

Views

The No. 1 National Problem

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CAN population growth be still termed as our No. 1 national problem? It used to be so until recently. But in view of host of other problems that have already taken deep roots in our society, the scenario has undergone a rapid and dramatic change. One tends to believe that issues like rising unemployment, sickening poverty and a reign of terror in the educational institutions of the country taking deep roots in our body-politic, the issue like population explosion has paled into insignificance.

Ours is a country of only 54000 sq. miles inhabited by 120 million people. The density per sq. mile is 2222. To make matters worse, 4 new children are born every minute. In spite of a spending of Tk 15000 crore over the last 22 years for population control, the rate of population growth is still 2.4%. This precisely means, food, shelter and medicare facilities have to be provided for an additional 35000 people at the turn of every year. A herculean job for a poor country.

We already have an unemployed workforce of 15 million — a figure which is increasing with every passing day. Increase in investment is far below expectations resulting in slow growth of factories. The educated unemployed cannot find a job and as a result are either frustrated or taking to drugs. But life goes on and life without work is like a body without a heart.

The country is languishing in ex-

treme poverty. Per capita income is only 220 US dollars. Half the population lives below the poverty line and is compelled to lead a subhuman life. Disclosures made after a survey by the government very recently are even more disconcerting. The survey which was conducted preparatory to a national housing policy to provide "shelter to all people by the year 2000", a global strategy fixed by the United Nations, reveals that more than 15 million people live under the open sky and the number may reach 25 million by the year 2000. The gap between the rich and the poor has further widened.

Violence on the campus has now assumed epidemic proportions and devoured cities and countryside alike. Since students are the future of the country, education remains to be the only way to bring them up as worthy citizens. But what is happening in the educational institutions all over the country is a definite contradiction, to say the least. It is a hair-raising saga of unending violence resorted to by a handful of students to maintain their sphere of influence. But the fact remains that only three years ago the same student community played the main role in toppling the autocratic government of Ershad through a popular upsurge and paved the way for a democratic government to take over.

Recent statistics have shown that

during last three years there had been 644 incidents of violence in the educational institutions of the country which left 89 killed, 6842 injured and necessitated closures of different institutions 162 times. On the other hand, there are session jams, admission problem due to inadequate number of institutions and mismanagement in administration which have pushed the entire education system to the brink of a major disaster. In view of staggering session jams and admission problem the well-to-do section of meritorious students who can afford are leaving the country. Those who cannot afford are only helplessly watching, the clock ticking away and cruel time leaving an indelible mark of frustration on their innocent faces.

The government had declared primary education mandatory for all. Not enough schools are there. The infrastructure and other facilities are lacking. According to newspaper reports, 13 lakh children of the northern region of the country alone cannot go to school because there are not sufficient schools for them. The situation elsewhere is also not encouraging. About one hundred thousand students in the country who passed SSC examination last year could not get themselves enrolled in college despite obtaining second and even first division! 10 to 12 students are competing for one seat in the universities and medical colleges.

Session jam is even worse than the traffic jam of Dhaka city. Three-year honours course is stretched to five years. There are students who appeared for the HSC in July 1992, got their results in February 1993, got admitted in to BUET and the classes are yet to start. It is reported that there is no possibility of classes being started before September this year.

If education is the backbone of the country, the present condition of our backbone can better be imagined than described. Many great men have said, if you want to destroy a nation, destroy its education system. Perhaps that is why the occupation forces of Pakistan unleashed their first offensives against the educational institutions of this country and killed the eminent educationists and intellectuals with the help of Razakars, Al Badars and other collaborators immediately before their surrender. But now there are no occupation forces in the country. Then why can't we stop the process of destruction of our education system? Any conscious citizen will admit that the unabated wave of violence in the educational arena is crippling the nation permanently. But nobody seems to be worried. The leader of the party in power is quiet and so is the leader of the opposition. The intelligentsia does not feel concerned and the nation is speechless. What can be a greater problem for the country than this?