

LAND and LIBERTY

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COVER PICTURE

The derelict New York site bought by Donald Trump for \$110m. Now there's a \$650m discrepancy in its value. Story back page

A man-made trap

PITY the Bangladeshis who, by the tens of thousand, were drowned in the last monsoon.

And those who will not survive the next giant wave that will flood their homes.

On the surface it looks as though they are trapped in the middle of an ecological nightmare.

From the north, three great river systems come sluicing down to the Bay of Bengal. Together, they carry enough water each year to cover the low-lying country — which, periodically, is precisely what they do.

From the south, the tropical cyclones come charging into the coast, demolishing the fragile ecosystem on the mudflats.

But this is a man-made trap.

The deaths are not the result of natural calamities, for these people ought not to be living on the silt on the edge of the Bay.

They are social castaways, marooned on mudflats because they were driven off good land by private property rights in land.

As landless peasants, they had no option but to move further away from the high ground and on to *chars*, the low-lying tracts from which they eke out a precarious existence.

BANGLADESH, then, symbolises an anomalous legal and economic situation, one that afflicts every non-socialist country in the world today.

No amount of foreign aid is going to alleviate the Bangladesh family's vulnerability to inclement weather.

The fundamental reality is laid bare by the fate of the children.

- 870,000 children below the age of five die of malnutrition or disease every year.

- Nearly 30,000 pre-school children are blinded each year by Vitamin A deficiency.

- A quarter of the child population works for a living.

Curbing the high fertility rate would not solve the structural problem: it would merely alter the numerical degree of suffering. Fewer babies merely translates

into less business for the mortuaries.

We are not arguing against family planning programmes. Merely emphasizing that these would not translate into higher living standards or better levels of educational attainment.

Western agencies, then, ought to be emphasising knowledge, and we are not referring to the "green" variety — higher yielding crops. Bangladesh did adopt these improved variety of seeds. But that has not meant more food in bellies: in the last 25 years, the average Bangladeshi consumed fewer calories.

So where did the value of that improved productivity go? It was eaten up in the form of higher rents for the landowners rather than higher *percapita* incomes for the sharecroppers.

Whether we like it or not, there is one solution only to the plight of Bangladesh: a reversion to the communal philosophy of land tenure, the one that pre-dated the arrival of colonial Britain.

That does not mean a retreat to tribalism. Peasant farmers generate higher yields when they work on family-sized farms. The collective forms of enterprise, in the modern era, has been thoroughly tried out by the socialist countries of nearby Vietnam and Cambodia.

And they failed.

THE SOLUTION is an economically simple one: the socialisation of rent.

That fiscal policy has its tribal antecedents; and western agencies — such as the World Bank, the United Nations, UNICEF even — could disseminate the information to make it possible for economically under-developed countries like Bangladesh to adopt a modern variety of the policy.

There is only one snag: the political will. But once the possibilities have been laid out for the people, it is up to them to apply the solution.

Bangladesh, after all, is supposed to be a democracy.

COMMENT by the Editor