

BITTER TRUTH

Roadblocks in poverty alleviation



Md. ASADULLAH KHAN

THE discussion meet titled "Creating jobs for All" now being held in the city as part of the International Conference on People's Empowerment and Development stressed the need for creating better paying jobs, mostly in the manufacturing sector, for the 1.8 million odd youth who enter

the labour market every year. Unfortunately, that possibility remains a distant dream as political conflict lingers, reform measures and development efforts stall, economic woes mount and more and more people from the countryside continue to migrate to cities.

Apart from politics, economic expectation has turned into economic disappointment as the proposed World Bank-funded Padma Bridge construction has stalled due to graft allegation; metro rail project is now in limbo; roads communications is battered; and there is price hike of essentials.

In rural areas there is desperate poverty, mainly because of bad politics and uncaring governments. According to 2009 Planning Commission report about 30% of the 150 million people are living in extreme poverty.

Government effort to eradicate poverty is half-hearted. Most of the NGOs working in this line seemingly lack adequate skill, strategy and experience and have started projects with a business motive. NGOs can't lift the face of the country unless entrepreneurs with sound industrial projects and investment proposal come forward. Measures they take are only palliative and can never cure the ills plaguing the country. But who is going to invest money in a country mired in dirty politics, petty squabbling and frequent policy changes? In the years following 1975, the ailing economy grew worse with sharp division between two opposing blocks. In the wake of the bickering that often exploded into violence and even killing, sluggish growth and rising unemployment have hit the country hard.

The country and its people are being held hostage by a group of hyperactive leaders in the major political parties as well as some stalwarts in the administration talking irrelevantly on issues that foment conflict and tensions in the country. Most distressingly, some of them seem to make some astounding pledges that give

a feeling that the country will be flowing with milk and honey from tomorrow. But rhetoric can't fill the stomach. They preach one thing and practice another. These slogan-chanting people are the worst threat for the country. Mutual respect and trust in each other are sine qua non to flowering of democracy, development and prosperity.

One can justifiably say that Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina serves a citizenry weary of economic hard times. In a situation when just living is at stake, people are less interested in the different ideological biases or political bargaining or tall promises that can never be materialised. Let there be no debate that if we can't put bread on people's tables, there would be chaos everywhere.

The privatisation or rejuvenation of sick industries didn't succeed properly because of neglect and lack of commitment of the persons involved. Entrepreneurs from home and abroad are not interested in investing in the country because of the violence and frequent power breakdowns. The huge losses and ultimate closure of these industries is attributable to system loss, lack of accountability, pilferage, over-staffing and investment in the unproductive sectors. If things continue to run like this, the country will soon attain the status of economic pariah.

The ministers for planning and finance said in a press briefing that the country's economic crisis has been compounded by bureaucratic paralysis. Unless the bureaucratic machinery can be set in motion and some politicians and people's representatives rise above their hankering for wealth, no progress can be achieved and poverty elimination programmes will just become a slogan. To create infrastructure and avenues for employment, the government must set up skill development training centres at every district.

Failure of successive governments to create job opportunities has aggravated the problem. New arrivals are pouring in at the rate of 3 lakh a year in the capital city, crushing into a highly over-congested area. With each new wave come ever greater problems like street

agitation and extortion and political infighting and environmental degradation, which the administration finds difficult to tackle.

Almost 60% of Dhaka city's population are under 22 and are without jobs. Almost 45% of the population are slum dwellers. The migration has been spurred by catastrophes like drought, cyclone, flood, loss of farmland and famine-like conditions in the lean months of Ashwin-Kartik.

The rural areas have vast possibilities. The populace is implicitly committed and imbued with a sense of sincerity of purpose. But these possibilities remain to be exploited. Because of lack of patronage, entrepreneurship and motivation, much of the countryside is facing insurmountable problems -- poverty, illiteracy, corruption, social breakdown, vanishing resources, drought and environmental catastrophes.

Agriculture offers little hope for job creation because it faces a crisis of land as the spread of cultivable land for food grains has remained stagnant. The profitability from this land has not increased either, as land holdings have become smaller and investment is negligible. There is disincentive amongst the younger rural people to get involved in agriculture, which appears

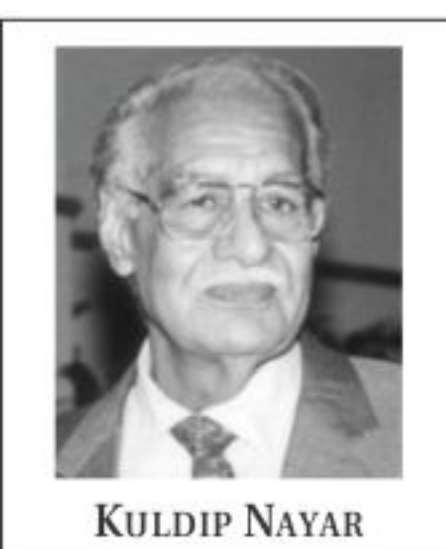
to promise only an uncertain livelihood and crippling debt. Until this government came to power, farm subsidies in the form of fertilizer, irrigation facilities and price protection were non-existent. Farmlands have given way to shrimp farms in large areas of greater Khulna, Barisal and Chittagong.

But despite the threats to the growth of the economy, there is a lot of enthusiasm and craving for a better life among the people. What is needed for the political leaders and industrial entrepreneurs is to consider self-sacrifice rather than self-service. The largely illiterate and overwhelmingly poor electorate signaled their disillusionment with the previous regime's failure to deliver on its tall promises to spur equitable economic growth. Agricultural and industrial rejuvenation as expected by the people did not happen.

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BETWEEN THE LINES

Party rises from ashes of movement



KULDEEP NAYAR

IT is not the first time that the Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) of India has disclosed the government's involvement in a scam. What is disconcerting this time is that Prime Minister Manmohan Singh has been accused of keeping away the CAG report from parliament

on coal bungling, running into Rs.1.45 lakh crore. The prime minister told parliament on May 23 this year that the CAG report was only a draft while the fact which has come to light is that the final report was received on May 11, both by the government and the president's office. It means that there is nothing sacrosanct for the Congress-led coalition, even parliament privileges, much less transparency that one expected from a government headed by Dr. Manmohan Singh.

The government is only a forwarding agency as far as reports by the CAG are concerned. He directly reports to parliament through the government as he did in the case of corruption in coal, a portfolio directly under the Prime Minister. How he rationalises the delay -- he is a master in doing so -- will be something which I await.

Yet the corruption part is really serious. Certain private parties and individuals are said to have been given benefits. They must have rendered service in kind and cash to the ruling party.

The sad part is that when a movement against corruption was needed the most, Gandhian Anna Hazare leading it, changes his strategy and thinks about contesting elections in 2014. Although he looked reluctant and expressed doubts in public, he seemed to have been prevailed upon by those who have always focused their eyes on the electoral politics. Some of them may well be members of the team which Hazare has now disbanded.

Yet abandoning a movement which had come to ventilate the resentment of civil society was leaving a job in the middle. True, the government was obtrusive and did not want to give a strong Lokpal (ombudsman). Equally true, the opposition parties were indifferent. This was all the more reason why the movement for a Lokpal needed to be intensified.

The failing health of some members who went on fast was one reason why the movement had to be restructured to give an excuse for dropping the fasts. In fact, fasts are a wrong strategy to begin

with. Mahatma Gandhi's fast was never against anybody. They were always positive in their demand and he was engaged in wresting freedom from the unwilling hands of the British.

With no immediate challenge on corruption, the government has blessed the move of Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) not to go in appeal on the rejection of disproportionate assets case against former UP chief minister Mayawati. Even her 21 votes in the Lok Sabha are important for Manmohan Singh government to show a majority in parliament.

And it seems obvious that the Congress will stick to office for the rest of the term, roughly 22 months, even if it has to play false as it has done in the case of CAG report on coal and even if it has turned a blind eye to Mayawati's assets which are unexplainable. She has reportedly amassed a wealth of Rs.116 crore since 2003.

I am not against Anna taking part in elections. He himself is having second thoughts. Yet it would have been far better if he had held wider consultations with activists like Medha Padkar and Aruna Roy. Such consultations did take place before Anna had begun the stir against corruption.

Indeed, this is the best time for Anna to enter the political field. But can a party rise from the ashes of a movement which had swept the intelligentsia off its feet and had kept the media focused for 18 months? In concrete terms, the movement has nothing to show. But the awakening of civil society is itself an achievement of sorts.

Whether Anna can convert the awakening process into voting process is yet to be seen? One thing which is in his favour is that he is being associated with an alternative to the Congress and the BJP, the two main political parties. People generally want a change and not either of the two at the helm of affairs again.

Gandhian Jayaprakash Narain (JP) was forced into a similar situation but accepted the Jana

Sangh, the predecessor of BJP, after the Jan Sangh promised him to cut off relations with the RSS. He was betrayed but in the process the Jana Sangh got credibility of a non-communal setup.

A similar situation faces Anna when Baba Ramdev wants the two of them together. Secularism and parochialism do not mix well. JP made the mistake and parochial forces gained from it. Anna should not traverse the same path. He has to stand alone when Baba Ramdev and his musclemen try to make a united stand. Their culture is different and civil society is not willing to accept them.

The mantle of JP has fallen on Anna. But JP traveled throughout India to awaken people to the need to have an alternative and defeat the rulers who have mutilated the very system to serve their purpose and sustain the status quo which gives them power and unfettered control.

I am not against Anna taking part in elections. He himself is having second thoughts. Yet it would have been far better if he had held wider consultations with activists like Medha Padkar and Aruna Roy. Such consultations did take place before Anna had begun stir against corruption. He must string together the various movements, however small, which are visibly working at the grassroots. These activists will provide grist to the mill of change that Anna is contemplating.

Maybe, a political platform, instead of a party, may serve a wider purpose. Some can work with the people's movements and some contest elections. They will help each other and together they will be a force to reckon with. Mahatma Gandhi had separated constructive workers from those engaged in the legislative field.

JP did not form the party till after winning at the polls. Yet he saw to it that his candidates would fight on one symbol. What proved to be his Achilles heel was the wrong candidates he chose. They were not the people to effect changes. They used the system to benefit themselves.

And then JP's health failed and he could not reach out to the people. Anna should be careful about his health and slowly but relentlessly harness support among those close associates who have the commitment and faith in basic values. He should take time. But he cannot afford to fail for the second time. Politics is not bad. Those who dominate it at this time have given it a bad name.

The writer is an eminent Indian Journalist.

Asians discovered US: proof



Nury Vittachi

ASIANS were the first people to get to America. We crossed through Siberia to reach a huge land which was completely empty of humans. And this amazing discovery came from clues found in a toilet, bo-

pins revealed last week.

Scientists found a coprolite in the back of a cave in Oregon used as a caveman toilet, according to the latest issue of Science journal. They noted that it was 13,000 to 15,000 years old and was clearly Asian.

Now I know what you're going to ask -- how does one tell? Fossilised particles of semi-digested MSG? Satchet of chilli sauce found nearby?

No. "The haplogroups, or the DNA types, are similar to what you find among certain Asian groups, also among Native American groups," Professor Eske Willerslev told the BBC.

Not sure exactly what that means but we need to make absolutely sure this information gets nowhere near Beijing.

Those guys would immediately send gunships across the Pacific and claim that America has been "an Integral Part of The Glorious Motherland since time began," etc.

If China took over America, the flow of that's country's creative contributions to world culture, such as the bacon milkshake and America's Funniest Home Videos, would surely dry up.

On second thoughts, maybe not a bad thing.

On a different note, a man was charged with "failing to wear a helmet" even though he was in his car. It has been more than 100 years since motorists were required to wear helmets and goggles to drive cars, but police officers slapped a summons for that offence on Amit Saini, 26, of Haryana, India, according to the Times of India last week. They definitely need to update the laws in that country, before some poor guy is charged with "failing to keep his spear sharp," etc.

And another note tells us that the Editor of the Times of London lost his cool with the wet English weather and simply ordered the rain to stop. "Let us make our position crystal clear: We are against this weather," said a tirade in the editorial column the other day. "It must stop raining, and soon."

They will definitely work. I've met UK newspaper editors: they're so scary no one can disobey them, not even the weather angels.