

Vices eating into the vitals

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SENSIBLE citizens in the country voiced their concern about the increasing political turmoil and stressed the need for bringing about political stability by avoiding confrontational politics, ensuring a fair investment climate, improving the law and order, and curbing terrorism, extortion, secret killing and hijacking. They called for a relentless war against corruption and bureaucratic bottlenecks and red tape that bedevil the development programmes in the country.

The governments in all these years could not do anything to attract investment and had only pursued a suicidal path in the name of politics and democracy. There is a widening gap between rich and poor, burgeoning unemployment, exploitation of women and children, spiraling crime and ecological destruction.

Despite the fact that food production has increased substantially and food import bill is not as big as in the past years because of the high quality seeds developed in the country's research institutions and quick availability of agricultural inputs, it is common knowledge that farmers are still using antiquated systems. In the marketing side, the situation is most depressing. Even if production is good, farmers do not get the return of their investment.

Government effort to either improve or reform the public distribution system by better supply chain management at the retail level is non-existent. The supply chain is so badly managed that one-third of the produce is just wasted or rots away. Post-harvest fruits and vegetables worth crores of taka are wasted every year because of abysmal road network and storage facilities. Dilapidated roads and inaction in opening up the retail sector to benefit both the farmer and the consumer adds to price hike at the consumer level.

Farmers suffered losses by cultivating jute this year. Last year, the price of raw jute was Tk.1,500-2,000 per maund, this year the price came down to Tk.700 per maund. Now the price of rice has started going down

and farmers complain that the present price level does not cover the cost of production. There is disincentive for rural people to get involved in agriculture, which appears to promise only an uncertain livelihood and crippling debt.

The second priority is to organise the educational system. Unqualified teachers and administrators must be got rid of, and more students must be motivated to take up science and engineering. We need to enable students to move from vocational education to higher education after working for a few years. The quality of education still remains abysmally low and class rooms remain empty. Even in schools with teachers, mindless rote learning dominated and the results were lackluster.

In the urban areas, apart from shortage of skilled teachers, the major complaint was the stressful, boring and burdensome learning load that discourages free thinking and knowledge gathering. As reports show, possibly 1 in 100 students who finish school ends up in university.

As many as 56 private universities have been given sanction during the last 10 years, many of them due to political lobbying rather than the quality of education they were supposed to impart. There is also a shortage of efficient teachers, which means that students are not getting the quality of education they deserve.

There have been many attempts to stem the rising tide of mediocrity that has swamped the education system, like setting up of a statutory autonomous higher education commission as well as involvement of the industry so that education and training can directly feed into jobs.

The education sector, that was once deemed to be sacrosanct, now appears to be steeped in corruption. Reports have it that teachers are changing the answer

scripts of board examinations and replacing those written by others after the examination. There are allegations that grades of students in the board examinations have been changed in collusion with personnel in the examination section of the board.

The highest seats of learning are no exception to these vices. Some private universities, in the name of promoting education, are selling certificates. With no campus and no qualified teachers, some universities are only visible by the colourful signboard on the house and banner in the road intersection. The recent debacle in Dhaka University 'Ga' unit admission test arising out of the anomalies in the question paper as well as in the evaluation of the answer scripts is an illustration of total callousness, irresponsibility and lack of seriousness on the part of the teachers of a renowned university.

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Some teachers, who are supposed to be adherents of morality and a code of conduct that their students would inculcate, are indulging in activities that shame all in the country. This is a pointer to the moral and ethical vacuum that plagues the society, even the sacrosanct education sector.

Corruption is rampant. Reports show that more than 60% of the citizens had the personal experience of paying bribes or using powerbrokers to get work done in a government office or utility organisations. The borders with India and Myanmar are the frontiers of corruption. Appallingly, Bangladeshis stay silent when faced by corruption. Maybe this bribe taking news are never made public out of sheer apathy and helplessness of the people seeking business or asking for remedy of their sufferings. Or perhaps they have accepted that corruption is a way of life.

Politicians and public officials create conditions

where the poor are forced to pay extra money, often beyond their means, to get what is their right. Studies conducted by different agencies have revealed that those living below the poverty line are paying crores of taka in bribes to avail need-based services that the government is obliged to offer. A huge part of the government developmental funds meant for developing social infrastructure, eradicating poverty and empowering the poor goes to a few influential individuals and some NGOs, making them richer and increasing the rich-poor divide.

The complete lack of political will to contain corruption in a meaningful way has escalated poverty, degraded public institutions and weakened the private investment climate in the country. Poor governance and corruption have contributed to financial and economic collapse, public alienation and even violence, with disastrous consequences for the poor.

People are questioning as to why there was an occasion for the World Bank to stop funding for the Padma Bridge. The former communication minister should have been extra cautious in handling the negotiations with the funding agencies when he runs a business house that works as agent of the international companies.

The completion of the Padma Bridge construction within the tenure of the AL government was not only an election pledge, it would also have contributed largely to flourishing of business climate, quick movement of people and goods and elimination of rich-poor divide.

Sadly true, there is no role model for probity in public life. Corruption can be checked only if the tone is set at the top. It is important to bring corrupt people to justice by giving exemplary punishment to those who have abused their power. Transparency and accountability in government should be made mandatory by using tools and rules without prejudice to anyone in the society.

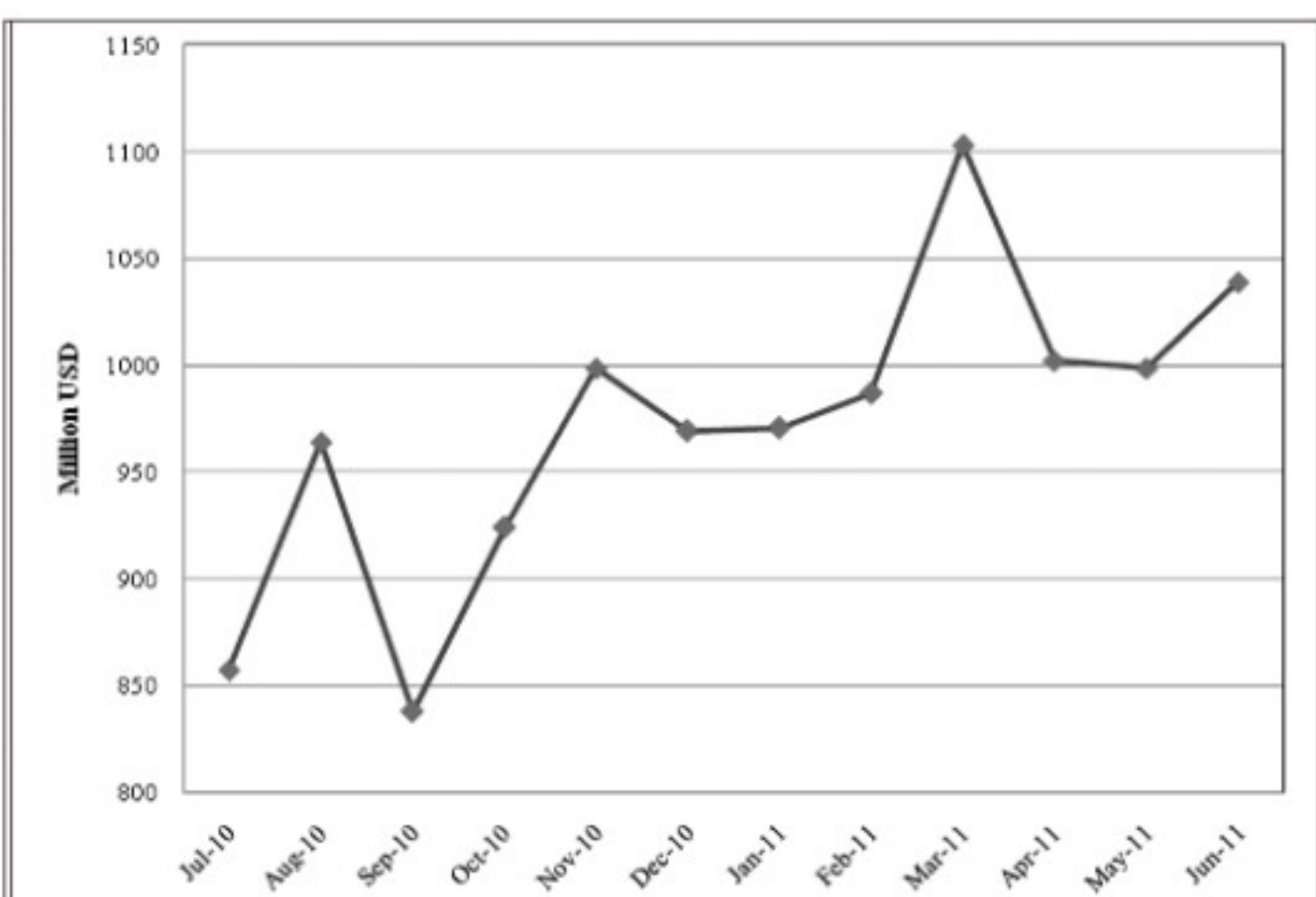
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Migration in the face of Globalisation

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ON December 4, 2000, the UN General Assembly, taking into account the large and increasing number of migrants in the world, proclaimed December 18 as International Migrants Day after the adoption of the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families on December 18, 1990. There is growing recognition that migration is an essential and inevitable component of the economic and social life of every State, and that orderly and properly managed migration can be beneficial for both individuals and societies. There are now about 215 million international migrants and 740 million domestic migrants all over the world. According to the Convention, the term 'Migrant Worker' refers to a person who is to be engaged, is engaged or has been engaged in a remunerated activity in a state of which he or she is not national'. It also put forward the responsibilities of the host nation to provide the basic human

Graph 1: Monthly Remittance inflow in FY 2010-2011
Source: Bangladesh Bank, 2011



rights e.g. basic freedom, right to privacy, equality with nationals, transfer of earnings, right to information, due processes etc. along with other rights e.g. right to temporary absent, freedom of movement etc. to the migrants as mandatory.

Discourse on migration is a complex, multi-dimensional and dynamic perspective that is considered as a social process, which cannot be confined to the state boundary. It is influenced by higher employment opportunities, descent living condition, better communication facilities and cultural similarities. In addition, labour markets are characterised by co-existence of the capital-intensive and labour-intensive sector where job security is prevailing and wage rates are high. Thus, migration is an inflow or outflow of people from one region to another for a permanent or semi-permanent settlement. In the twenty-first century, migration is no longer largely unidirectional and permanent in nature. It is increasingly temporary and circular. Changing geo-political and geo-economic landscapes, as well as the 'knowledge-economy,' are fundamentally changing the processes of migration and globalisation leading to the emergence of new development thinking and strategies.

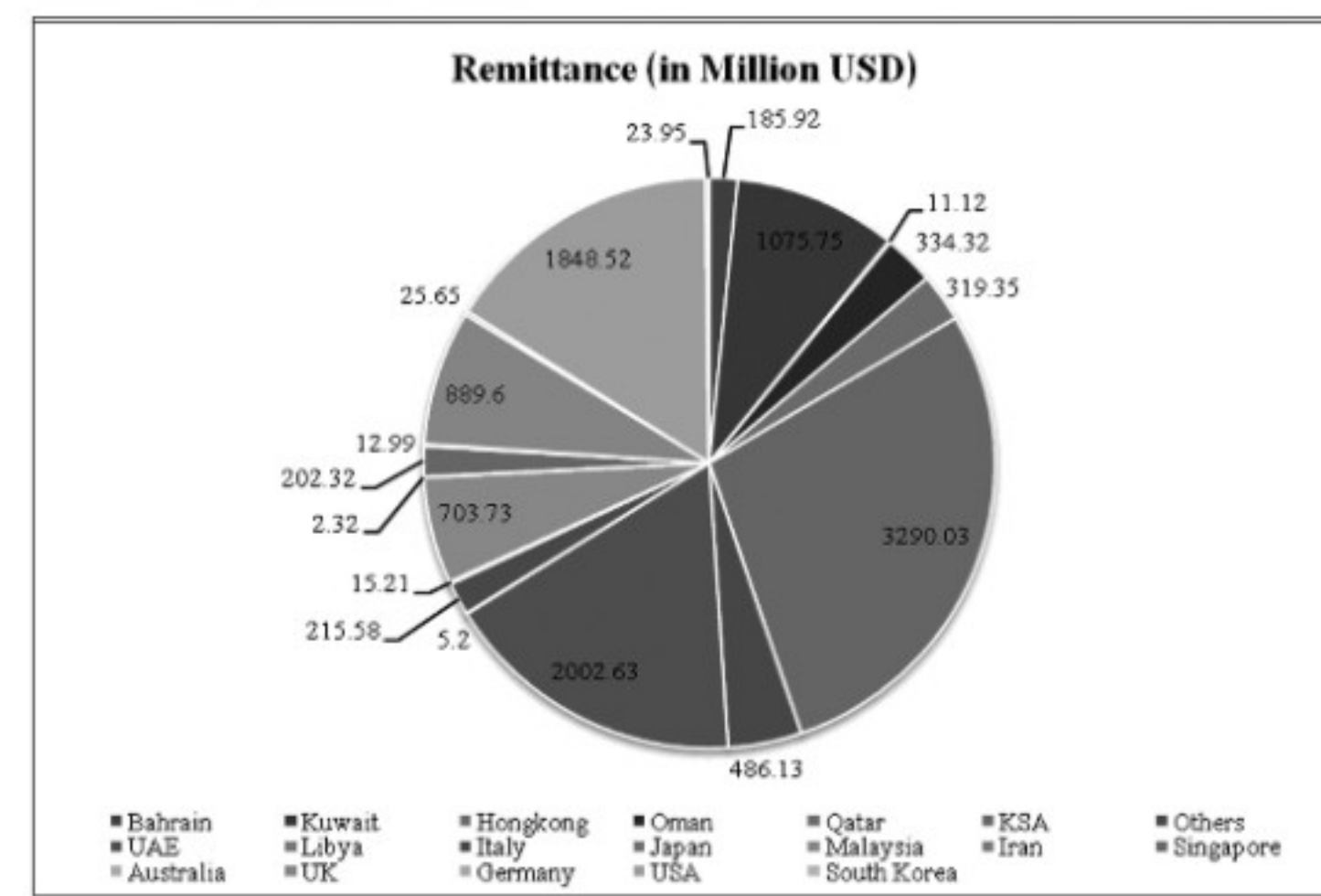
During this period, the movement of people becomes even more significant as a result of economic liberalisation. The most significant type of international migration recently affecting Asia has been temporary labour migration, especially, but not exclusively, to the Middle East. Following major increases in petroleum prices in 1973, many countries in the Middle East embarked on ambitious programmes of infrastructure development. These projects required massive number of workers at all skill levels, who have been increasingly supplied by countries from the region of the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP).

The total number of international migrants has increased over the last 10 years from an estimated 150 million in 2000 to 214 million persons today which denote that 3.1 percent of the world's total population are migrants. Among them 49 percent of migrants are women. From the independence of Bangladesh 1976-2010, it has sent more than 7.1 million workers to over 140 countries and earned a total remittance of 77657.09 million USD (as of November, 2010). There remain two different patterns of migration. In the first one,

well-educated, high or middle income people as well as unemployed segment of population migrate to the industrialised countries. On the other hand, the second one consists of skilled and unskilled labour force migration towards Middle East and Southeast Asia. Among the migrants, only 0.18 million are of professional category while 2.15, 1.03 and 3.7 million peoples are of skilled, semi-skilled and less-skilled labour force respectively. Earlier immigration legislation of the major receiving countries gave preference to persons in specified occupations, particularly in professional category. This approach was said to be responsible for a 'brain drain' or movement of highly trained or skilled persons from the developing countries to the developed countries.

Migration is increasingly being recognised as a viable livelihood option and one of the major development issues for Bangladesh. According to Bangladesh Bank, in the Fiscal Year 2010-2011 alone, a

Graph 2: Remittance Inflow by Country in FY 2010-2011
Source: Bangladesh Bank, 2011



remittance inflow of 11650.32 million USD was made (Graph 1).

However, the highest remittance inflow is contributed by the migrants of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (Graph 2).

The growth in migration from Bangladesh and the increasing levels of remittances and consequent benefits to the society and the country are facing enormous challenges mainly due to the failure of the government to establish a clearly defined migration policy. Alongside regular and beneficial migration -- irregular migration, informal channels of remittance and human trafficking continue to result in serious violations of migrants' rights and an increasing number of Bangladeshi irregular migrants are apprehended in destination countries. Other contributing factors include irregular recruitment practices and abuses, rising migration costs, and a lack of data and follow-up with returning migrants, who have greater vulnerability in terms of infectious diseases, psychological well-being and lack of access to appropriate health services. Additionally, human trafficking including men, women and children for both labour exploitation and commercial sexual abuse remains a grave concern in the country and the region.

Interestingly, the migrants when return to their origin face lack of employment opportunity or income generating activities. Those semi-skilled and less-skilled migrants became skilled labour force during their stay in abroad. The period of stay to Bangladesh, they neither engaged in full time/part time job nor involved in contribution to the community by providing training to the future migrants.

In order to address these challenges, operational and administrative capacity of the Government including further investment and assistance in cross-border technical cooperation, capacity-building of bilateral and regional border checkpoints, prevention of migration-related crime, develop an appropriate compulsory training module, mandatory involvement in economic activities on reverse migration, awareness-raising on the risks of irregular migration and improved labour migration management should be enhanced. Governments at all points on the migration spectrum increasingly recognise the potential of regulatory mechanisms to maximise the positive impact of labour migration.

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Remembering Kabir chacha

CHANCHAL KHAN

NOT long ago, Kabir chacha (Professor Kabir Chowdhury) and I were having a small chat on superstition, something that stemmed from selecting a date that might suit him to be the chief guest at my audio album release function. Kabir chacha was way above superstition but our discussion was indeed educative, with hints of humour and laughter.

Superstition aside, Tuesday, December 13, is indeed an unlucky day for us. We lost Kabir Chowdhury. I did not visit his apartment yesterday. The day passed in sadness for me. The relentless voice of democracy, secularism, non-communalism, tolerance and liberal humanism will no more be heard.

My formal introduction with Kabir chacha was sometime in 1994 when I was living in Kathmandu. Rasheda Benu, his daughter, and Selim Jahan, her husband are my old acquaintances from our UNDP days. Kabir chacha and chachi arrived at our home on a beautiful summer day. They stayed with us for about a week, and each minute of our lives was filled with joy. We talked about literature, music, painting, poetry, the birds around our home, the mountains, the history of Bangla language (the first script was found in Kathmandu, as history suggests). What a learning experience for me!

As I would still lazily lie on the bed in the morning, Kabir chacha would finish his three rounds of walk around the vicinity. Most evenings would feature a bit of music, joined by my students and expatriate singers from Kolkata. Kabir chacha brought copies of his books, mostly translations of Kazi Nazrul Islam, and Anwar Pasha's book *Rifle, Roti, Aurat* (rifle, bread and women). We were blessed with these gifts, which remain readings for our children.

I would visit Kabir chacha's Gulshan home every time I returned home from abroad. Over tea, he would narrate how his democratic and secular aspirations received a rude shock after the partition of the subcontinent in 1947 and the emergence of Pakistan as an autocratic state with theocratic ideals.

As the Director of Bangla Academy, he played a major role in propagating secular values during the mass movements of 1969 and 1970. In the sovereign independent Bangladesh, Kabir chacha worked tirelessly through his writings, speeches and formal and informal discussions to imbue the citizens of the newly independent country with the values of democracy, secularism, non-communalism, tolerance and liberal humanism.

Both as a member-secretary of the National Education Commission and as education secretary to the government he tried to incorporate secular and demo-



cratic values in the curriculum, especially at the primary level, and achieved at that time a certain degree of success. Kabir Chowdhury and his associates took a rigid stand against the onrushing tide of reaction.

Following Bangabandhu's death, he and his associates tried to halt the growth of communalism and religious fundamentalism by organising meetings, rallies and seminars not only in the metropolitan city of Dhaka but also in several outlying cities. In these activities, Kabir chacha provided inspiring leadership. He headed several organisations that worked for secular democracy, such as the "Committee for Resisting the Killers and Collaborators of 1971," (better known as "Ekattorer Ghatok Dalal Nirmul Committee"), "Citizens' Social Rights Movement," and "Citizens' United Front."

He worked closely with the late Jahanara Imam in trying to bring to book the killers of 1971 as war criminals. The fundamentalists declared Kabir Chowdhury and 23 other distinguished colleagues of his as traitors to the state and instituted a formal case against them. The case was withdrawn later during the caretaker regime headed by retired Chief Justice Mohammad Habibur Rahman.

He wrote extensively on anti-fundamentalism, religious fanaticism and communalism, and stressed the need for developing broad human values, realising the importance of cultural diversity, and the imperative for developing a pluralistic society.

Kabir chacha translated Kazi Nazrul Islam's novel "Kuhelika." He was not a kuhelika (mystery) to us. He was neither a mystery himself nor a subject of fathomless mystery, and beyond any enigma. With the fall of this wicket, our innings seem to be ending. There are not enough Kabir chacha's left to advocate for a knowledge nation, where secular ideals will be practiced at heart; good music and books will replace sick habits, and humanism will triumph.

The writer is a development professional and a noted Rabindra Sangeet singer.