

The Daily Star

FOUNDER EDITOR
LATE S. M. ALI

DHAKA THURSDAY DECEMBER 19, 2019, POUH 4, 1426 BS

Ethical recruitment of migrant workers is the answer

Migrant workers continue to be exploited and victimised

THE commemoration of International Migration Day yesterday, December 18, has brought to the fore many pressing issues related to migration which has become more and more widespread than ever before. Migration is a product of globalisation and is a manifestation of the interconnectedness of the countries of the world in general. Thus problems related to migration are multifaceted and complex requiring sincere cooperation and partnerships. For Bangladesh particularly, the problems faced by migrant workers have become acute and require immediate attention.

According to reports, Bangladesh has not been able to practice ethical recruitment and has rather failed to stop the exploitation of workers seeking overseas employment by recruitment agencies. Where there should be a zero migration cost policy, in reality we have a situation where Bangladeshis pay exorbitant amounts of money just to secure a working visa to a foreign country. Bangladeshis pay many times the amount for an overseas employment compared to their counterparts from the Philippines, India, Pakistan, Nepal and Sri Lanka. This is because of the presence of illegal brokers dominating the sector with impunity. The consequence of uncontrolled activities of the manpower syndicates is already having a detrimental effect with countries reducing or even refusing altogether, Bangladeshi migrant workers. This is an ominous sign for Bangladesh which is heavily dependent on foreign remittance.

Apart from the high cost of recruitment, migrant workers become victims of fraud, bonded labour, sexual abuse and other forms of exploitation. The high number of cases of abuse of Bangladeshi women migrant workers in Saudi Arabia indicates the helplessness of these workers when they go abroad.

Obviously things cannot go on this way. The government must take stringent measures to stop illegal manpower brokers from operating, make sure that all migrant workers go abroad through legal channels, reduce the cost of recruitment (with a goal to eliminate the cost altogether in the future), facilitate training of migrant workers so they have better skills hence better jobs, and also negotiate with the recruiting countries so that the rights of the migrant workers are protected. In this regard our foreign missions must be more proactive and better equipped to help migrant workers when they are in distress. Ethical recruitment is the only way to ensure that our workers can reap the benefits of their hard earned labour which ultimately benefits the country.

Expedite the process of Aman procurement

Pay farmers the due price

THE slow pace of Aman procurement by the government this year is worrisome. Reportedly, although the government had promised to procure Aman directly from the marginal farmers, the state-sponsored procurement programme could not start on time because of the Department of Agriculture Extension's (DAE) delay in preparing the list. As a result, the Regional Food Controller's Office in Rangpur could procure only 3,865 tonnes of paddy until December 9 against the government set target of 126,883 tonnes in this harvesting season. If the government fails to expedite the pace of procurement it will be really difficult to achieve the target.

Moreover, the slow pace of procurement will have a disastrous impact on the price of paddy. Already paddy price in the local market is very low—Tk 16 per kilogramme. This is very unfortunate because the Ministry of Food announced to procure paddy at a price of Tk 26 per kilogramme this season. Needless to say, the farmers could have gotten better price if the government started procuring paddy earlier. Also, the lottery system through which the government selects the farmers to buy paddy from does not seem like a well-thought-out decision.

What is more, the government's failure to procure paddy timely will make it easy for the middlemen to come in and buy from farmers at a much lower price. This is what happens every year: even after getting a good yield, and despite the demand, the farmers are deprived of the fair price of their produce.

Under the circumstances, the government should expedite paddy procurement process. Since the list of the farmers has already been made, it should not take much time to buy from them now. At the same time, the government must also ensure that the farmers get the government-fixed price for their produce.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

letters@thedailystar.net

Polythene use still rampant

Although the government has banned the production, distribution and sale of polythene many years ago, unfortunately the market for it is still widespread. As polythene is a non-biodegradable substance, it poses a great threat when it comes to the disposal of plastic waste. Apart from clogging canals and drainage systems, it has many more negative effects.

The concerned authorities should raise more awareness about the dangers of polythene use to our environment and at the same time they must clamp down on the factories producing it. Instead of using this hazardous material, we can opt for jute polymer, which is better than polythene in every possible manner. It is biodegradable, water and air resistant, and more durable. Though the production cost of jute polymer is higher large-scale production will help bring down the cost. In fact, the price that we pay for using polythene is far more threatening.

Jakir Mahmud, Bangladesh Agricultural University

As India teeters on the brink, can it revive its pluralistic tradition?

A CLOSER LOOK



TASNEEM TAYEB

WHILE witnessing chaos unfolding in India over the newly passed Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), I could not help but think about Amartya Sen's bestseller *The Argumentative Indian*, a book that invokes the rich Indian tradition of scepticism and heterodoxy, and discusses how this has facilitated the flourishing of the world's largest democracy.

The contentious new law essentially bars Muslim migrants from gaining Indian citizenship while fast-tracking Indian citizenship for people of other religious groups, and has been rightfully slammed by the United Nations Human Rights Office as "fundamentally discriminatory in nature".

When I first read the book in the last leg of the last decade, I—a younger me, an optimistic me—was captivated by the sanguinity of the writer and believed that the rich argumentative tradition of India could sustain its democracy—that heterodoxy (deviation from orthodox standards) and heteroglossia (presence of multiple viewpoints in texts or artistic creations) would always be the safeguards of the invincible Indian democracy.

But today I wonder if, in my youthful optimism and rose-tinted glasses, I was blind to the other India, heading down an altogether different path—a divisive path that essentially marginalises religious minorities and dents a blow to the secular spirit of its constitution.

Amartya Sen in his book had been full of hope, citing how the tradition of scepticism and argument is inherent in the very way India has evolved as a democracy: deliberations and conversations have been an essential part of the oldest texts in Sanskrit—the *Vedas* and the two great Indian epics: *The Ramayana* and *The Mahabharata*. And these discussions have dealt with ideas ranging from philosophy

to theology to politics.

The Indian tendency to promote heterodoxy and dialogue has also been greatly facilitated by Buddhist and Muslim rulers, especially Ashoka and Akbar, with their secular views about religion and pluralistic practices, including debates on religion itself. Akbar went one step ahead, and at a time when the west was embroiled in the Inquisition turmoil, he preached the *Din-i Ilahi* or Divine Faith—a syncretic religious approach that embraced people of all religious beliefs and allowed them to co-exist and prosper together.

But the India today looks very different from the India of Ashoka or Akbar. The India today is being ruled by Hindu nationalist forces, who the people have mandated to power fully aware

In the rest of the country, people are protesting the undemocratic nature of the act. Seen in the context of the revocation of the special status of Jammu and Kashmir—the country's only state with a Muslim-majority population—earlier this year, and the NRC that was exercised in Assam, and then the Ayodhya verdict, the CAA falls into a pattern set in motion by the BJP after their recent election victory—a pattern that is prejudiced in nature and that goes against the secularism enshrined in the Indian constitution.

Watching reports of protests and violence in Guwahati and New Delhi on *Al Jazeera*, one cannot help but wonder what has happened to Sen's Argumentative Indians—did they also give in to the Modi government's agenda of establishing

justifiable, one must ask: was the reason behind these protests just? Perhaps.

Amartya Sen suggested in *The Argumentative Indian* that civic discourse and public debates are as essential for a democracy as balloting. This is what India now needs. And the act is being contested in the court. But with sporadic protests erupting across the country, the situation in India is still somewhat fluid.

Ideally the focus now should be on constructive civil dialogue. And the Indians must make sure that no disruptive elements can create chaos in the name of civilian protests. The people must maintain the peaceful means of protests, in line with the tradition of the Mahatma's *Satyagraha* and nonviolence resistance, because it is only through peaceful



Supporters and activists of Trinamool Congress participate in a mass rally to protest against the Indian government's Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), in Kolkata on December 16, 2019.

PHOTO: DIBYANGSHU SARKAR/ AFP/ GETTY IMAGES

The India today is on the brink of losing its secular character, its pluralistic practices. The CAA is just another sad artefact of the erosion. The divisive nature of the act has put the country into a dangerous path towards disenfranchisement of its 200 million Muslim population.

of their agenda. The India today is on the brink of losing its secular character, its pluralistic practices. The CAA is just another sad artefact of the erosion. The divisive nature of the act has put the country into a dangerous path towards disenfranchisement of its 200 million Muslim population, and that too at a time when Islamophobia is on the rise across the world.

And this has led to mass protests—protests that have been triggered by two fears: in Northeast India that has experienced fierce protests leading to the death of six people, the people's concern is the potential massive influx of migrants from neighbouring Bangladesh that might dilute the ethnic character of the region, especially in the face of the possibility of the absorption of the Hindu population left out in the National Register of Citizens (NRC).

Hindu nationalism in the country? Are the fundamental ideologies that the Indian democracy was based upon changing shape?

Or is there a flicker of light at the end of the apparently dark tunnel? The local governments of five Indian states, including West Bengal, Punjab and Kerala have publicly said that they will not implement the CAA. The chief minister of West Bengal, Mamata Banerjee, has herself joined the demonstrations against the new law.

The protests that have erupted in India are unlike the popular protests in Hong Kong, Lebanon or Iraq, because these protests are not against the malpractices of undemocratic or failed governments. These are essentially against a flawed action of a democratically elected government. And while the violence unleashed by these protests are in no way condonable or

demonstrations and civic dialogues that the Indian democracy might survive this onslaught.

The Indian democracy in the past had seen intermittent episodes that threatened to undermine its pluralistic and secular nature. But the question remains, in the face of the current challenges, can the Argumentative Indian demonstrate the maturity that is needed to engage in public discourse? Can the Argumentative Indian resolve this chaos though heterodoxy? Or is the fundamental nature of the Indian democracy changing, and if so, how is it going to take shape in the days and months and years to come? Can the Indian tradition of secularism and plurality survive this new wave of right-wing nationalism?

Tasneem Tayeb works for *The Daily Star*. Her Twitter handle is: @TayebTasneem

Disability-inclusive development: Our path to prosperity



SUDARSHAN NEUPANE

THE World Bank has recently launched the Bangladesh Poverty Assessment 2019 report that highlights remarkable progress the country has made in terms of reducing poverty and combating extreme poverty. One of the stirring statistical transformations is on the graduation of nearly 25 million poor people out of poverty in the last 20 years and Bangladesh is being considered as the new "Asian Tiger" with its sophisticated economy. It is uncontested that Bangladesh is signifying a "role model" to developing countries that it is possible to reduce rampant poverty by developing policies and strategies catering to the needs of the population.

However, another striking reality is that about 40 million people are still living in poverty, half of them in extreme poverty. The recent trend shows slowing pace of poverty reduction in the hard-to-reach areas, particularly the extreme poor residing in Rangpur and Dhaka divisions. This is a stark reminder that the poverty fight still remains while Bangladesh embarks on a high-spirited development trajectory. This presents us with the pressing development challenge—"unequal development". Starting from intensifying inequality to sluggish economic growth, from unemployment to disaster vulnerability, these challenges not only make it difficult to reduce extreme poverty but threaten to reverse the gains. Now is the right time for Bangladesh to intensify analysis who are the "hardest to reach groups" living in extreme poverty.

Poverty and disability
According to the World Bank, 20 percent

of the world's poorest people have disability. Past studies have shown a strong link between poverty and disability. Several years after ratification of the United Nations Conventions on Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), people with disabilities are twice as likely to live in poverty. This compelling fact masks other important differences in the poverty rate among women, people living in extreme poverty, people with lower education and those affected by complex disasters—who face additional economic challenges. People with disabilities have less access to education, skill development and are more often prevented from participating in economic life. They face discrimination while seeking employment and are engaged in the most hazardous jobs, i.e. mining, construction and manufacturing that might trigger disabling consequences.

In Bangladesh statistics vary, but 2010 data from the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (HIES survey) gives a 9.07 percent prevalence rate. Social exclusion is widening here due to negative attitudes, prejudices and discrimination against disability. People with disabilities have remained passive recipients and scarcely benefit from health, educational and employment schemes of government. Another 2011 World Bank study conducted in 15 developing countries including Bangladesh showed disability prevalence at 23 percent among women, compared to 10 percent among men, which gives a gender gap of 13 percent points. Looking at all the dimensions of economic wellbeing: education, employment, assets/living conditions, household expenditures, one can see that the same research shows that disabled persons are significantly worse off in two or more dimensions due to additional expenses. The poverty rate is highly correlated with lower educational attainment and lower employment rates among people with

and without disabilities.

Bangladesh's context

After ratification of the UNCRPD in May 2007, Bangladesh has made notable progress in the disability sector. The Disability Rights and Protection Act and Neurodevelopmental Disability Protection Trust Act -2013 fully recognise the principles of the convention, and widened the definition of persons with disabilities, recognising the intersectionality within disability, eliminating derogatory practices and attitudes. Consequently, the 7th Five Year National Plan and other sectorial policies for Education, Skill Development have some provision on disability. Besides, Bangladesh is highly committed to achieving Sustainable Development Goals by 2030, thus reduction of poverty, acceleration of socio-economic development and building of accessible infrastructure have been the government's priority.

Despite these positive commitments, rampant poverty exists among people with disabilities in both rural and urban areas of Bangladesh. The most economically backward population such as disabled people living in marginalised areas, disabled women and people with profound disabilities lack proper education, employment and other essential services. There is strong mayhem in the implementation of disability policies and countless people with disabilities and their families are caught in endless poverty cycle.

Possible step forward

As poverty and disability contribute to limiting the capabilities of the poor people, there is a need for targeted and mainstream social development policies/programmes to dismantle this nexus and break the vicious cycle of poverty. Bangladesh government and its development partners need to play a vital role in undertaking advance studies

for creating economic opportunities, providing financial and business literacy and specific support for economic empowerment, improving skills and vocational training and guaranteed employment in private and public jobs for persons with disabilities. The emphasis should also be laid on quality inclusive education, development of professional skills that enable both women and men with disabilities to pursue career, ensure loss of economic burden for the country and create a roadmap to economic freedom.

Ministry of Social Welfare is working tirelessly to build better future for people with disabilities in Bangladesh, but nothing great can be achieved in silos. The disability allowances and social protection packages need revision for allowing disabled persons to pursue economic opportunities.

Local administrations are central for improving the situation of people with disabilities. Thus, we need to build capacities of Wards, Union Parishads and Upzilas to promote disability-inclusive development. For that, effective collaboration with local disability groups and disabled people's organisations (DPOs) is the necessary first step.

The government and relevant stakeholders therefore, must work together for ensuring disability inclusive development through active participation of people with disabilities/DPOs in all relevant discussions and planning processes. As Professor Stephen Hawking rightly said, "disability need not be an obstacle to success." If the government and its development partners are dedicated to removing barriers that people with disabilities face, it will be a turning point for inclusive and economically prosperous Bangladesh.

Sudarshan Neupane is an Australian Awards Alumni from Nepal, currently associated with Humanity & Inclusion in Bangladesh. Email: sudarshan.neupane@hotmail.com