

Social safety in poverty alleviation Aminul Islam

The government is always active in providing fair and deserving services to the vulnerable citizens of the country while upholding the sense of respect for human rights, social justice and collective responsibility. The present government has been able to play a significant role in transforming the backward and neglected communities into human resources and including them in the mainstream of national development. To make Bangladesh known to the world as a welfare state, the government is implementing more than half a hundred programs including old age allowance, widow allowance, disability allowance, providing support to acid burns and disabled people etc. The Ministry of Social Welfare is closely conducting activities in both rural and urban areas for the welfare and development of the poor, unemployed, landless, vagrants, homeless, distressed women, orphans and vulnerable children, helpless elderly, poor patients, physically-intellectual-socially disabled and autistic citizens in the society.

During the British period in 1943, government social service work started in the region by establishing some orphanages. After the partition of India in 1947, it became necessary to deal with the refugee crisis in the region, the multi-dimensional socio-cultural problems that suddenly appeared within the country and the necessary infrastructure challenges to solve them. Based on the advice given by a special committee of the United Nations which arrived in 1951 at the invitation of the then government in the light of the two-year survey and research results, the social work education and training program started in Dhaka in 1953 with the cooperation of Dhaka University. The present Urban Social Service Project was launched experimentally in Kaytuli, Dhaka in 1955 by employing professionally trained social workers. The National Social Welfare Council was formed in 1956 through a government resolution to encourage and activate voluntary initiatives in social welfare programs alongside the government to meet the social challenges present in the country. Similarly, medical social work was introduced in 1958, correctional program and disability welfare program in 1961, school social work in 1969 (discontinued in 1983).

The current government has ensured poverty alleviation, human rights and social justice of the backward people in the society by bringing more or less one-third of the people under the social safety net program. In addition to various programs like food assistance, food in exchange for work, sale of goods in the open market, the government also provides cash assistance under the social security program. **Elderly Allowance Program:** This program was implemented from the fiscal year 1997-98. Initially 5 men and 5 women per ward were given allowance at the rate of 100 taka per month. The number of beneficiaries and the amount of allowance have been increased in stages. Poor and vulnerable senior citizens of the society whose age is 65 years or above for men and 62 years or above for women can come under this scheme. **Widows and Deserted Women's Allowance Program:** With the objective of social protection and empowerment of poor, vulnerable and backward women, the government launched the 'Widows and Deserted Women's Allowance' program in the financial year 1998-99. Initially, under this program, 4.03 lakh women were getting allowance at the rate of Tk 100 per month. At present the number of beneficiaries and the rate of allowance have increased.

Maternity allowance for poor mothers: Maternity allowance was introduced for the first time in the financial year 2007-08. Financial assistance is mainly provided to poor mothers in rural areas under this. Under this program, poor pregnant women are given allowances as well as health and nutrition training. Earlier this allowance was paid at the rate of 500 taka per month. At present, the monthly maternity allowance for poor mothers has been increased to Tk 800. Also, the period of payment of allowance has been increased from 24 months to 36 months.

Working Lactating Mother Support Fund: This program started from the financial year 2010-11. This allowance is provided to working poor mothers in urban areas to support maternal health and full development of their unborn child or new born child. Dhaka, Narayanganj and Gazipur Garment Industrial Areas and all City Corporations/Municipalities of the country have been included in this program. Earlier, a mother

used to get this support for 24 months by paying Tk 500 per month. From the financial year 2018-19, both the amount and duration of the allowance have been increased. At present, a mother gets this assistance for up to 36 months by paying Tk 800 per month.

Freedom Fighter Honorary Allowance: The government is working tirelessly to improve the quality of life of freedom fighters, the best children of the nation. From the financial year 2021-22, the honorarium of freedom fighters has been increased from Tk 12,000 to Tk 20,000 per month. Two festive allowances are being given annually at the rate of 10,000 taka along with honorary allowance to the titled freedom fighters. At present, 35,000 taka allowance is being given to Bir Shreshtha and 25,000 taka to Bir Uttam. Honorary Allowance is being provided to all freedom fighters in all districts of the country on G2P basis. From 2018-19 financial year, apart from honorary allowance and festival allowance, Bengali New Year allowance of 2 thousand taka is being given to freedom fighters. Besides, special honorarium of 5000 taka per head is being given to all living freedom fighters on the occasion of Victory Day. The government is also working for the welfare of the martyrs' families and the war-victims of the liberation war. Separate programs have been launched for the treatment and honorarium of the families of martyrs and war injured freedom fighters.

Livelihood Improvement Program of Bede Community: In 2012-13 fiscal year, this program was implemented as a pilot in 7 districts of the country namely Dhaka, Chittagong, Dinajpur, Patuakhali, Jessore, Naogaon and Habiganj districts. Currently, this program is being implemented in a total of 64 districts by expanding the program.

Food Friendly Programme: This program enrolls 50 lakh poor households (widows, elderly, female heads of households, low income poor heads of households on priority basis) living at the Union level. 30 kg of rice is distributed every month to the families enrolled in this program at the rate of Tk 10 per kg during the working period of 5 months every year.

OMS Programme: Government launched Open Market Sale (OMS) program to ensure food security of low income people. Under this program, food items (rice and flour) are sold at a lower price than the market price through special subsidies. From the first half of 2014 with the support of the World Food Programme, the work of distribution of nutritional rice among the beneficiaries in 5 upazilas of three districts in the Vulnerable Population Development (VGD) program has been implemented step by step. Currently, nutrition rice distribution program is ongoing in 170 upazilas. In addition, nutritional rice rich in vitamin A, B1, B12, folic acid, iron and zinc is being distributed in the food-friendly program to meet the nutritional needs of the poor people of the country. Nutritional rice distribution program was started as a pilot project in Kurigram Sadar and Phulbari upazilas in 2017-18 financial year. At present, nutrition rice distribution program is ongoing in total 251 upazilas in food friendly program. Food-in-exchange (Kabikha) program under Ministry of Disaster Management and Relief is ongoing for rural infrastructure reform. This assistance is usually provided to the affected families in the post-disaster period until the livelihoods of the poor people are restored. 20-40 kg monthly per family for 2 to 5 months. Besides, fishermen who refrain from harvesting mother hilsa and jatka also get VGF assistance. Poor people also get VGF assistance during various religious festivals.

Allowance for indigent disabled persons: The indigent disabled allowance program was introduced in the financial year 2005-06. Under this scheme, 1,04,166 disabled persons were initially given allowance at the rate of 200 taka per month. In the financial year 2023-24, the number of beneficiaries has increased and the amount of monthly allowance has been increased from Tk. 750 to Tk.

As a result of the implementation of multi-faceted programs of the government, the poverty and extreme poverty of the country has reduced significantly, but the goal of the government is to make the country completely free from poverty. High growth, employment, skill development, progressive tax structure, social protection programs etc. directly or indirectly contribute to poverty reduction. Apart from this, the government is implementing several programs with the specific goal of reducing poverty. 5000 to 50000 taka per family is being distributed under 4 programs namely rural social service activities, rural mother center activities,

rehabilitation of burnt and disabled people, urban society development at 5 percent service charge. These microcredit programs are playing a positive role in reducing poverty by providing protection to the rural and urban poor including marginal farmers, day laborers and maintaining the vibrancy of the rural economy. Interest-free micro-loans are being disbursed at the rate of taka.1 lakh per person for the purpose of making people trained in technical education as entrepreneurs through urban social service activities. The government is implementing refinancing schemes for CMSME startups and women-owned enterprises to facilitate access to credit for the underprivileged.

The current poverty rate of the country is 18.7 percent, which was 24.3 percent in 2016. On the other hand, the extreme poverty rate is 5.6 percent, which was 12.9 percent in 2016. Thus the overall poverty rate of the country has increased. Changes have occurred in the development of regional poverty. There has been a significant improvement in the poverty rate in the manga-affected Rangpur division. To provide social protection to those who are lagging behind in every social and economic index including food, education, health, nutrition, medical treatment, housing, clean water, sanitation, dowry, child marriage, daily wages, per capita income, population control and those who are unable to keep pace with the development progress of the country. The goal of the current government is to build a happy-prosperous developed Bangladesh.

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