of BEA, in 1976. He made an impression

on all of us -- the tall, slightly balding, scholarly, and legendary person in a very plain pajama and punjabi.

I left for higher studies soon thereafter, but after three years came back to work with him and his team at BIDS during my dissertation. I had the good fortune of having him as a senior adviser of the Food For Work project that I was associated with as a Doctoral Fellow of IFPRI.

My next round of interactions with Abdullah Bhai is the one I remember and cherish the most. The opportunity came when Abdullah Bhai visited University of Massachusetts, Amherst, in 1976 as a faculty member for one academic year.

Thanks to the hospitality of a common friend, Kazi Belal (our Shajahan Bhai) and his wife, Pushpa Apa, my wife Rumi and I spent many evenings at their house in the company of Abdullah Bhai listening to songs rendered in his rich voice. In the early hours he and Shajahan Bhai would join in a jugal bandi. The ambience was just incomparable, because of the variety of songs, the camaraderie of the group, and the energy that permeated the jalshaghar.

Another memorable moment for me was when I sang a duet, the Rabindra Sangeet "poth diye key jaye go choley," with Abdullah Bhai at MIT at the 1987 Pahela Baishakh celebration. I was probably lacking in taal and loy, but Abdullah Bhai never let these weaknesses get in the way of my enthusiasm and eagerness to perform with him. I wish, as I remember Abdullah Bhai today, I had asked him to sing with me another Tagore song, one that I am constantly humming on this sad occasion, "jey phool jhorey."

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