

In pursuit of social security for the urban poor

ASHEKUR RAHMAN

It was a week after the recent fire incident that turned everything to ashes in a slum in Mirpur when people like Shahida Begum were looking for help to restore their normal lives. The only people that came to their aid and fed them were their neighbours. Poor people who are forced to settle down in slums or become squatters in the city are the most common victims of natural and man-made calamities in the rural areas, and are often found to be helpless after losing all their belongings in such incidents. They only receive humanitarian or philanthropic support from neighbours, relatives, and some NGOs, but lack permanent and systematic response systems that could help to rehabilitate them and overcome their loss gradually.

Peara Begum and Lucky Akhter share similar experiences in Mirpur Jheelpar slum. They represent the urban poor in Bangladesh in the sense that there are no safety net programmes to cover them during difficult times and help them build back their lives in a better way. The victims in rural areas, however, are more fortunate than in the urban areas. The question to ask then is, what makes this difference?

Public safety net efforts in Bangladesh have not been mainstreamed as a social concern. On the contrary, it evolved in the form of food rations and as a response to disaster-affected communities and was popularly known as “relief”. Other than these occasional and periodical needs fulfilment efforts for the poor and affected communities, pension schemes for state employees has been in practice for a long time. With the development trends that began soon after 1974, and with new provisions and coverage adopted during the 1980s and 90s, the current decade has seen multiple dimensions of safety net coverages, including bringing employment under the current social safety net schemes. In the current budget (2019-20), the government plans to spend 14.21 percent (Tk 74,367 crore) of the total expenditure



Efficient urban development can play a major part in combating national poverty, mainly through ensuring better lives for the poor migrants.

PHOTO: SHAHEEN MOLLAH

for social safety net programmes (SSNPs)—a 15 percent (Tk 64,656 crore) jump from the respective FY 2018-19 allocations.

Under the SSNPs, the country generally allocates cash and in-kind transfers, and conditional cash transfers for the recipients including widows, persons with disabilities, the blind, orphans and those of old age through the administrative structure. Although eligibility criteria don't differ between rural and urban areas, coverage of these safety nets is low for the urban poor.

Even though a wide range of safety net programmes are in operation in Bangladesh, growing urbanisation and the alarming increase in the number of slum dwellers pose new challenges for designing safety net programmes needed for the poor of an entirely new type. According to BBS (HIES

2016), the lower poverty rate came down to 12.9 percent (from 17.6 percent in HIES 2010) at the national level, with the highest 14.9 percent (21.1 percent in 2010) at the rural level and the lowest 7.6 percent (7.7 percent in 2010) at the urban level. This shows a prominent decrease in rural lower poverty rates but not in the urban areas.

Though social safety nets have emerged as an important component of the anti-poverty strategy, coverage remains a major challenge for newer risks such as urban poverty, resulting in growing inequality. According to the Centre for Policy Dialogue, urban inequality increased much more than rural inequality during the period from 1973-74 to 2015-16.

The rural-urban differences in safety net coverage are stark, with coverage being

significantly higher in the rural than in the urban areas. Part of this is due to the fact that a higher proportion of the country's poor lives in rural areas. Safety net programmes have been historically focused on rural areas, and generally referred to as post-disaster relief, and more recently as an act of income-generating activity. Over time, however, safety nets have transcended and graduated to a mainstream social and developmental concern.

The reality of urban poverty is increasingly acknowledged in the social safety net programmes in Bangladesh, but urban areas (and the increasingly rapid urbanisation) pose complex problems of delivering social security schemes. These are largely on account of the continuous influx of people into the cities, and lack of relative capacity of the urban local bodies in handling migration. The urban poverty-ridden families need to supplement household incomes and skills to enhance human capital and access to basic services, while rural poverty-based SSNPs may not require this under current coverage. Housing, transportation, and labour market access are the most significant issues in the lives of the urban poor, rather than receiving food or cash via grants. Therefore, these are crucial things to keep in mind in designing effective safety net programmes for the urban poor.

Given the urban proliferation with the inadequacy of services provided to the residents, the rapid increase in urban population is bound to place a further strain on infrastructure and services. Strategies such as targeting urban areas based on the profiles and administrative arrangements, involving the city and municipal local bodies, and revised urban social security programmes are ways to potentially address the present chaotic situation and ensure urban social security in light of the global commitment of “leaving no one behind.”

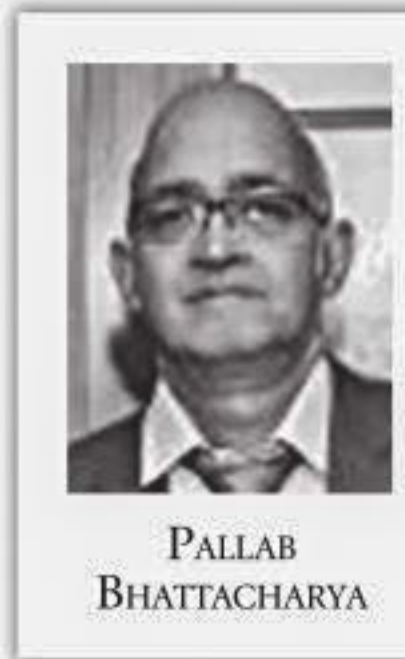
The fundamental services, apart from social security, that are most wanted for urban poor and slum dwellers are: affordable housing, provision of potable water, sanitation, education for children, mobility, and medical benefits. Urban poverty is

not only limited to these wants, but also include cumulative deprivations, where a particular want is a cause of other wants. The magnitude of urban poverty is enormous and multifaceted, which requires customisation of schemes for effective implementation with regard to social security schemes. The government is well aware of these issues and stated in the country's 7th Five Year Plan that efficient urban development can play a major part in combating national poverty, mainly through ensuring better lives for the poor migrants and creating opportunities for the growth of industrial, commercial, and service activities which can become an engine of growth for the national economy.

The government has predominantly emphasised poverty eradication in its 7th Five Year Plan to reduce the upper poverty rate from 24.3 percent in 2016 to 18.6 percent by 2020. The government is attempting to alleviate poverty by implementing various kinds of SSNPs. The scope and allocation for SSNPs is being extended every year following the life cycle approach of social safety nets, which is contributing to a reduction of the poverty rate, incidence, and depth of poverty. The vision of National Social Security Strategy (NSSS) is to expand coverage to the residents of urban areas and to the socially excluded people through strengthening the social security system for the urban poor. However, there are equally formidable challenges in financing this strategy, and in overhauling the coordination, implementation, and monitoring systems which are in place. The scaled-up attention to issues of safety nets and social protection is not being driven only by the experts' search for more effective anti-poverty strategies. It is simultaneously an outcome of the deepening of welfare aspirations of citizens and the pressure on the state to respond to these aspirations that will ensure social security for all including the urban poor.

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Politics, verbal duel hot up again over NRC



PALLAB BHATTACHARYA

Banerjee-led Trinamool Congress is becoming increasingly shriller.

It is Mamata who began the latest round of attrition on August 31. Since then, she has progressively raised the pitch on the NRC by launching strident attacks on the BJP, piloting a resolution in the state assembly against an Assam-type exercise in West Bengal and finally leading a street march in Kolkata on September 12. Mamata has made her intention clear to take on the BJP on the NRC issue, which fits so well into the saffron party's Hindutva narrative, as was evident in the run-up to the national election earlier this year. On the other hand, BJP President and Indian Home Minister Amit Shah chose to visit Guwahati on September 7-8—in his first trip to Assam since the publication of the final NRC—and articulate the position of the party's central leadership on the issue. Until Shah's visit, it had been the local BJP leaders, notably Assam Finance Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma and the party's state chief Ranjit Kumar Das, who had been doing the talking criticising the exclusion of lakhs of “genuine” Indian citizens, a euphemism for Hindus, from the final NRC and the inclusion of “illegal immigrants” in it.

Amit Shah spoke at two separate platforms in Guwahati: 1) a purely administrative one provided by North Eastern Council comprising chief ministers of eight states in the region, and 2) a political forum comprising top leaders of the BJP's regional allies under the umbrella of

North East Democratic Alliance (NEDA). It should be noted that the BJP and its allies are ruling all the north-eastern states, where the Congress party has been over the years squeezed out of power. Shah was high on rhetoric on the NRC issue declaring that not a single illegal immigrant would be allowed to stay back, not only in Assam but in any other part of India. He also indicated that the BJP-led central government would bring back the Citizen Amendment Bill to help non-Muslims left out of the final NRC. His remarks were aimed at assuring the key ideological constituency of the BJP in Assam, where Hindus had backed the BJP in the state assembly elections in 2016, and where there is now concern among its support base after lakhs of Hindus were excluded from the final NRC.

BJP has taken every opportunity to point out “irregularities” in the inclusion and exclusion of names in the document. According to Indian media reports, a majority of those excluded from the final NRC are

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People check their names on the final list of the National Register of Citizens (NRC) at Buraburi village in Assam

PHOTO: DAVID TALUKDAR/ AFP

Hindus, and according to Mamata, their number stands at 11 lakh (out of the total of 19.6 lakh). The exclusion of Hindus also elicited concerns at a meeting of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), the BJP's ideological mentor, and its 35 affiliated bodies in Pushkar, Rajasthan, on September 8-9, when the BJP General Secretary Ram Madhav made a presentation on the NRC in Assam. What is unmistakable in BJP's criticism of the final NRC is that the party is not opposed to it as a concept per se but rather the manner in which the enumeration was conducted.

While seeking to assuage its Hindutva constituency on the final NRC, Shah had also taken care to address another important constituency of the BJP—the regional parties of the north east—during his Guwahati visit. At the NEDA meeting, he sought to dispel apprehensions that the Citizen Amendment Bill would override Article 371 of the Indian constitution that gives special protection

to Nagaland and Mizoram in terms of land ownership and transfer rights, their religion, social customs, administration of civil and criminal justice according to their customary laws and procedures. These are matters on which the Indian parliament cannot legislate at present. The apprehensions had been sparked by Congress leaders and civil society groups in the north east after Article 370—which gave special status to Jammu and Kashmir—was abrogated in August. At the NEDA meeting, after Meghalaya Chief Minister Conrad Sangma brought up the question if the Citizen Amendment Bill would take precedence over Article 371, Shah's assurance was that the bill would “not hurt” the relevant article.

The advantage for the BJP in the north eastern states is that all regional parties there want the NRC. But the BJP's main challenge is that the opposition to “illegal immigrants” in the entire north east is religion-neutral. This is

also true for the agitation against immigrants in Assam. What appears to have prompted Mamata to play up the final NRC issue now is the fact that so many Hindus, Buddhists and Muslims have been left out of the document. This is evident from her speeches in the assembly during the debate over the resolution against the NRC in West Bengal, and at her protest march-cum-rally in Kolkata on September 12. She has given enough indications that her party's anti-NRC posture will become sharper in the coming days. The assessment in the Trinamool Congress is that the “flawed” results of the NRC in Assam, over which the BJP has developed cold feet, have provided Mamata with an opportunity to counter the saffron party's oft-repeated charge of Muslim appeasement against her.

Mamata, at the September 12 rally, made it a point to mention that a large number of non-Muslims too have been excluded from the final NRC. By doing this, she wants to turn the table on the BJP, which favours the NRC in West Bengal, in the run-up to the 2021 assembly polls in her own state. However, in doing so, Mamata, on the face of it, may also run the risk of playing into the hands of the BJP which benefited immensely from its polarising nationalist plank during the parliamentary election in West Bengal, with Trinamool Congress suffering major losses in terms of seats and its saffron rival making huge strides. So, for Mamata, the question is: will the political risk be worth taking?

Amit Shah had repeatedly made it clear that the NRC would happen across India. That is not unlikely with the BJP having a commanding majority in the Lok Sabha and the political acumen of turning the numbers game in its favour in the Rajya Sabha. As far as West Bengal is concerned, much will depend on the verdict of the next assembly polls due in 2021 and how ahead of it Mamata frames the Trinamool Congress' narrative on the NRC.

Pallab Bhattacharya is a special correspondent for The Daily Star.

QUOTABLE Quote

MILAN KUNDERA
(Born: 1929)
CZECH-BORN FRENCH WRITER

“Love is the longing for the half of ourselves we have lost.”

BEETLE BAILEY by Mort Walker

I WONDER IF THERE ARE GUYS LIKE US ON OTHER PLANETS

YOU WONDER ABOUT A LOT OF THINGS, DON'T YOU?

I GUESS SO, MOM ALWAYS SAID I WAS A WONDERFUL BOY!

BABY BLUES by Kirkman & Scott

HI, DAD. WHAT'S CHA DOING?

BRUCHM MA FEE!

WHAT?

BRUCHM MA FEE!

WHAT DO YOU WANT, ANYWAY?

MOM SAYS BE SURE NOT TO GET TOOTHPASTE ON YOUR NEW SHIFT.

NOTICE

Due to unavoidable circumstances, we are currently unable to publish the daily crosswords. We will resume publishing them as soon as possible.

এক ছাদের নিচে দেশীয় ফার্নিচারের সবচেয়ে বড় আয়োজন!

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16th National Furniture Fair 2019

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প্রবেশমূল্য নেই, আছে আকর্ষণীয় ছাড়!

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