

Pervasive beggary is shaming us

Targeted efforts needed to combat it

WE have poverty eradication programmes aplenty but none by way of eliminating beggary. Thus, we get to hear of the declining numbers of people below the poverty line being claimed as poverty alleviation successes. This should have commensurately reduced beggary. But this is not happening; on the contrary, street begging has seen an exponential rise. During the month of Ramadan, poor people from out-lying areas enter the city as temporary beggars.

The ungainly and morbid manifestations of begging with broken flailing limbs, even a sedated child held tightly by the arm of an emaciated mother rapping on car windows bring slur on ourselves in the ultimate analysis. We cannot simply wish it away in view of its entrenched nature but we can will it away backed by a well-coordinated action programme.

Given the evident disconnect between declining poverty and rampant beggary, two imperatives crop up for urgent attention followed up by focused containment measures. First, an authority must be clearly designated, empowered and logistically supported to be dealing with begging practices thriving as business on the prevailing alms-giving culture. The Dhaka North and Dhaka South City Corporations as such designated bodies should have nodal agencies or composite task forces to do the job. Secondly, government bodies, non-government organisations and the corporate sector will have to coordinate efforts to help the mayors in putting adequate rehabilitation measures for those resorting to begging as a means of livelihood. Eradicating child beggary through setting up schools is a good way to go but then the major task involves rooting it out at the parents' level.

Violation of professional ethics

Accountability of hospitals and clinics in question

A report published in this newspaper yesterday reveals an alarmingly high number of caesarean deliveries performed in private hospitals. The percentage of caesarean births rose to 23 percent last year—up from 9 percent in 2007 despite the fact that this surgical procedure is unnecessary in most cases.

This is solely profit-driven and hence, unethical. A C-section is a life-saving option only in complicated cases and as per recommendations of the World Health Organisation, births through caesarean section should be kept below 15 percent.

The reasons why caesarean deliveries should be normally avoided unless absolutely necessary are many. Recovery from a C-section takes longer and like other types of major surgery it also carries a high risk of complications such as surgical injury, blood loss, reactions to anaesthesia, wound infection, and most importantly, increased risks through future pregnancies. Babies born through C-section may also miss exclusive breastfeeding, putting their brain development at risk of being stunted.

Lack of accountability and quality assurance system in clinics and hospitals are partly to blame. A 2012 study found that a lot of private hospitals do not adequately assess patients before performing such risky and expensive procedures.

We earnestly hope that the national strategy launched recently to ensure quality healthcare service in the country will identify this issue as a priority. Meanwhile, the government has to come up with a way to hold hospitals and clinics accountable for performing such surgeries without sound medical reasons.

COMMENTS

“BSF man cleared again of Felani murder”
(July 4, 2015)

▼

Mahmudul Hasan Shuvo
Bangladesh must appeal to the International Court of Justice.

▼

Noman Khan
Shame on them.

▼

Faysal Ahamed
It's unacceptable. India has finally proved that their judicial system is highly biased.

▼

Mosharaf Hossain
This is drama in the name of trial. Very sad!

Moving lower middle income status forward



This graduation of Bangladesh is an indication that despite various bottlenecks such as political turmoil, poor governance and natural disasters, the country is resilient and has been able to exhibit higher and steady economic growth over the years.

Enhanced image can bring in positives in the form of higher opportunities for commercial loans from the global market and higher foreign investment. But it also means getting soft loans from development agencies may become tougher. The rate of interest may be higher and the repayment period shorter than what is offered to low income countries. To face such situations the country has to be prepared by way of achieving further growth and higher income so that it can generate enough resources for its development to be less dependent on external finance as well as for repayment of any foreign loans.

Further growth will of course hinge on two critical issues: increased investment and building institutions. During the last decade or so, investment growth has not only been modest, but this growth was driven by public sector investment in terms of the larger size of the ADP. However, to achieve a growth of 8 percent, domestic investment has to be increased to 34.4 percent of GDP by FY2020. Investment in infrastructure such as transport and energy sectors will attract investment in other sectors and play a pivotal role in achieving higher growth. The major source of investment, of course, has to be the private sector—both domestic and foreign for which a favourable environment is a

prerequisite. Predicaments such as delay and lack of transparency in the decision making process and lack of effective implementation of regulatory policies act as disincentives, particularly for foreign investment. Good governance and institutional reforms are, therefore, crucial for promoting investment and growth.

Along with investment in infrastructure, we will also need investment in human resource development, skills upgradation, innovation and R&D. We have been too complacent with our achievement in education and health sectors. But the quality of education and health services still remains poor and is not up to mark for an emerging economy. It is time that we act on

For Bangladesh, moving ahead also means that it has to diversify its exports and move towards high value products.

improving the quality of our human resources through higher allocation of resources and establishing stringent quality control measures. Sadly, our education system does not encourage creativity and science and technology. The number of science graduates is declining relative to business graduates, not only due to students' lack of interest, but also due to the uncertainty of getting suitable jobs. On the other hand, though the economy has been performing relatively well, productivity is very low in all sectors due to lack of skills. Even with good agricultural output, our yield per acreage is lower than countries such as India and Thailand. Same goes for the readymade garments sector where output per worker is lower than other com-

peting countries such as China and Vietnam. Higher productivity cannot be achieved without sophisticated technology.

One has to be mindful of the fact that many countries which are advanced today took several years to graduate from being a lower middle income country (LMIC) to upper middle income country (UMIC). For example, it took 17 years for China, 19 years for South Korea, 27 years for Malaysia and 28 years for Thailand to move from LMIC to UMIC. Also some of our compatriots continue to be in the LMIC despite good economic performances. India has been in the LMIC category since 2007 while Vietnam has been in the same league since 2009. In fact, as countries move to a higher ladder of development, it becomes tougher to continue with the same momentum of growth. That is why growth rates are found to be higher in low income countries than middle and high income countries. A World Bank study shows that since 1960 only 13 out of 101 countries came out of the middle income category and graduated to the high income group in 2008. This is something to be cautious about for aspiring countries.

For Bangladesh, moving ahead also means that it has to diversify its exports and move towards high value products. As the country progresses further, the competitive advantage of cheaper output will fade away. The only way to remain competitive is to manufacture technology supported high value products.

Moving forward into the UMIC category will also mean that income inequality has to be reduced. Without making growth broad based and inclusive, sustainability of growth cannot be ensured. This has to be pursued through the creation of livelihood opportunities for all. But any job is not enough. Jobs have to be in the formal sector that will guarantee wages for a decent living. Social protection for the less privileged sections has to be strengthened as well.

The bucket list is thus quite long for us to move forward. Getting there will depend on how we address the challenges that lie ahead.

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Mahinda Rajapakse Bounces Back

SMRUTTI S. PATTANAIAK

AFTER months of negotiation and show of strength, former President Mahinda Rajapakse was finally given a ticket to contest by the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) which is part of the United People's Freedom Alliance (UPFA), a conglomerate of around sixteen parties. Few of its constituents had left UPFA before the presidential election. General Secretary of the UPFA, Susil Premajayantha, who is also a supporter of Rajapakse, said that President Sirisena has finally approved his candidature to contest the election from Hambantota constituency and rejected three other proposals which were proposed to him during a meeting of the UPFA of which he is the Chairman. The other three proposals that President Sirisena rejected were concerning the prime ministerial post for Mahinda Rajapakse, to give him leadership of the election committee and of the nomination board. The question is: why did President Sirisena, who had earlier rejected the proposal to make Rajapakse the prime ministerial candidate, even entertain the idea of giving him a ticket from the Party? Without his approval, this would not have been possible.

First, over the period of time, Rajapakse has tried to build his constituency within the SLFP – especially with the support those MPs who benefitted immensely from the last regime in terms of power and economic gains. They felt marginalised after Ranil Wickramasinghe was chosen as the Prime Minister as per the manifesto of the Common Opposition Parties that had made Sirisena their presidential candidate and ensured his victory. While Sirisena's party was the opposition in the Parliament, many of the MPs from the party also became ministers as part of forming a post-election national government to bring changes to the constitution. Rajapakse supporters organised rallies based on the theme of “bring back Mahinda” like the Nugegoda rally of February 18, rally in Kandy on March 7, rally in Ratnapura on March 26, May rally in Kurunegala and the June 12 Matara rally demonstrating that Rajapakse continues to enjoy popu-

lar support. In fact, these shows of strength were projected as popular demand for Rajapakse to make a comeback to politics as he said “people's requests asking me to contest cannot be ignored.” Many of the SLFP members who had supported Sirisena in the last election felt that since he received nearly 48 percent of votes, mostly in the Sinhala constituency in the south in the last election, his candidature can only be ignored at the peril of the SLFP.

Second, unlike the last presidential election, the parliamentary election is going to be a contest between the SLFP and the UNP and their allies. Thus battle lines will be drawn between these two

UPFA in case he's denied nomination from the party, then Wickramasinghe would surely win the election. Thus pro-Rajapakse factions along with other SLFP members put pressure on Sirisena to accept Rajapakse's nomination.

Third, President Sirisena may have calculated that nominating Rajapakse as a candidate is not a bad option. After all, the President still retains the power to appoint the Prime Minister after the election. Moreover, under the constitution the president continues to enjoy vast powers. The 19th amendment which was introduced to correct the lopsided balance of power that was in favour of the President and attempted to



Mahinda Rajapakse

PHOTO: AFP/ISHARA S. KODIKARA

political parties and their ideological differences. Many in the SLFP thought that the only way to defeat the UNP would be to bring Rajapakse back to the electoral scene. It was generally believed that the UNP had a fair chance to win the forthcoming parliamentary election. Ranil Wickramasinghe had successfully capitalised on the disaffection for the Rajapakse regime by putting a common presidential candidate in which the dominant minorities' parties, i.e. the Tamils and Muslims, whole-heartedly supported Sirisena. The voting pattern in the last presidential election showed that in case the SLFP votes are split and if Rajapakse decides to contest outside

transfer some of these powers to the Parliament did not succeed in bringing major changes. Sri Lanka's Supreme Court ruled out major changes and clearly mentioned that any fundamental changes to the power balance would require a referendum as per article 123 of the Sri Lanka constitution. However, it remains to be seen how many of Rajapakse's loyalists are going to retain their seats in the next parliamentary election to pressurise Sirisena to nominate Rajapakse as Prime Minister after election.

In the context of Rajapakse's decision to contest in the election, one perceives a significant consolidation of the minor-

ity votes. Though the Tamil National Alliance (TNA) and the Sri Lankan Muslim Congress (SLMC) have announced that they will contest the election separately, it is likely that these two parties will be able to get most of the seats in the North and the East. The Tamils have not forgotten the kind of state surveillance that was carried out when Rajapakse was in power and how the Northern Provincial Council was reduced to a non-entity. Tamils' political grievances were securitised under the UPFA regime. Similarly, the Muslims suffered a number of attacks orchestrated by the Bodu Bala Sena, an outfit patronised by Gotabhaya Rajapakse, Mahinda Rajapakse's brother and the dreaded former Defence Secretary. It is also likely that Rajapakse will up the ante by bringing in the Tamil issue to the electoral politics. He will play on people's fear that under Wickramasinghe's 150-day regime the LTTE regrouped and strengthened, thereby making the war victory meaningless. Of course, it would be difficult for him to blame Wickramasinghe alone without bringing in the role of President Sirisena. Moreover, corruption and misuse of power by the Rajapakse regime would also dominate the electoral politics and this election may not be a cake-walk for him.

Sirisena's approval of Rajapakse's nomination has certainly disheartened the Sinhala liberal constituency that suffered in the hand of the Rajapakse regime. Many journalists were tortured, some of them went missing while a few fled the country. The authoritarian tendencies of the last UPFA regime dismantled all independent constitutional bodies and made a mockery of the state institution. As was reported, out of the Rs 1.7 trillion budget of Sri Lanka, Rs 1.2 trillion was controlled by the Rajapakse family. Many perceive Sirisena's approval of Rajapakse's nomination to be a betrayal of the mandate that people had given to him by voting for him overwhelmingly with the only hope that he would put democracy back on track. Only time will prove how prudent Sirisena's politics is.

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Stop Rampal power plant project

On June 29, while speaking in the parliament, PM criticised those who opposed the construction of the coal based power plant near the Sundarbans. We have learnt from news reports that three French banks have decided not to invest in the Rampal project as this project violates the environmental impact assessment guidelines for coal-based thermal power plants. On August 1, 2013 Department of Energy of Bangladesh approved the construction, but then changed its stance and set 50 preconditions for the project. But the location of the plant, 14 kilometres from the Sundarbans,

violates one of the basic preconditions, which says such projects must be outside a 25-kilometre radius from the outer periphery of an ecologically sensitive area.

The plant will need to import 4.72 million tons of coal per year. This massive freight will need about 59 ships—each having a capacity of 80,000 ton that would be taken to the port on the bank of Poshur river. The 40 kilometres from the port to the plant cuts through the Sundarbans and it includes the river flow path. Environmentalists say these coal-carrying vehicles are not often covered as they scatter large amounts of fly ash, coal dust, sulfur and other toxic chemicals which will be released throughout the life of the project. Environment and ecology experts predict that the plant will release toxic gases such as carbon monoxide, oxides

of nitrogen and sulphur dioxide, thereby putting the surrounding areas and, most importantly, the Sundarbans at grave risk.

According to a report published in New Age, in the past few years the Indian central and state authorities which deal with environmental concerns in India denied the proposal of NTPC to set up a similar coal-fired thermal power plant at Gajmara in Gadarwara of Madhya Pradesh over a number of points. NTPC failed to get approval of the Indian Central Green Panel (Green Tribunal) in 2010 for the construction of that coal-fired thermal power plant because the site comprised a vast double-crop agricultural land, a situation similar to Rampal.

Nur Jahan, Chittagong

Levy heavy fines on cigarettes

Smokers not only destroy their health but also those of innocent non-smokers, by forcing them to inhale in an environment of tobacco smoke. For this crime of deliberately harming the health of non-smokers, the best measure will be to impose excessively high excise duty on all 'biri' (local tobacco leaf rolled for smoking) and cigarettes.

Such a punitive duty should hopefully gradually decrease this addiction that harms both the smokers as well as the non-smokers.

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