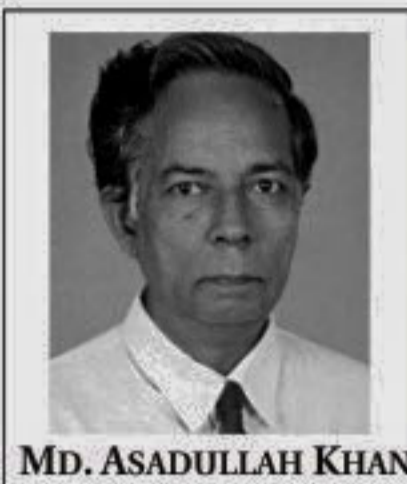


BITTER TRUTH

# Unguided youngsters: Untapped wealth



Md. ASADULLAH KHAN

**I**N the backdrop of the observance of the National Children's Day on March 17, grim reports of the plight of millions of children, mostly born of poor parents, are pouring in.

Bangladesh's young population (under 18), about 45% of the total population, are virtually unnoticed. They are the untapped wealth of the nation. The male children supplement the meagre income of the parents, while most female children work as domestic help. A large number of girls, because of abysmal poverty, fall into the clutches of child traffickers and find themselves in red light areas in the country or beyond the borders of the country.

There are reports that many child domestic helpers live and work under conditions that are oppressive, exploitative, and abusive. The poignant part is that, as they belong to the informal labour sector, they are excluded from legal protection, which makes them even more vulnerable.

According to a survey by Unicef, about 48% of them are working in the informal sector. As many as 8 lakh 75 thousand within the age range 10-15 years are included in the country's labour force.

In a recent report by Unicef, it was pointed out that the plight of the poor urban children is really horrific. They suffer much greater deprivation than those in the countryside. There are about one million children living in slums in cities, deprived of education and forced to work long hours in a predatory and unforgiving environment. Most horrifyingly, around 22% to 50% of the 2.5 million people forced into labour after being trafficked are children.

Most of the male children labour in factories and fields until their hands are gnarled

and backs bent. Many of them wander in the streets of big cities and towns surviving by begging and even thieving. Sleeping in railway stations or bus stands or on the footpaths, picking through garbage and sifting for food in the municipal dumps! They die of easily preventable diseases. The neglect of these children by the society and most of all by the government is most depressing.

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The summits, meetings and seminars that are often convened by the leaders of different political parties to find ways to care for this multitude remain confined to the agenda. Recommendations made to the policy makers in National Child Domestic Worker Convention about empowering children economically, as well as stopping exploitation, creating job opportunities for the parents in the rural areas and enacting laws to protect child workers from exploitation and abuse are fine on paper, but implementation seems to be a far cry.

Our failure to delve deep into this issue and grapple with it properly now threatens to lead to a catastrophic situation. This will mean turning the country into a snow capped volcano -- pretty and calm at the top but with serious problems seething within.

Why do we fight shy of the problem that warrants our attention most? What horrifying drudgery and waste of human energy due to lack of economic protection, guidance and motivation. Thanks to the electronic media, people can see boys aged

brings money. With crime woven into the fabric of the society, the nation has got every reason to be wary.

Drug addiction and drug trafficking among youths are eating into the vitals of the nation. The police chief of the country



A.M. AHAD/DRINK NEWS

between 8 and 12 doing hazardous work in small factories, workshops and brick kilns. Their daily wages range from Tk.30 to Tk.50.

Juvenile crime in Bangladesh has exploded in recent years. These kids cannot be blamed totally for committing the crimes. In many cases, they are lured with money by drug lords and some unscrupulous political masters in the area to work as drug couriers, and themselves get addicted to drugs. When the craving for drugs rises they can commit any crime, and even kill. Poor parents, sometimes indulging in crimes themselves, encourage their children to work as couriers because the job

has time and again made it plain that drug is the biggest enemy and most crimes are drug-fueled. Undeniably true, there is no soul-searching analysis as to why these kids belonging to all sections of the populace, rich and poor as well as those living in slum areas, are being drawn into the drug trade and getting hooked to drugs.

The fact is that many of these youngsters are resorting to unethical and illegal means of earning because of the lack of opportunities for doing anything else. How unfortunate the situation is that the casualties are children in this trade! We have a whole generation of human beings in the country

who could be so productive and helpful for the country but are being lost. The drug trade obviously has shown them that in a little time they can make a lot of money, and they have accepted the violence that goes with it. Government efforts to curb the daunting problem of drug smuggling, vandalism, and even child trafficking has been far from satisfactory.

The question that arises is whether the society and the government have done anything to protect the children from these scourges. What has dismayed the vast majority of the people who want the society to move in the proper direction is the tepid response of the government and the national leaders to this surge of mayhem indulged in by the youngsters. The way the whole country is plunging into chaos because of the apathy and neglect shown towards this vital section of the society signals a potential calamity. In fact, the country has inherited decades of benign neglect, misplaced priorities, and outright incompetence at every level.

The government must wake up to the stark reality that this vulnerable group of the population needs care and sustenance to ward off the disasters stalking the nation. Social welfare department may be restructured and their gamut of activities may be re-oriented in the light of the present horrifying state of the social ills creeping into the fabric of the nation. Under-privileged children and children born of poor parents who can't cater to their food and education should be picked up and placed at the responsibility of the government. The task may appear to be gigantic and the cost staggering but it will prove to be as much useful and profitable as setting up several industries.

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BETWEEN THE LINES

## Time for Kashmir solution



KULDEEP NAYAR

**T**HERE was a time when any statement on Kashmir, either by the prime minister of India or that of Pakistan used to create a rumpus. Politicians and the media on both sides would dwell for several

days on what a particular remark tried to convey.

Pakistan Prime Minister Yusuf Reza Gilani said the other day that his country would seek a solution on Kashmir through a dialogue, not hostilities. I have not seen any comment in India nor have I found any Pakistani opposition leaders or the press taking notice of it. More significant has been the silence of pro-terrorist groups which are talking in terms of jihad against India all the time. The usual Pakistani reiteration that Kashmiri would not be allowed to stay on the backburner is there. President Asif Ali Zardari has said this week that Pakistan has not forgotten Kashmir. But this does not change the ground realities, which have recognised that the line of control is the border between India and Pakistan.

Gilani has reiterated what the late Zulfikhar Ali Bhutto had enunciated in the Shimla Agreement four decades ago: "In Jammu and Kashmir, the line of control resulting from the ceasefire of December 17, 1971, shall be respected by both sides without prejudice to the recognised position of either side. Neither side shall seek to alter it unilaterally, irrespective of mutual differences and legal interpretations. Both sides further undertake to refrain from the threat of the use of force in violation of this line." The agreement has stood the test of time for more than three decades and except for the Kargil misadventure there has been peace.

Perhaps leaders of the Pakistan government, including the hawks, have come to realise that there is no alternative to amity. Perhaps the peace lobby on both sides has become bigger for even the governments to notice, and they refrain from giving ultimatums as it used to happen not until long ago. Perhaps the warning by Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru that any attack on Kashmir would be regarded as an attack on India has gone home. Three wars, plus the misadventure at Kargil have proved

that New Delhi will resist with all its force any push by Islamabad. Therefore, Prime Minister Gilani's observation not only makes sense but throws up another opportunity. Both the countries have to solve Kashmir or, for that matter, any other problem peacefully. It is a sort of no-war pact without the formality of signing one. Yet Gilani's statement should not lull India into complacency. Kashmir continues to be a problem. Every now and then there is an inci-

*What the two countries have to realise is that they have to give up their entrenched positions. Peace and friendship are more important than hostility. The extremists will continue to talk of hostilities because they have developed a vested interest in an unsettled situation.*

dent in the Valley to register the people's discontent. Even the elected government, headed by Chief Minister Omar Abdullah, has said more than once that Kashmir cannot be sorted out without Pakistan's participation.

India's armed forces too are not happy with the situation because the successive army commanders of Jammu and Kashmir have said that it is a political problem, not a military one. Yet India continues to station a large number of troops in Kashmir. It has been seen again and again that they are not trained to deal with domestic troubles.

The country's defence is understandable but the forces should be on the border, and not used for law and order purpose. The stationing of forces within the state only confirms that the government has no solution to the situation and it does not know how to settle the problem.

True, New Delhi has tackled international opinion effectively. There is hardly any adverse notice abroad. But this does not solve the problem. At best, it remains suppressed. Still there is

civil society in India which has certain obligations that a democratic polity has to carry out.

If the Kashmiris remain unhappy and the government they elect too feels that the problem has to be sorted out with Pakistan, New Delhi has to face the fact. This does not necessarily mean that Islamabad's demands have to be met. The latter too has to take certain realities into consideration, and one of them is that India can never have another division on the basis of religion.

The Valley, predominantly of Muslims, has gone its own way and has kept at a distance both the Hindu-majority Jammu and the Buddhist-majority Ladakh. Therefore, when President Asif Zardari says that Pakistan would continue to support the Kashmiris, he is only underlining the two-nation theory which India buried deep long ago. I do not think that even the intelligentsia in Pakistan has any faith left in that theory. But that is not the point at issue. It is Kashmir which, I believe, should get attention after Gilani's olive branch.

I do not agree with those who argue that what Pakistan could not get through wars has no case to claim it on the table. What the two countries have to realise is that they have to give up their entrenched positions. Peace and friendship are more important than hostility. The extremists will continue to talk of hostilities because they have developed a vested interest in an unsettled situation.

I have a solution to offer. Both governments should transfer all subjects except defence and foreign affairs to Kashmir, and soften the border so that the people of Jammu and Kashmir and the Azad Kashmir meet and jointly plan the development of their region. They can have their own air service and trade and cultural missions abroad. Visitors, not from the region, will need visa to enter either Kashmir.

Azad Kashmir will be part of Pakistan and Jammu Kashmir of India. The case pending before the UN would be withdrawn. The part of my proposal is that the Lok Sabha's elected members from Jammu and Kashmir should sit in Pakistan's National Assembly and those of Azad Kashmir in India's Lok Sabha. This is aimed at setting a pattern for the two countries to come closer in the future.

The writer is an eminent Indian columnist.

## WORLD TUBERCULOSIS DAY Progress of TB control programme

ASHEK HOSAIN

**T**UBERCULOSIS is a major public health problem in Bangladesh. It ranks sixth among high TB burden countries in the world. Several factors, such as dense population, environmental pollution, and low physical quality of life prevailing among many people, are contributing to high incidence of the disease in our community.

Though the magnitude is high, the government of Bangladesh has taken adequate measures to address the problem. DOTS, the globally accepted strategy for treating TB patients, has been adopted and expanded throughout the country, which ensures universal access to diagnosis and treatment of all patients suffering from tuberculosis free of cost. Uninterrupted supply of drugs and logistics has been ensured in all DOTS centres.

It is good that we have been able to utilise DOTS as the principal key to success for TB control programmes, but there are still some challenges we have to address. MDR-TB (multidrug resistant-TB) is one of them, which is going to be a real concern in the days ahead. It is natural that bacteria develop resistance to antibiotics and chemotherapeutics in course of time. That applies for TB also. MDR-TB is becoming a serious global issue day by day. In Bangladesh, the scenario is better, with the incidence being below 2% among new cases. This has been possible because of extensive DOTS implementation in this country.

For MDR-TB management the government has undertaken special measures, including introducing new tools like GeneXpert, LPA and liquid culture media methods, for quick diagnosis of the disease. We are also going to launch cPMDT (community based programmatic management of drug resistant TB) for convenient management of MDR-TB patients. At present, the programme is practiced in large chest disease hospitals, and needs long duration hospitalisation. This is uncomfortable and non-compliable for the patients.

We have other issues also which need attention. They are childhood TB care and practical approach to lung disease. We are mobilising resources and building capacity for those interventions.

So we will have to walk a long way to reach the goal of eliminating TB from the country. But surely we are on the right track for doing so. We have successfully engaged the private sector in this programme, with the government doing the stewardship, and donors are willing to fund this programme. There is a good sensitisation about the disease in the society. The service is community-based as well under definite, organised and disciplined national protocol. The case detection rate is over 70% and cure rate is over 92%.

So it may be concluded that though there are some challenges remaining, the progress is remarkable. If everything keeps going like this, Bangladesh TB control programme will be successful.

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