

Trapped in poverty

Make development inclusive

In a recently concluded national workshop that brought together development practitioners and researchers, the subject of discussion was how to make national development relative to the poor marginalised and excluded groups. People eking out a living like tea workers, sweepers, dalits, sex workers, barbers, washer-men and women, etc. constitute the marginalised and the various social safety net programmes are not designed to reach any of these excluded groups who number anywhere between 500,000 to 800,000 people. While the government has invested heavily in major infrastructure programmes that have expanded road, rail and energy sectors and benefitted mainstream segments of the population attention has not been paid to the excluded groups who continue to remain outside the focus of government interventions – either economic or social.

Many of these groups remain entrenched in poverty as the trades or professions they are engaged in have been passed down from generation to generation. The hurdles they face are in the areas of access to health, education and voting rights. That they have been ignored since the country gained independence is most unfortunate. However, we are happy to see that a census is being carried out to assess the number of people belonging to the marginalised communities and that should provide the government with the information to design programmes to help get some of the social welfare programmes through various ministries and departments, to those who need it most. Bangladesh has taken giant steps to reduce extreme poverty but that success will not be complete unless the marginalised are also taken into account.

Curtain comes down on Rio 2016

For us it is time for serious reflections

We congratulate Brazil and the city of Rio as well as the IOC for successfully holding the world's largest quadrennial sporting event. The multi-sport extravaganza, held amidst concerns about terrorism and mismanagement, was organised beautifully, celebrating the bond of brotherhood and the triumph of sports over adversities with all its strands and hues. This is especially true for the participants of war-ravaged Syria and Iraq, where people live by the day, not sure of seeing the next morning. The sportspeople from these nations live and train in the most despicable conditions, yet they have participated in Rio 2016 after qualifying in some team sports in their own right.

As for team Bangladesh, it is time for some serious reflections. It is sad to note that we hold the unenviable title of being the world's most populous nation not to win any Olympics medal ever. Save for golf, all our Olympic participants were wild card entries. There is no denying that meeting international standards and challenging the big guns of world sports cannot be successfully achieved overnight, it demands time and planning.

The enthusiasm generated by the winning performance of Bangladeshi-born Russian rhythmic gymnast Margarita Mamun demonstrates our thirst for Olympics glory, to the extent of owning up and relating to her success.

We must not forget that in sports there is no substitute to hard work and perseverance. The thrust should be on holding age-based sporting competitions to glean talents at the district and divisional levels. The country's lone sports academy in Savar should go through a detail evaluation. On top it all, it is important to create a sporting culture; for that we need more playgrounds, good coaches and proper infrastructural facilities.

COMMENTS

"A win for two countries"

(August 22, 2016)

Abdullah Haroon Pasha

A win for two countries; well said. Congratulations Margarita!

"Hajj crisis deepens"

(August 21, 2016)

Saimon Tune

This is the perfect example of system loss.

Zallal

How come that every year, thousands of pilgrims do not get their visas on time and that their pilgrimage is pushed into uncertainty?

Musa

Stop the blame game. It won't bring any result.

Jannat Hasan

The agencies or the ministry, whoever is responsible for that crisis is the least concern of the pilgrims. They just want to perform the hajj and that's all.

KNOT SO TRUE



RUBANA HUQ

IT'S called a sprawl. We just happened to experience a mushroom growth. It happened to us when schools, garment factories, stores, boutiques, offices just stealthily popped up in our neighbourhood. Instead of driving for an extra mile, we conveniently drove around our own vicinity when we wanted to have a cup of coffee, stopped by at a boutique to buy our clothes, and sent our kids to the nearest schools while we drove to our offices in the next block. Proximity breeds comfort. It also kills rules. So, every time someone orders for the mall next door to be demolished, they look for licenses, permits and violations.

Six months ago, the move to shift commercial establishments from residential areas started with full enthusiasm. Every newspaper, every talk show, every informal discussion centred around one decision. People walked in with concerns of relocation and finance. How would they shut shop overnight? Where would they go? While the noise was all over every area, every zone, one noise that never left my head was: Where was governance when all these shops, hotels, schools, factories were being built, right in front of our eyes? While we watched a housewife turn into a designer, a young graduate begin her own start-up, a young brother join a school, all of us had encouraged a whole community to contribute to the vibrancy of our neighbourhoods. While shops in garages sprung up, we watched people being employed, caterers boom, and regular people finding entertainment spaces right by their own abodes. Gradually, we have all become dependent on these outfits.

Running a bulldozer over an extended part of the house, which was being used as a bakery, is easy. But rehabilitating the baker, the waiters and the rest in there isn't quite so. But then again, who

thinks about that anyway? And while shops are being demolished, evacuated, etc, while the owners are being punished, are we punishing those who allowed the sprawl to happen? Very often we forget that it's easy to exercise power, but difficult to introspect, self diagnose and treat our own evils that lie well within our own selves.

Dhaka has almost 50,000 people living in one square kilometre, compared to 1,510 inhabitants living in one square km in London, 10,831 even in the most populated city, New York, 11,297 in Delhi, and 6,897 in Hong



Furniture being shifted from a campus of a school in Dhanmondi. The campus was being relocated as per a Supreme Court order.

PHOTO: RASHED SUMON

Kong, one of the most populated cities in Asia. Therefore, in Dhaka how shall we ever be able to respect laws of zoning and have perfect plans of picture perfect neighbourhoods? A mix is inevitable! No matter where we go, even in the tiniest of neighbourhoods in Europe, every street has an art gallery, a café, a convenience store, et al. One misses nothing. Weekends are filled with flea markets, where people flock to get their grocery, find a little old urn or an old lamp and even discover rare books. Neighbours meet,

kids chat, friends share a drink and in the process, it becomes a friendly space where one knows the neighbourhood barber, the restaurant owner, the IT whiz next door and so on and so forth. Those places have parks, where kids go play soccer while parents watch them with pride. In our case, even our schools don't have fields. Therefore, we don't know who our kids are bonding with over a sport.

All of that "para"/"moholla" concept is gone. As Baudrillard stressed on Hyper Reality, he aptly painted the post-modern man, who knows about his

neighbour through a television screen. While we remain cooped up in our own comfort zones, we don't know who lives next door, or if they are in pain or danger. These are the curses of post-modernity. Isolated by selfishness, we live in times, where the minimal bonding happens over a neighbourhood coffee shop or a restaurant. And that too is at stake today.

I remember, as a young girl, I used to watch my parents agonise about their next move while landlords served them notices, day after day. I watched them

circling the house-for-rent section in the daily newspapers, every time we had three months' notice to find our new temporary home. With time, I grew an expertise in packing and as a teenager knew different ways to label, separate and pack our stuff.

I will end this piece by sharing personal experiences of our workers who just relocated to a brand new factory 20 kilometres away from where they were. Some have settled into their new homes; some haven't. Those who couldn't, still commute in buses provided by the company. But the journey is killing for those who have to return to their home late at night, as it takes at least one and a half hours to return from work. How could I explain this to authorities when we were first asked to relocate one of our factories from a shared building? How could I tell them that while I understood that it was not "safe" to be there because of shared tenancy, it had the best structural integrity out of all the factory buildings that we had? So, till date, the workers are still pining away to return to their old spaces, as the new place offers no comfort other than the satisfaction of working in a brand new space. Financial compensation has also failed to satisfy them.

Moving is not an easy thing. It is coated by uncertainty and fear of the next space not being as good as the last one. The cost of movement isn't comforting either as along with it comes the resistance to oppose the authority. If commercial spaces need to be shut down, authorities must kindly ensure that there are alternative spaces for them. Closure of business involves uprooting the lives of many. If commercial spaces need to be demolished, authorities must kindly guarantee a completely transparent process, which will not allow any under the table dealings. After all, the authorities have the right to decide, but it's also up to the people to resist any unilateral moves. And no authority is immune to public wrath.

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MALDIVES

Crisis in paradise and death of free speech

SELINA MOHSIN

In a survey this year, Maldives secured the highest rating as the most coveted "dream honeymoon resort". But away from the islands of shimmering beaches and overwater bungalows on a sparkling lagoon, its capital, Male', is in a political crisis under an increasingly oppressive regime.

After a series of actions that led to human rights abuses, the government has now muzzled the press and freedom of expression. This started in March 2016 when news of corruption of over US\$30 million leaked out. President Yameen was alleged to have been responsible, with ministers and MPs benefitting from the heist.

A bill to criminalise 'defamation' was immediately proposed by President Yameen and his supporters. Upon hearing this, journalists campaigned against it, claiming that it was designed to kill press freedom and pointed out that it would also threaten online debates on political issues. Their slogan, "In defence of 27", referred to the provision in the Constitution guaranteeing freedom of speech. In April, the police arrested some 18 persons from a 'sit in protest' and on July 26 broke up a silent protest by journalists.

Amnesty International called the government to stop enacting the bill into law, as it would have a "stifling effect on the right to freedom of expression".

Disregarding widespread public outrage, the bill was placed before the *Majlis* (Parliament) on August 9. Around 47 MPs out of the 78 present voted in favour, and the bill became law. MPs of the ruling PPM party defended it on religious grounds, claiming that "protecting one's good name was an Islamic tenet" and accused journalists of "defaming politicians".

The bill imposes punitive measures on those who wish to exercise their democratic rights and freedom. The

penalties are US\$ 130,000.00 for slander and criticism of the government or a jail sentence of six months for those who are unable to pay the fine. Journalists are barred from reporting allegations if the accused refuses to respond. This is a 'Catch 22' situation, as the accused persons would risk government anger if they did respond.

Maryam Didi, an MP of former president Mohamed Nasheed's MDP, has termed August 9 a "dark day" in the history of the country, since the Constitution was violated and citizens deprived of their rights.

The bill sparked fierce criticism from

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USA, UK, EU, Germany, Norway and Netherlands. They condemned it as a "serious setback to free speech" in the Maldives. They urged President Yameen to nullify the bill and establish a democratic government immediately. This went unheeded, even though some MPs of Yameen's own People Progressive Maldives (PPM) criticised it.

The PPM is headed by President Yameen's half brother Maumoon Abdul Gayoom, who had been president for 30

years. Gayoom himself criticised Yameen for the bill and news of this leaked out. MPs loyal to Gayoom stated, "A president is a servant of the people and criticism of his actions does not amount to slander". However, Yameen boldly claimed that it did not contradict international law! One wonders to which international law he was referring.

The relationship between Mamoun Abdul Gayoom and his half brother President Yameen has been cooling for several months. Conflict over the leadership of the party has sharpened with Gayoom's refusal to endorse Yameen as a presidential candidate in the forthcoming 2018 election without a primary. The party has fractured into two. Gayoom's son, Faras, was expelled from the PPM for voting against a bill authorising the government to award islands for sale without the required bidding process. A source from the opposition MDP party pointed out that this could allow countries like China to establish military bases in the Maldives, thereby risking destabilising the power dynamics of the Indian Ocean.

Gayoom retaliated to the expulsion of his son by suspending the PPM Committee and launching a reform agenda, claiming that the *Majlis* was endorsing legal changes that were leading to massive corruption. This, in turn, led MPs loyal to Yameen to file a lawsuit seeking to invalidate Gayoom's reform agenda.

In July, Foreign Minister Dunya Mamoun, daughter of Mamoun Abdul Gayoom, resigned, citing her opposition to capital punishment, which the government adopted in May 2016, as the grounds for her resignation. But local media connected the resignation to the conflict between her father and Yameen, his half brother. This game of political party roulette is spinning.

In a surprising step, the government on August 11 switched off the first private Dhi Television channel of

Maldives. Dhi TV's last broadcast was at midnight. It was just a day after the *Majlis* had endorsed the bill criminalising 'defamation'. Phi FM, a radio station linked to the TV station, and a Dhivehi online website were also ruthlessly switched off.

But that was not all. In another move, it was announced on August 11 by the government that the Maldivian Defence Forces were barred from meeting or interacting with ministers, political activists, foreigners and diplomats without permission from senior military officials.

This curb on the Defence Forces came in the midst of a further intensification of the political crisis as the 'Maldives United Opposition', a number of political parties and former senior bureaucrats, are determined to remove Yameen from office.

Currently, the judiciary is compromised; the rule of law fractured; freedom of press severely curtailed; and democracy a farce.

As early as February 24, 2016, the Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative (CHRI) and the Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group (CMAG) had called for reform. But Yameen continued his ruthless actions to remain in power. Maldives is now on the formal agenda of the CMAG. The country needs to acknowledge the gravity of the Commonwealth's concern regarding the deterioration of all democratic values. Unless reversed, the deterioration could lead to suspension or expulsion from the Commonwealth and provide ample justification for sanctions on the island state by the world community.

With increased pressure from within the Maldives and by the outside world, President Yameen may soon find that he has very little room left to manoeuvre.

The writer is former Bangladesh High Commissioner to the Maldives.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Shocking killing of children

The recent killing of two siblings by their own mother at the city's Bashabo area has shocked us to the core. Both the children were hacked to death with sharp objects. We still can't forget the gruesome killing of the two Banasree kids by their mother in March of this year. I wonder what has gone wrong with people; what motivation can drive a mother crazy enough to kill her own children?

Hashem Miah
Barisal

We mourn the immortal

August is the month of mourning for the Bangladeshi people. In 1975 on this month, some misguided people killed the architect of free Bangladesh, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. Though he is no more, his

deeds have made him immortal in the hearts of the common people. We pay our solemn homage to him, the father of the nation.

Ahmed Niaz
Mohammadpur
Dhaka

