

Budget: Whose Interests it Serves... the Poor or the Rich?

As usual, the government will try to sell it as a pro-people, pro-development plan, while the opposition, demonstrating its traditional character, is most likely to brand it as an anti-people, anti development budget.

to pay for the losses and liabilities of the public sector. The question is, why a government that has accepted privatization as a key strategy for establishing market economic principles continues to subsidize Tk 20 billion a year for sustenance of the public sector? How does it help in promoting the private sector or enhancing economic growth of the country? Isn't it contradictory to the government's commitment to squeezing the public sector and enlarging the private sector? Why the government has to patronize state controlled white elephants that are nothing but monuments of corruption, inefficiency and waste?

In sum, a budget is not mere a document that displays government's revenues or outlays — it's a powerful instrument that dictates national priorities and preferences. It sends powerful signals to all segments of the society, all spheres of national life and all sectors of the economy. The current leadership should understand that a populist budget may help it win the election, but the nation might have to pay for the misplaced priorities for a long time. Of course, one single budget can not change the destiny of a nation, but several of them can put a nation aboard a wrong train that can lead to wrong destination.

FINANCE Minister Saifur Rahman will be presenting his seventh budget — the fifth in a row during the current regime of BNP — probably in less than two weeks. As usual, it will have good news and bad news, even ugly ones — largely depending on who is talking about it. The problem is, so far only Saifur Rahman is talking about it, and you guessed it right, he is giving only good news — sometimes even better ones. After all, its an election year — he himself may not be an elected MP, but he most certainly has responsibilities to make the election easier for his partymen.

It is certainly, a piece of good news to learn that the size of the next Annual Development Programme (ADP) — the development budget of the country — will be the largest in the history of Bangladesh — over Tk 120 billion, nearly three billion US dollars. It is even better news to learn that the government plans to generate about 43 per cent of the total development budget from domestic resources. Both the features, at least on the surface, make sharp departures in the troubled history of this nation's public finance.

Of course, the size of the budget and domestic contribution to it are important matters for a country like ours.

Especially important is the fact that the nation is able to muster a substantial chunk of its development funds from its own resources. Only a few years back, the nation was overwhelmingly, some times even totally, dependent on foreign assistance for its development budget. Often the revenue budget of the nation, at least some portion of it, was financed by foreign assistance.

Source of financing does make a difference. There are numerous examples — in this country as well as elsewhere around the world — that tell us loudly and how absolute or overwhelming dependence on foreign aid resulted in unproductive and wasteful projects and programs. Now that Bangladesh is able to generate some resources on its own, it must have enhanced bargaining capabilities of our planners. One of the challenges of the next budget would be to demonstrate that the capability has been translated into qualitative changes in the budgetary priorities of the nation.

Moreover, the most crucial aspect of a budget should be its content — the central question is not how big or fat the budget is, but what it really wants to accomplish? Does it promote

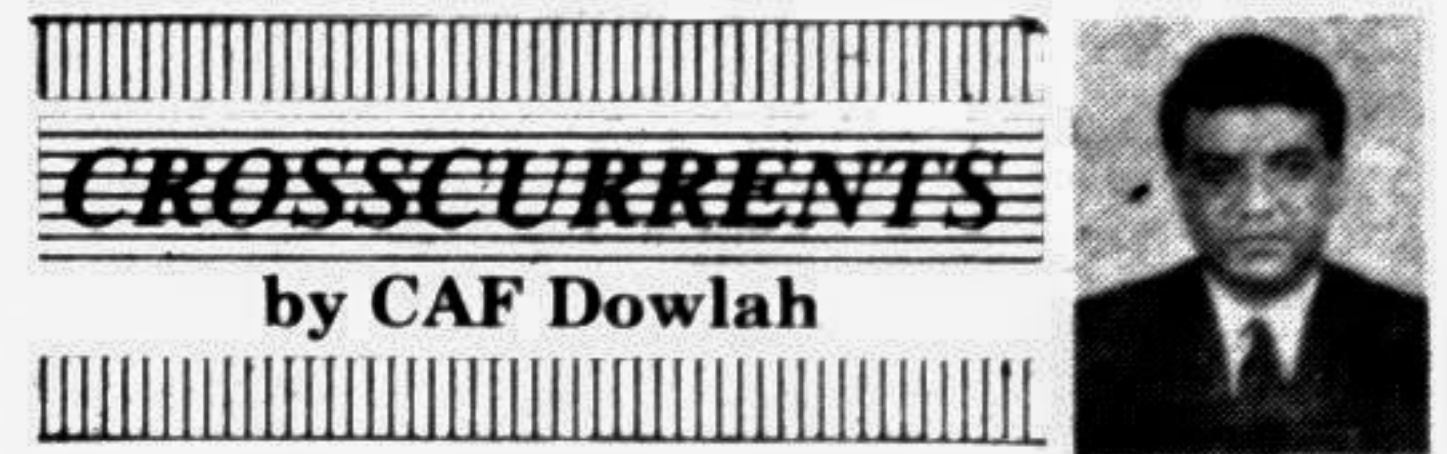
efficiency, productivity and growth? Does it encourage private initiatives and discourage the state sector? Does it discourage unproductive expenditures and provide incentives for expediting the day of the nation's industrialization? Does it promote industry, trade and commerce? Does it encourage innovation, science and technology? Does it aim at alleviat-

the parliament in the absence of the opposition. What difference it makes in presenting a budget in the parliament — even broadcasting and telecasting it live by the state-controlled radio and television — without having opposition members to scrutinize it in the floors of the parliament? How can a government contribute to consolidation of democracy

likely to brand it as an anti-people, anti development budget. Unfortunately, in the absence of democratic scrutiny, especially in the floors of the parliament, the people will be left with no choice but to accept a budget cooked and delivered by the ruling party. Who can guarantee that such a budget won't be reflecting the ruling party's priorities of an election year?

At least two such indications can be discerned from the reported deliberations that took place while the finance minister was exchanging views with his cabinet colleagues at a pre-budget policy discussion on Sunday last. He asked his cabinet colleagues for curtailing non-priority sectors and unproductive expenditures. Is there too much pressure on the finance minister to incorporate projects and programs that belong to those categories — in an election year? If such programmes and projects do make their way into the budget, in the absence of the opposition, who in the parliament would let the nation know of it?

Second, the finance minister indicated that the size of the budget would have been more than Tk 140 billion if the government did not have



by CAF Dowlah

ing poverty, eliminating illiteracy or meeting health or housing needs of the toiling masses? Above all, whose interests it serves — the business, the bureaucracy, the poor or the rich?

Of course, the people will not know the answers to most of these questions before the presentation of the budget in the parliament. Then again, the parliament is largely a lame-duck institution now. There is every chance that the next budget — just as the previous one — will be passed in

by passing two successive budgets in the parliament without involving the opposition? It gets worse when one considers the fact that the budget is prepared and delivered by a non-elected person.

In any case, the nation is going to get a new budget by this month. Of course, the budget will make headlines in the nation's newspapers. As usual, the government will try to sell it as a pro-people, pro-development plan, while the opposition, demonstrating its traditional character, is most

Do Sit Down for Talks

The controversy raging over voter registration on the CEC-prescribed format comes as a serious reminder for the opposition and the government to end their stand-off and thrash out the vital operational details of holding a free and fair election. Now that the chips are coming down, their failure to sit up and take note of it and start a substantive dialogue forthwith on the modalities to hold a good election can prove disastrous in the end.

After all, the opposition have represented before CEC at some level on what they see as faulty voter registration procedure being followed as well as on the alleged doles from the PM's discretionary fund to the ruling party MPs and leaders purportedly attracting the EC's responsibility to restrain spending money to influence voters. Then a writ challenging the Election Commission's authority in fixing a retrospective date for eligibility of voters is before the court. In other words, approaches, contacts and references are being made with the relevant authorities by the opposition for getting their viewpoints heard and their grievances attended to.

We are for fulsome, direct and comprehensive negotiations on the points at issue between the top-most opposition and government leaders in place of the piece-meal, truncated and indirect slogging with the issues. A holistic approach is what we need now after having made things murky by ego-driven procrastination. The ruling party on its part must be keen on drawing the opposition into the election because without the latter's participation the whole exercise would be meaningless. By the same token, the government cannot savour any fresh addition to opposition's list of demands. For all we know, the opposition is serious about testing their popularity in the polls, so that they must keep the atmosphere conducive to holding the election by avoiding fresh threats of agitation.

Since both the sides evince keen interest in the polls they must sit down for talks to fix a date for the election and negotiate the modalities of forming a neutral caretaker government; the composition and the timing of its being in the saddle. They must concur in regard to a foolproof voters' list, ID cards and a code of conduct for the election.

One good safeguard against exclusion of voters is the individual eligible voter's determination not to be left out. The government in the meanwhile should come out with a statement on some of the opposition's complaints about expatriate voters being kept out and stranded Pakistanis being included.

Improving Ferry Service

The three major ferry terminals — Aricha, Nagarbari and Daulatdia — connecting the capital with vast areas in the country's north, west and south are reportedly gasping for breath. Traffic congestion at those points has given rise to a problem that calls for immediate attention. In fact, an antiquated ferry service, made all the more complicated by irregularities and undesirable interferences, can no longer take the pressure of an increased flow of traffic.

We have time and again drawn the authorities' attention to the need for an improved communication system both for fast and smooth movement of people and goods. The heavy rush of traffic at ferry terminals is a sign of economic health of the country. It means that people are travelling for business and various other purposes and the farmers are producing goods at increasing rates. But if the transportation of their produce is hampered and the return is either nominal or diminishing, the incentive for growth is gone.

Unsurprisingly, this year's bumper production of mangoes is not going to bring much of a benefit for the growers. Coupled with the falling price, a long wait at the ferry ghats and forbidding transportation costs have made the fruit harvest uneconomic for the farmers. The traders, however, are enjoying the situation because it is they who dictate the terms in the market. It is indeed a pity that we cannot make the most of a bumper harvest. There is no market research and other measures that would help us find an economic use of our high production. Perishable items rot and people suffer at the ferry terminals because of a lack of vision. A thorough study of seasonal movement of goods and people can help determine the number of required ferries. Definitely, at this time of the year, transportation of fruits demand more ferry service. The Bangladesh Inland Water Transport Corporation has unsuccessfully pleaded for expansion of its fleet. But why? Along with increasing the number of ferries, there is need for modernisation of the service at the ghats coupled with a complete elimination of irregularities and musclemanship there.

Death of a Teacher

Khan Mohammad Salek who built Government Laboratory High School virtually from scratch to its eminence immediately after its establishment in the early 60s, is no more. An educationist with exceptional love for literature, Khan carried the best of traditions that made teaching profession more than a service for money. In fact, in British India teachers viewed their profession as a mission in which there was no scope for self-deception. A recipient of the Ekushey Padak, Mohammad Salek carried the baton of that glorious tradition till his death on Monday. He was totally immune from the present-day aberrations of the teaching profession.

Mohammed Salek combined the rare quality of good administration and an enviable standard of teaching. His success both as a headmaster and as a teacher is legendary. An open-minded person, communalism or such other smallness was foreign to his character. It is because of this broadness of his nature that he could turn the Laboratory High School into a cradle of learning. And yet he was unaffected by the success in a way that might have made others arrogant.

This was possible perhaps because of his sense of duty and his appreciation of life and literature. The titles of most of his books have been taken from Rabindranath's poems or songs. A modern man in his outlook, Khan was immersed upto his neck in the pursuit of knowledge. He continued his study till the last days of his life. Again he has proved that he is a true follower of Rabindranath. With his death an outstanding tradition comes to an end. We mourn his death and extend our sympathy to the bereaved family.

Of Fifth Five-Year Plan and Budget 1995-96

THE current five-year plan and financial year will close on June 30, 1995. After last Paris Consortium meeting, we are fairly clear what are coming in as foreign aid and what would be the expected size of the Annual Development Programme and Development Budget for 1995-96. Now, the Finance Minister, his Ministry and National Board of Revenue are supposed to have been working out the estimates under the Revenue Budget. It is widely rumoured, but seems sensible, that the Government and its Ministry of Finance are deeply engaged in dressing the estimates and the accounting figures to call it a people's budget and attract the voters in the parliamentary election, likely to be held by the end of this year, in all probability. It is presumed that no new tax will be imposed, but then the coverage of VAT will be extended to increase the revenue receipts, to show surplus of, say, Tk 4000 crore in the revenue account.

But, what proportion of the total budget, Revenue and Development, will trickle down to the teeming millions, the voters, will not be told by the Finance Minister or the Prime Minister! This, however, is nothing new. And it is no wild thinking either, when somebody says that 80 per cent of the budget is eaten up by the government and its bureaucracy, foreign purchases, indentors and commission agents, consultants, foreign tours and in-land travels, etc. No doubt, salary, allowances, and establishment expenses are increasing persistently and these make a big component, whatever accounting jugglery is used. But, the consumers,

the tax-payers and the voters will not be told if any exact measures have been undertaken to combat the gigantic menace of bribery, system loss in the public undertakings, annual loss of Tk 2000 crore in Govt owned enterprises.

It has not been done in the last four budgets of the BNP Government. It is wishful to think that they will come out this time to hit out the corrupt clique, a cobweb net negated as potential source of supply of voters in the polling booths! But one point is almost certain that Finance Minister will have to his psychic condition to address the one-party parliament in its 20th Budget session, no matter, the TV and Radio are there to telecast and broadcast his speech directly from the Parliament building. The viewers or listeners may not understand his accounting and tax terminology, but surely they will be impressed to know the budget figures running into thousands of crore Taka. But how will he tie up the budget figure with the first year of the fifth five-year plan and anticipate the growth rate of the economy in an orderly manner, will perplex any sensible mind. Centre for Policy Dialogue have since raised some fundamental questions in its Independent Review of Bangladesh's Development (1994-95) and conducted deliberations, participated by the Finance Minister, policy makers and leaders of political parties and business, among others. Will the CPD document and deliberations have any impact on next Budget and five year plan? Let us wait for the

next session of the parliament, without members from mainstream opposition parties.

Strangely enough: there is rather an ominous silence on the Fifth Five Year Plan, commencing from July 1, 1995.

What the State Minister for Planning, his Ministry and Planning Commission are doing in this regard are seemingly shrouded in mystery. Recent press reports could not move them to action or come out with a Government Press Note. There is no lack of personnel in the planning machinery to respond to the position reported, unless otherwise stopped by the boss in the Ministry. Might be it is a deep slumber (or a cunning method to while away time). Will not CPD's shock therapy rouse their senses?

Amidst huge uproar last year, the State Minister for Planning Dr Moïn Khan initiated the preparation of next five-year plan through his stated participatory planning process and bottom-up approach. He was quite emphatic in his utterances that the country can not be run with age-old planning. He directed to prepare participatory/bottom-up plans through holding of meetings, in 64 districts, of professional groups. We have seen TV reports and Radio broadcasts on such meetings, where the members of the ministry were also present. By now, both the members, who had sound background of economics, have left the Planning

HSC exam date

Sir, A press report says that some students have been agitating for shifting of HSC Exam which is scheduled to commence on 6th July. Even 6th July is rather a late date and there is no justification for shifting it further. This is not a demand of the common students. Only a handful misguided students perhaps are behind it. If the government succumbs to their demand, this will create a dangerous precedence. Maybe they are being instigated by some political parties for their respective gain, who knows? Hence I urge the Ministry of Education not to pay any heed to such unjust and unreasonable demand.

Saleh Ahmed Chowdhury
Dhaka Cantonment

Imran's marriage

Sir, Imran's marriage has created a world-wide furor as he at long last has married the only daughter of a wealthy Briton. But this middle aged play boy perhaps unwarily has committed a great blunder of his life by marrying of a Jewish origin. The orthodox Muslim Pakistanis cannot accept this absolutely uncommon wedlock. Certainly marriage is Imran's personal affair. But as some has pointed out that as he is a Muslim and a Pathan, marriage is also an auspicious social and religious custom to follow.

To make things complicated a bolt from the blue has befallen honey-mooning newly-married couple in Spain (or Athens)? When one bewildering 'Sita' suddenly surfaced with an innocent charming 3-years old daughter of world famous all rounder cricketer Imran born out of wedlock. Sita is not an ordinary cheap woman and shall not let Imran go scotfree. If required she will take legal assistance with

the help of formidable British Duke father.

No doubt, Imran is in a real soup. We will sincerely pray that he comes out of this knotty situation very soon, without much mud on his bright face.

Fl Lt (R) ABM Mohiuddin
Dhaka

India and Pakistan

Sir, It appears that both India and Pakistan are sailing on the same boat. Everytime an Indian or a Pakistani comes in Dhaka from New Delhi or Islamabad he always speaks almost in the same tongue and same mood reiterating and assuring again and again the old promises of their respective predecessors for immediate solution of the Ganges water issue or the repatriation of the stranded Pakistanis in Bangladesh. Thus both the issues grow older and older day by day and nobody knows when and at what age of the issues, ninety or hundred years, or not at all, these would be solved.

What is the use of making false promises and assurances one after another? This does not help solve any problem, rather makes a problem more complicated for a peaceful solution. India is pledge-bound to Bangladesh for equitable distribution of the Ganges water for the last two decades. Similarly, Pakistan is also assuring Bangladesh for repatriation of the stranded Pakistanis for the last twenty years but of no avail. Both India and Pakistan are equally responsible for their respective negligence of duties, lapses and omissions at the cost of untold sufferings of the millions of people.

We would request both India and Pakistan to kindly change their habits and to follow good conduct. If they don't, problems like equitable

distribution of the Ganges water or the repatriation of the stranded Pakistanis would never be solved. Do they want it so?

Would New Delhi and Islamabad really do something for the solution of long standing issues instead of making childish quibbling?

O H Kabir
Dhaka-1203

Facts of life

Sir, A father fathered a child with his own daughter in the US in the recent past! Such a mating that is widely viewed as an immoral act by many religious commands as well as by civic bodies can lead to eventual decay of social values and integrity.

The legitimacy of the baby born out of coitus relation between nuclear kin is not the main point in question, the issue's right to living like another member of the society is. A baby delivered outside wedlock is still looked down upon as some kind of social nuisance as if the sibling is to blame for his/her own illegal birth.

As of now, an offspring, no matter how came into being, cannot confirm his/her own biological parents as a witness to his/her own birth.

Disregarding a few known cases of incest, the suspicion of other hidden facts of premarital sexual molestations naturally detects anybody nowadays.

If this unethical (and outlawed) psychophysical intercourse is thought of as an interaction that can be injurious to proper growth of a moral-rich socio-cultural system, then the societal duty must call for a means to do away with this social vice before it penetrates the whole civility.

M Rahman
Zila School Road, Mymensingh

National Primary Education Week '95 More Efforts Needed to Achieve a Higher Literacy Rate

by Prof Roushan Ara Hoque

The country's Constitution has ensured our fundamental right to education. As a participant and signatory of 1990's international conference on 'Education for all by the year 2000 our government is committed to ensure education for all by 2000 AD.

THE theme of this year's National Education Week, which began on June 3, is 'Primary Education is the Foundation of All Education'. The programmes of the week include a national seminar on June 7 with the Prime Minister as the chief guest, besides discussions, meetings, competitions and prize distributions among the primary school children.

In their respective messages, both the President and the Prime Minister have laid emphasis on primary education as the basis of all education because development of mental ability of the children depends on the successful completion of primary education.

Our population is 12 crore, but the literacy rate is 24.28 per cent, per capita income is 133 US dollars a year, unemployment rate is over 80 per cent and 85 per cent of the population live in sub-human conditions. So education is the only option to turn the manpower into skilled workers. And primary education is the basis of developing human resources which has been proved to be more valuable than natural resources for developing countries. Japan with meagre natural resources, Japan has topped the list of the richest countries only by utilising her highly skilled manpower. Our political freedom will be meaningful if it brings economic freedom as well. And primary education, no doubt, is the source of gaining that economic progress.

The country's Constitution has ensured our fundamental right to education. As a participant and signatory of 1990's international conference on 'Education for all by the year 2000 our government is committed to ensure education for all by 2000 AD. Primary education has already been made free and compulsory, more schools have been nationalized, and the rate of literacy has in-

creased by 10 per cent, as claimed by the government, over the past four years.

The following figures show the rate of adult literacy and primary school enrolment as estimated by the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, Directorate of Primary Education and World Bank, compiled in 1990:

Adult Literacy Rate of 15+	Male		Female	
	1970	1990	1970	1990
	36	47	12	22

Primary School Enrolment Ratio	Male		Female	
	1970	1990	1970	1990
	80	83	31	71

Of the enrolled students in primary schools, the average of drop-out is 60 per cent within 1st and 2nd year, 30 per cent between 3rd and 4th year and only 10 per cent of them complete the primary schooling. The rate of drop-out is more among girl students.

The study shows the reasons of drop-out as —

- Poverty: Children of poor families are to earn their own livelihood instead of going to schools.
- Parental negligence: Lack of awareness among the parents.
- Domestic works: Both boys and girls are to help their parents at home.
- Teacher pupil ratio in most schools is 1:61, the ideal being 1:30.
- Most of the teachers follow the old learning by cramming method and students are overburdened with homeworks.
- The number of working days are insufficient to complete the course satisfactorily.
- The time of a class is short. So the teachers cannot follow modern method of teaching and evaluation within the time limit.

As the government has already introduced free educa-

tion up to primary level, it has distributed prescribed books free of cost, started 'Food for Education' programme in many rural schools as an experimental process, improved the salary structure and started pension benefit and provided training for teachers with refresher courses at regular intervals. However, for creating awareness about the importance of primary education some suggestions are being given below — which may be considered by the government:

- Local administration may form vigilante-teams in every area to create awareness among the parents to send their children to school.
 - Compensation in cash may be given to the parents for the financial loss they will incur for sending their children to schools.
 - Begging by any child or child labour should be banned only to compel them to go to schools.
 - Certain amount of fines may be imposed on the parents for neglecting their children's education. Social and moral pressure may also be created.
 - Rewards and incentives should be given to the children for their good performance in schools.
 - School-dresses, books, pencils, tiffins and writing and learning materials — all should be provided free.
 - Working days and lesson periods should be extended and if necessary the working hours of the rural schools may be shifted to evening.
- By allocating more funds to the primary education sector some of the above suggestions may be considered. Such steps have already been taken in Western Myanmar where the drop-outs can be reduced and that of literacy increased in this process.