

A year when poverty increased, and so did misery

THE OVERTON WINDOW



ERESH OMAR JAMAL

THE year 2020 has been like no other in recent history. Even the biggest doomsdayers could not have predicted what was to occur, and how the Covid-19 pandemic was

to derail millions, if not billions, of dreams and aspirations.

In terms of our greater national ambitions, the pandemic severely obstructed Bangladesh's progress towards reducing poverty, among other things. According to various estimates, the fallout from the pandemic has created somewhere between 17.5 and 20 million new poor in the country. And according to a new UNDP study, the poverty rate in the urban areas of Bangladesh has increased three-fold during this time period, mainly due to a massive number of people in cities and towns losing their jobs or experiencing a reduction in their salaries.

A World Bank report titled "Losing Livelihoods: The labour market impacts of Covid-19 in Bangladesh" further confirmed this. The report said that around 68 percent of people who had to stop working due to the pandemic in urban areas of both Dhaka and Chattogram lost their jobs. It also estimated that the rate of jobs lost in Dhaka was 76 percent, while it was 59 percent in Chattogram. Loss of income was another factor mentioned in the study. In Dhaka and Chattogram, about 80 percent of wage-

earners and 94 percent of business owners said their earnings were lower than usual, while median wages for salaried and daily workers decreased by roughly 37 percent. Predictably, daily and weekly waged workers experienced much greater losses in income compared to salaried workers.

According to ILO's Assistant Director-General Chihoko Asada-Miyakawa, "Covid-19 has inflicted a hammer-blow on the region's labour markets, one that few governments in the region stood ready to handle." She added: "Low levels of social security coverage and limited institutional capacity in many countries have made it difficult to help enterprises and workers back on their feet, a situation compounded when large numbers remain in the informal economy."

In Bangladesh, for example, out of the 61 million people who are employed, 52 million are in the informal sector, which contributes more than 40 percent to GDP. As most of these workers are involved in daily work, and rely on daily cash, they have very little provisions of employment protection. As such, according to the WB report mentioned earlier, cleaning workers or housemaids (who make up a significant portion of the informal economy) received the biggest blow as 54 percent of job losses were reported in these fields.

The second highest number of job losses was reported in the garments sector (19 percent). After the pandemic hit Europe and the US, the textile industry experienced a reduction in exports by as much as 84 percent in April 2020 compared with that of the previous year, leading to some 2.19 million workers losing their jobs,



Social safety net programmes need to be expanded in order to cover the multitudes of new poor that have been created due to the pandemic.

PHOTO: AFP/MUNIR UZ ZAMAN

according to some estimates.

Despite these great difficulties, the Asian Development Bank (ADB)—and other international organisations—projected the Bangladesh economy to rebound strongly in 2021, with an expected GDP growth of 6.8 percent. However, much of this growth will be dependent on the performance of manufacturing and exports. This is where the uncertainty factor comes in.

According to the ADB, a prolonged second wave of Covid-19 in Bangladesh, or in any of its major export destinations for that matter, could threaten the recovery and growth projection. And as Europe is already struggling to cope with a

second wave of Covid-19, chances of a quick recovery could very well prove to be beyond our reach. According to a Bangladesh Bank report that came out on December 22, opening letters of credit (LCs) for back-to-back import of textile products dropped during November, as apparel exporters decreased purchase of raw materials after postponing shipments by one to two months due to the second wave of coronavirus in Bangladesh's key export destinations such as the US and Europe.

What does this mean? Well, for one, it means that the government may have to roll out a new round of stimulus package since recovery might be slower.

Social safety net programmes also need to be expanded in order to cover the multitudes of new poor that have been created due to the pandemic.

According to Khondaker Golam Moazzem, research director at the Centre for Policy Dialogue, a social safety net programme like Vulnerable Group Feeding has covered only 33 percent of those eligible for the programme. The poverty caused by the pandemic would be alleviated to some extent if necessary assistance were distributed better. In order to do that, the government could use digital payment to properly distribute the funds for the poor and to avoid mis-targeting and corruption.

Due to the significant rise in urban poverty and rising number of slums inhabited by poor and extreme poor people, cities will also require more anti-poverty schemes specifically targeting the newly created—as well as the previously existing—urban poor. Since the government does not have unlimited funds at its disposal, it must utilise its resources more efficiently.

Covid-19 has destroyed many lives and livelihoods in 2020. As we welcome 2021, it may take a while for all of that to be rebuilt. During that time, the government will have to lend its full support to the people, especially those unfortunate enough to have been pushed back into poverty. The sooner these people are pulled out of the poverty trap, the quicker our overall economy can recover. That's the hand we have been dealt and now have to work with.

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Young people can change the system, but they need better guidance



RUBAIYA MURSHED

"WON'T you change your birth year?" my class teacher had asked with a confused look. She was processing the paperwork

for changed birth years in our class nine cohort, and amidst all the "new" 1992s and 1993s, I was one of the two "original" 1991s left. "No, my parents said it's alright not to change it," I remember telling her. She looked perplexed, as if she was seeing my future flash before her eyes and wondering how my parents could knowingly do me so much harm. After all, I would not have an extra shot at BCS exams because of their choice.

Changing birth years to reduce age is probably one of the most common memories we Bangladeshis share. The aim of this practice is to get extra years to sit for the Bangladesh Civil Service (BCS) examination which one cannot apply for after the age of thirty. From the young age of class nine, we learn to accept that changing something as fundamental as the year we're born in is alright as long as it gives us better opportunities to run the rat race and ace the exams that are often tied to glory and respect.

Now, we've reached a point where public university exams are being scheduled according to BCS exam dates. The aim of university education, unfortunately, seems to revolve around getting a degree to qualify for participating in the BCS exam. In the process, we're gradually drifting towards

making university education more and more redundant. Who can blame the students for wanting to focus more on their BCS studies than on their education? Who can blame the teachers for not being able to entice students away from BCS, and towards other routes such as research, development and academia? Nobody can blame either of the groups. It is the system that is at fault here.

There are several sides to this

some credibility by being less prone to corruption. This makes it somewhat more equitable to all in terms of entry. Secondly, aching the BCS exams is gradually becoming an overarching goal for more and more students because it has been made more lucrative, not just in terms of monetary benefits and facilities, but also in terms of social status and dignity. Lastly, and perhaps most pathetically, it is regarded as one of the most valued achievements in our



Passing the BCS exams is becoming an overarching goal for more and more students every day.

FILE PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

system failure. Firstly, BCS has very few alternatives that are equitable to all. Many factors are at play here, including corruption and connections. There are vast differences in terms of access and opportunity among the candidates who come from different socioeconomic backgrounds, from both rural and urban areas. Over the years, thanks to the initiatives of some strong leaders, the BCS exams have managed to gain

society, so much so that one's self-worth, marriage prospect, and parental pride all seem to depend on one's success in BCS exams. Before we lose the entire population of students to this farce of a success, we must take a pause to think, at what cost is this success coming?

It's coming at the cost of the students' happiness, passion and overall purpose in life. They hold the future of this country in their hands, but not in their

Each of us from our own position can start this revolution of redefining what we mean by success and retargeting what we value.

hearts, because instead of letting them live and grow as they please, we have thrust them into rat races to chase after our definition of social respectability. Why blame the young when the old are the ones assigning value to what should not have so much value? Our society prefers a BCS cadre who is unethical to a school teacher who is honest, a government officer who abuses power to an entrepreneur who refuses to pay bribes, for example. Unless we change what we value as a society, we will be leaving the young with a candle without the wick, a wick burnt into ashes by the wrong choices we make as a society.

Ideally, any country would want its best minds and most ethical members going into the civil service. This is most probably not the case in a country like ours. In India, a study by Hanna and Wang (2014), titled "Dishonesty and Selection into Public Service: Evidence from India", showed that students who cheated at a simple laboratory task were more likely to prefer public-sector jobs, and that the cheating was a meaningful predictor of future corruption. Could this be true for Bangladesh?

Each generation has their own role to play. The older generations must play their roles in changing what we value and prize as a society. In doing so, they

would be providing the "push" needed to accelerate system change. Who can ultimately change the system? Only the young. We've got to do better in motivating the young. We need to shift our priorities from their achievements in the rat race to their happiness in life. We need to stop valuing BCS and other similar "trophies" at the cost of more important traits such as morality and character. We need to prize kindness. We need to make viral videos of young people who positively impact people's lives with their social work. Each of us from our own position can start this revolution of redefining what we mean by success and retargeting what we value.

Let's start today, right now. At the start of the new year, I pay tribute to our students at the Department of Economics, University of Dhaka, who have, during this Covid-19 era, started the Pashe-Achi Initiative and provided various kinds of help to countless people from different walks of life. I hope these initiatives would be valued equally or more than the attainment of the highest C.G.P.A. or a position in the ranking of BCS cadres. I see hope in the young more than in anything else. I've seen it in my students, in their zeal and their resilience. I've been pleasantly surprised by their potential from time to time—for example, when I came to know about our student, Fokhrul Islam Sumon, using his scholarship money to create a library in his village. These stories we carry with us with pride as we transition from one year into the next. Here's to the souls connected to these stories for helping us survive with hope. Here's to the kind and good-hearted. Here's to the young, to a happier new year.

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QUOTABLE Quote

ROBERT E HOWARD
(1906-1936)
American author.

But not all men seek rest and peace; some are born with the spirit of the storm in their blood.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

- 1 Musical speeds
- 7 Purposes
- 11 Stir up
- 12 Christmas travelers
- 13 Manger scene
- 14 Safari sight
- 15 Dorothy, the one
- 17 Painter Holbein
- 20 Finishes a golf hole
- 23 - Jima
- 24 Stand with shieves
- 26 Paving stuff
- 27 That woman
- 28 Wedding words
- 29 Hand warmers
- 31 Paint buy
- 32 Old anesthetic
- 33 Scottish isle
- 34 Baseball's Reese
- 37 Inn offering
- 39 Is real
- 43 Odometer unit
- 44 Christmas tree stuff
- 45 Winter glider
- 46 Unwavering

DOWN

- 1 Tic-toe link
- 2 Screw up
- 3 "The Simpsons" bartender
- 4 Hockey needs
- 5 Workplace watchdog: Abbr.
- 6 Glimpsed
- 7 German vowel
- 8 Annual visitor
- 9 Swelled head
- 10 Sermon topic
- 16 Ship poles
- 17 Blackjack call
- 18 Be patient for
- 19 Home of 8-Down
- 21 Right now
- 22 Sculpting medium
- 24 Question of place
- 25 Egg layer
- 30 Was abundant
- 33 Paris river
- 35 Moistens
- 36 way to go
- 37 Apt. ad abbr.
- 38 Motor need
- 40 Compass dir.
- 41 - Aviv
- 42 Shrewd

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WEDNESDAY'S ANSWERS

S	A	N	T	A		C	A	R	O			
A	B	O	I	L		I	D	A	H	O		
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BEETLE BAILEY BY MORT WALKER

BABY BLUES BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT