

North Bengal badly needs industrial infrastructure

A coordinated development strategy should be operationalised, involving both public and private sector agencies, for facilitating accelerated development of the northern region of the country, writes **M Azizur Rahman**

THE northern part of the country, that is, north Bengal accounts for about one fourth of Bangladesh, in terms of its geographical area, population, administrative units etc. But it is not the recipient of a proportionate amount of resource allocation for its economic development. This zone or area is predominantly agrarian in the nature of its activities. It supplies almost seventy per cent of its agricultural production which is in excess of its requirement, for supplies to other parts of the country.

In industrial and service sectors, the North Bengal is lagging behind other regions in Bangladesh. Reasons for this are many. Its industrial and educational development, the service and export-oriented sectors, businesses and employment-creating opportunities have not expected or improved in commensurate with those available in other regions of Bangladesh.

Industrial infrastructures including, gas and electricity, railway and road communication facilities, in addition to entrepreneurial are too inadequate compared with those in other regions. One problem of infrastructure is closely associated with the other problematic areas relating to broad areas of infrastructures; it is like a vicious circle of poverty. For example, because of lack of gas, electricity and road communication, the industrial entrepreneurs are not attracted to invest in north Bengal.

That creates a lot of other problems including those in areas of businesses, employment opportunities, self-employment facilities and the quality of family life and standards of living for the people in the northern part of Bangladesh.

The area of Rajshahi Division in Bangladesh or the North Bengal of the then British Indian regime, is 35,000 sq km. This is about 24 per cent of the whole geographical area -- of 1,47,570 sq km -- of Bangladesh. Roughly speaking, the geographical area of the northern part of the country is, thus, about one fourth of the whole country.

The population in north Bengal is also about one fourth of the aggregate number in Bangladesh. Population per square kilometer is a little bit higher in north Bengal than that in the whole of Bangladesh. It means that while Bangladesh is the most densely populated area,

north Bengal is relatively more densely populated compared to the other regions of the country.

Administratively, out of seven divisions in the country, two are located in north Bengal. These are Rajshahi and Rangpur divisions. We have 64 districts in Bangladesh out of which 16 districts -- about 25 per cent -- are situated in north Bengal.

Bangladesh has 690 Upazilas or Thanas out of which north Bengal has 127 Upazilas or Thanas. The percentage of Upazilas or Thanas, in north Bengal is, thus, about 18. The total number of administrative Unions in Bangladesh is 4,451 of which 1,092 Unions are located in North Bengal.

The number of union in north Bengal is, thus, about 25% of the total Unions in the country. Mouzas, totalling 59,990 in north Bengal, are about 32% of the country's aggregate number. The number of villages in Bangladesh is 86,174 among which 25,475 villages are in north Bengal. This is about 30 per cent of the total number of villages in country.

Among the 16 districts in north Bengal, gas is available only in Bogra. Bogra used to be the fourth largest industrial city in Bangladesh. Before gas facilities were made available in Bogra, many industrial units and factories, located there, used to get sick and or go out of operations due to lack of power and energy.

Per capita availability of gas and electricity in Bogra is still far too inadequate and can in no way help facilitate an accelerated industrial growth process and development. Railway, roads and airways are also too poor in their supply and quality of services to help the growth of businesses in north Bengal.

The service sector and financial institutions including banks, insurance and leasing companies and industrial operations and the activities of non-government organizations (NGOs), availability of industrial finance etc., are not also favourable to growth-facilitation in the northern part of Bangladesh.

The silk industries in Rajshahi and Thakurgaon, agricultural and non-agricultural products and equipment in Bogra, weaving industry in Pabna, tobacco production and processing in Rangpur and the related so many other small industries and related concerns can be

cited here. Such economic activities have been suffering since long a lot due to lack of finance and loan facilities in north Bengal.

Better road communications are urgently needed for socio-economic face-lift of the region. One new Jamuna bridge between Bahadurabad of Jamalpur and Phulsuri of Gaibandha and a triangular bridge in Aricha connecting north Bengal, south Bengal and eastern part of Bangladesh through Dhaka are necessary. Potential external donors should be approached by the government to fund construction of this triangular bridge and the new Jamuna Bridge because of their likely favourable impact on efforts for facilitation of wider business activities in north Bengal.

A railway line has to be constructed through the already acquired land from the Jamuna bridge to Bogra. This railway connection will ease communications between north Bengal and eastern part of Bangladesh.

The activities for exploration of coal resources of Fulbari, Dinajpur have also to be expedited by resolving all related local problems in Dinajpur.

The local people must be advised to understand that exploration of coal will be more remunerative for them than agricultural production. The affected farmers should be given proper compensation, if necessary at a relatively high rate.

Ruppur Nuclear Plant should also be taken up for early construction, keeping an eye on including some new inter-related projects. This nuclear plant will help produce more than 5.0 thousand megawatt (MW) of electricity.

Large foreign companies like TATA group of India can be invited expressing quite serious intention of the government about promoting such investments, for a big push to modern economic activities in Pabna and Dinajpur in the greater interest of the nation, to produce items like cement and fertiliser on a large scale.

Finally, local private entrepreneurs should be encouraged in an increasing number to take up projects for producing electricity in the northern region of Bangladesh on relatively easier terms and conditions.

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