

The DCC Budget

The Dhaka City Corporation (DCC) has announced its budget of Tk 359.46 crore for the year 1996-97. A revised budget for the outgoing 1995-96 fiscal year showing a whittling down of the original allocation of Tk 303.48 crore to Tk 266.46 crore was also approved. Mayor Hanif, who presented the budget, accorded priority to increasing civic amenities for the city's growing number of inhabitants. A lion's share of the budget amounting Tk 248.66 crore has been allocated for an all-round uplift in the living conditions of the metropolis.

The thrust of this budget, like in the previous one, is definitely on the development side. However, the downsizing of the previous (1995-96) budget should leave a few lessons for the DCC. According to the mayor's own admission, the reduction of the '95-96 budget was necessitated mainly because of unrealised tax amounting to Tk 35 crore. Of this, the government, semi-government and autonomous bodies themselves owe Tk 15 crore to the corporation. The budget for the next fiscal year is reliant upon a grant of Tk 65 crore from the government and Tk 70 crore as a component of foreign and government-funded projects. So, there are latent variables that might necessitate a revision of the next year's budget as well.

The mayor is evidently in the best of positions though to carry forward his programmes for the metropolis. The change of government must prove propitious for him in his relationship with the local government ministry. On top of everything, the prime minister's directive for an effective coordination among the different service sectors — desirably with the DCC acting as the hub — should go a long way in doing away with overlapping and repeat activities. If things fall in place, we surely can expect the avoidance of resource waste.

Let the DCC give more attention to its traditional job of conservancy. An allocation of Tk 70 crore to environment development projects is heartening but their success will largely depend on the efficiency of the DCC's garbage collection and disposal. The provision for construction of drains is there, but we do not know if the strength of the garbage collecting fleet will also be raised. This basic requirement has to get the priority it deserves. Let the DCC give us a clean and environment-wise congenial city.

Cellular Hopes

Possibly Dhaka's cellular buyers have had to pay the highest price in the world for their sets and as well for the calls, made and received. A poor nation's lot is replete with such ironies.

Now Grameen Bank, through its subsidiaries developed for the purpose, are trying first to make the mobile telephone available to their organisational units spread over thousands of villages and also to the borrowing members of these units. Their projection that the resulting huge bulk of sets purchased and the matching networking would drastically reduce the price of the sets, sounds very practicable indeed. If we compare our situation with, say, Sri Lanka we shall both be shocked and amazed. It is said there you can get a cellular at just about any store and at prices decidedly below Tk 5,000.

If that is that, why did we have to pay through our nose and burden our wired technology with loads they cannot take within even decades? In an atmosphere of free market getting freer and fear all the time, who was it that played such a cruel monopolistic blackmail? While this question should not be allowed to peter out — the task at hand is to reach our people with this benefit of the STR — scientific and technological revolution. Be it through Grameen Phone or whatever, telephones must be made available to all of our people, irrespective of class and property and monetary position. It must not remain a luxury affordable by the rich.

The Grameen thrust in the matter first broke in the press as something resembling a utopia. All small producers, breeders and stockists of the rakhee business enquiring all over the places for a better price over their cellulars. That is quite a dream but eminently realisable. Who will take care of the city folks? Some set-up called the Nagoreen?

Wage Award

On Saturday Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina spoke for the first time of taking appropriate steps to implement the wage board for journalists. For six years, however, government has not modified its own advertisement tariff. During the same period a newspaper's cost of production has trebled or quadrupled — and price about doubled. It is a silly idea to keep one's purse strings tight and enjoin upon others to open theirs — when the source and volume of money remains the same. Till today government is by far the biggest advertiser of all. If government is both stingy and feisty over inflating its dues to newspapers, let it prove so by cutting wholesale on patronisation ads. Advertisements must go to the truly and better selling newspapers.

The former government was found in a very awkward position during the newsprint crisis that still continues for the new government to address. What happened to the green jute newsprint revolution? And what indeed happened to the green jute sticks purchased in huge lots at different mill-gates more than a year back? An eminently solvable equipment-cum-spares problem is plaguing the industry in a manner that calls for urgent resolution.

By a stroke of pen government can bring down the prices of spares and other materiel. This should cushion the award implementation.

Foreign Policy Establishment: Bangladesh Experience

In his meeting with Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina in August 1972, Foreign Minister Syed Abdus Samad Azad made some important remarks on the foreign policy of the new country. While appreciating the role of the UNHCR, headed by the prince, Bangladesh Foreign Minister laid emphasis on the spirit of the War of Liberation as the embodiment of the policy objectives of the government. The prince's courtesy call on Bangabandhu convealing in Hotel La Reserve in Geneva also reflected the same resonance. Earlier Foreign Minister Azad's letter to Vittorio Vinsapere-Guiccia, UN chief in Geneva and his personal note to me on our admission to the World Health Organisation reflected the same spirit. President Justice Abu Sayed Chowdhury's letter of June 1972 to me only re-emphasised the same vides.

Foreign policy of a state is the reflection of the domestic policy objectives of the country — as the embodiment of the country's history and the aspirations of the people that go with it. As American, July 4 Independence Day celebration cannot be visualised without George Washington and the declaration of Independence in 1776, so the French July 14th celebration cannot be seen as isolated from the storming of the Bastille and the slogan of 'Liberty, Equality and Fraternity'.

In Bangladesh, the post-75 period — roughly, a hiatus of 21 years — presents a different picture. Deliberate efforts were made to distort the history of the War of Liberation, war heroes were slaughtered, anybody connected with the War of Liberation was a target of character assassination. Conscious efforts were made to create division among the freedom fighters — both civil and military. In this process of

"We the people of Bangladesh, having proclaimed our independence on the 26th day of March '71, and, through a historic struggle for national liberation, established the independent, sovereign People's Republic of Bangladesh."

baudering our history, the projonmo was dished out (textbooks concealing the true history of Bangladesh and the struggle that went with it. Bengalee homeland was not achieved in a nine months of war. Bengalee resistance of thousands years before that prepared the ground presaging the achievement of a homeland in 1971 under the leadership of Bangabandhu. Many leaders and resistance fighters contributed to that day. Raja Gopal as much as King Shobhaniko; Gorashandha as much as Preetilata Wadidrar; Khudiram as much as Shubash Bose; Mir Musharraf Hossain as much as Nazrul Islam and Alawal; Tagore as much as Madhusudan Dutt. The pasture was further cultivated by Hossain Shaheed Suhrawardy, Maulana Abdul Hamid Bhasani and Sher-e-Bangla A K Fazul Huq. Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib gave concrete shape to the thousand-year-old Bengalee dream by giving a geographic configuration to the country as our homeland. As expressed in the preamble of the first Constitution of Bangladesh: "We the people of Bangladesh, having proclaimed our independence on the 26th day of March 71, and, through a historic struggle for national liberation, established the independent, sovereign People's Republic of Bangladesh."

The distortion of the history of Bangladesh and with it the Bangladesh foreign policy objectives, started with the amendment of this part of the Constitution.

It is interesting to note that in the past quarter-century of our independent nationhood, all major foreign policy achievements have

been made by diplomats connected with the War of Liberation. It was Foreign Minister Samad Azad under whose leadership this writer took Bangladesh to all the UN agencies in Geneva, Vienna and Rome overcoming the obstacles created by some powerful countries between 1972 to 1974 who did not yet recognise Bangladesh. It was Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman who took the new country to the United Nations on September 17, 1974. S A M S Kibria foreign secretary piloted Bangladesh's admission to the Security Council for the

admission to the FAO council by defeating powerful Malaysia, again by a freedom fighter diplomat, the foreign policy establishment between 91 to 95 was as it were, hoist by its own petard. Cynics may cast aspersions on our officers. But the fact is that our officers most of whom are serious and dedicated workers had very little chance of contributing towards our foreign policy objectives during this period. They were made to work in a very unhealthy atmosphere. They were reduced to the men of the establishment. Their creativity was snuffed

out. Anybody with ability to innovate and contribute was obstructed. Diplomats with liberal background and attitude were carefully screened out. The result was horrendously obvious. Who would believe that Bangladesh would secure only two votes in FAO election for Director General? Who would countenance that in the ECOFAC and UPU elections Bangladesh received less than South Pacific micro-states? Our traditional friends in Muslim countries and OIC felt ignored, our friends in the donor community, including foreign establishments like World Bank and IMF were sidelined; internal contradic-

tional and international, and promoted those, particularly in the foreign policy establishment, who were connected with the tragic events of August 1975 and others who actively opposed the creation of Bangladesh! The lack of foreign policy directives did not allow some good points in the Mordshed Committee to be implemented. Foreign Secretary Farook Sobhan was intimidated when he tried to speak about some of the recommendations.

Transparency in civil administration has to be matched with accountability in the foreign policy as well. It is in this context that the new foreign minister's pronouncements give us reason for hope in the coming days. The minister and his deputy, Kaiser Chowdhury, are both committed politicians. They will, I am sure, take demonstrative action to lift the morale of the foreign ministry and reactivate the establishment, structurally and other ways, in order to reinvent our true identity at home and abroad. The American Declaration of Independence had a strong moral connotations; so have we in the preamble to our Constitution. Sceptics may not like it — but cynics do not build cathedrals. We must define our critical choices to lend vibrancy and dynamism to our foreign policy.

Robert Livingston, the first American secretary for foreign affairs, selected in January 10, 1781, experienced a considerable amount of frustration in office because his duties were not clearly defined. He started the State Department with 14 officials — 4 domestic and 10 overseas. Foreign Minister Abdus Samad Azad started in 1972 in independent Bangladesh perhaps with less than 14 officials. Who could, therefore, be a better manager than him in redirecting our foreign policy?



Waliur Rahman

period 1979-1981. He also occupied the senior-most post in the UN system from Bangladesh as ESCAP Executive Director. Again, it was another freedom fighter diplomat Humayun Rashid Chowdhury who adorned the presidency of the UN General Assembly at its 40th session. We have of course some of our finest officers amongst those who for circumstances could not contribute to our War of Liberation. Bangladesh has never been friendless. We have never been defeated in any major international bodies. But the period between 1991 and 1995 saw perhaps the nadir in our foreign policy. Except for the

A Salute to the Left?

Ashok Mitra writes from New Delhi

MUCH media attention has focussed on the role of the left, more particularly of the Communist Party of India (Marxist), during the recent goings-on in New Delhi in connection with the formation of a new government. The Leftists and Marxists, in other words, have come to gain overwhelming recognition as an integral element in the nation's mainstream. This by itself is a remarkable development. Till only a few years ago, the Communist movement was regarded by large sections of the national media and other opinion shapers as an alien corn; the ideology of the Left was supposedly not quite reconcilable with the nation's political ethos. All that is changed. This change is all the more significant in the context of the general erosion of Left activism all over the world following the collapse of the Soviet Union and the eastern bloc.

One outcome of this transformation of attitude toward the Left has been the disappointment genuinely felt in many quarters at the decision of the Central Committee of the CPI(M) not to join formally the United Front government and thereby forgo the opportunity of having its Politbureau member, Shri Jyoti Basu, installed as the nation's prime minister. Even those sections of the media, who otherwise strongly disapprove of the Left, have expressed distress at the CPI(M) decision; in their view, it would have been to the best interests of the country in case

the West Bengal chief minister, with his richly deserved reputation for administrative acumen and political sagacity could be persuaded to take charge of the government in New Delhi.

The sense of anguish has been particularly deep among those who strongly believe that the only way out of the political quagmire the country finds itself in is a secular non-Congress government at the Centre which could assure both efficiency and stability. Given the track record of the Left Front in West Bengal, a Jyoti Basu-led coalition regime, it was widely believed would have been the best answer to the nation's prayers. According to some of these commentators, by taking the

decision it has taken, the CPI(M) has shirked a responsibility the nation was keen to see it assume. Traditional sympathisers of the Left, on the other hand, are full of regrets for a different reason: with a communist as Prime Minister, the course of history, they maintain could have been greatly hastened in the country, and the objective of ushering in an economically prosperous, egalitarian popular democracy would have been almost within reach. Such a development was, in their judgement, bound to have a tremendous global impact as well. The opportunity surren-

dered one or two sentimentalists have proceeded to lament, is an opportunity which is never going to re-visit India's Left. In this cacophony, a few other points of view have tended to be missed out. Arguments posted in support of the desirability of the CPI(M)'s joining the United Front government, — and of Shri Jyoti Basu assuming its leadership — without question contained much substance. It is nonetheless surprising that there has been no reference at all in the discussions that ensued to another aspect of the CPI(M)'s resolve to stay away from power. The policy of principle, the Marxist philosophy of life says, should always

has precedence over the lure of ministerial positions. To be even more explicit, to for sake, the party is asserting, is to be preferred to covet. Such abstinence has been rendered into an unfamiliar quality in recent times. It is an altogether uncommon sight, this courage of conviction of a political party which enables to express its disinterestedness in the office of the nation's prime minister even when it is offered to it on a platter. The international environment is hardly propitious for them, but, going by the evidence the Left in this country refuse to be daunted; they have no hesitation in proclaiming that, in their lexicon, commitment to ideology — and to the strategy that ideology is suggestive of supersedes other

important ministerial portfolios. Politics have been reduced, one is almost persuaded, to conclude, to the sharing of spoils. The rate race for power, and for pelf that seizure of power ensures, does not any longer evoke any large-scale miscomport or feeling of astonishment: the nation has come to expect such conduct from politicians and political parties. The craze currently in vogue for the pragmatic philosophy of liberalisation has lent extra acceptability to the politicians' bid for power and deployment of that power to effect material gains for themselves and their near and dear ones; the core of the liberalisation message, after all, is to urge each citizen to enrich

himself or herself without expending too much thought on the means. How many in the circle of political commentators have stopped to admit that, in this cloying climate, the decision of the country's leading Left party to turn down the invitation to enter government strikes an altogether different chord? This decision, on the part of the CPI(M) Central Committee, could prove right or wrong over the long run. What is however of equal, or even greater importance in today's context is, a political party demonstrating to the world that the principle it cherishes

considerations. This nation, which once swore by Tagore and Gandhi, has gradually slipped away from most ethical mornings thanks to the spread of the notion that enjoyment of the good things in life is the quintessential objective, all else is dross.

decision has also eluded notice. The party's Central Committee, exemplifying the basics of inner-party democracy, vetoed the recommendation of the superior body, the Politbureau, that Shri Jyoti Basu be permitted to accept the office of prime minister. This too is quite unheard of in the paternalistic climate nurtured in the country.

Should not one connect this lack of avarice on the part of the Left also with that other major revelation in recent months: politicians of practically all other hues have their reputation sullied by involvement in the hawala transactions not one Left leader has however been found to be involved in these sordid exercises in venality. The conclusion is self-evident: adherence to the policy of the principle also implies adherence to integrity and truthfulness.

The Left still commands only a minor influence in the country. They have nonetheless succeeded to gain entry into the national mainstream. And, who knows, at the next stage, their assertion and reassertion of old-fashioned values, such as dedication to ideology, resistance to temptations and sticking to the straight and narrow path of ethical behaviour, might win over for them the allegiance of millions and millions of countrymen. That would be giving tidings for many others though. — Mandira.

The author is a former Finance Minister of West Bengal and now, a Member of Parliament, Rajya Sabha.

To the Editor...

An earnest appeal

Sir, The country has recently overcome a deep crisis. After the free and fair elections under a neutral caretaker government, a new government has come to power. What is interesting to note here is that the roles of the erstwhile leadership and opposition have reversed! The BNP under the leadership of Begum Khasida Zia will be the largest ever opposition party to sit in Parliament. Their decision to form a shadow cabinet is certainly laudable.

Under the present circumstances, we make an earnest appeal to the opposition to keep to their election pledges and not resort to hartals, strikes, walk-outs, etc. The more "constructive" and "reasonable" their opposition in parliament will be the more appreciable will be their efforts outside. For once, give importance to our wishes — the dream of the people of Bangladesh and engage in healthy politics.

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Assets and property of ministers, MPs and government officials

Sir, The population of our country is 12 crore and the number of our MPs is only 300. On average an MP represents about 40 lakh people. While majority of the people live below the poverty line, some of the MPs lead an ostentatious life and their affluence need no description. So is the case with some of our ministers and top government officials. Article 19(2) of our Constitution says, "The State shall adopt effective measures to

remove social and economic inequality between man and man and to ensure the equitable distribution of wealth among citizens, and of opportunities in order to attain a uniform level of economic development throughout the Republic."

We strongly feel that all our MPs, ministers and top government officials must declare their assets and property on a yearly basis for the sake of accountability and transparency. In this connection a special cell in the Ministry of Finance may be opened.

We are hopeful and confident that the newly-elected government which is supposedly pledged bound to run the administration of the country on consensus on national issues would take effective steps to alleviate the long-standing sufferings of the people.

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Housing defeats greenery

Sir, A front-page news item appearing in The Daily Star of June 26, 1996 has drawn my attention and in a bid to settle the misunderstood feelings among the residents in and around Dhanmondi, I am compelled to write a few lines. Now we can proudly say Dhanmondi has that turned into a Commercial Area. A place that had been planned for two-storied buildings only can boast of having six to eight storied buildings with shops of all kinds irrespective of place, location or needs. Most of the house owners found it to be highly lucrative to expand their business of building or constructing multi-storied buildings all over

the area. When the owners themselves did not bother to care for the beauty of the area, how do they claim that only to accommodate a few high officials' two five-storied buildings by the Public Works Department shall "defeat the greenery" in and around the Dhanmondi Residential Area? How much care had the residents of this area taken during all these years?

Did not the owners connect their sewerage pipelines to the lake allowing all the waste materials to pour into the water of the lake only to satisfy their own selfish needs? The fishes in the lake proved inedible and poisonous. Only the Almighty knows how many human beings came down with various diseases, some of them fatal, from those fishes.

The Daily Star office being in I (repeat) ... The Daily Star office, Dhanmondi, the newspaper found the news to be of importance for which it appeared as a front-page item along with a photograph. But what about the garbage lying all over the area? The loitering cattle heads. Of course, the basti and the illegal occupants in and around the locality must be a great help to the residing populace indeed!

Last, but not in the least, I would rather feel much obliged if some residents do express themselves through this paper accordingly and clearly write with meaningful reasons why or why not any building should be constructed in the Dhanmondi Commercial Area. I feel there ought to be more buildings constructed so that more citizens can have the opportunity of accommodation.

Nahtasha Kamal Wari, Dhaka

Post-election thoughts

Sir, The recently-held election had undoubtedly created lot of enthusiasm among the people which could be evident from the ever-highest participation of voters. But it cannot be straightaway claimed that it was more free and fair than the election of 1991. Though this election was by and large peaceful and well participated yet there have been numerous allegations of casting of false votes, forcible ouster of polling agents of one party by another, throwing out of sealed ballot papers, influencing voters to put seal on a particular mark by the polling officers, number of votes cast found to be more than the number of registered voters and many other such irregularities.

In the face of such allegations raised by almost all the parties including even the victorious one, the Election Commission should have given a comprehensive clarification refuting the allegations at least for those places where some material evidences were cited. But instead of doing that the EC was found to be over-complacent with the observation of the polls observers from abroad that the election was free and fair. By doing so the Election Commission simply ignored the fact that it was not possible for the handful of observers to visit every five per cent of the total polling centres and moreover the large participation itself bears no indication that there could not be any irregularities. So the EC appeared to have given more importance on the certificate of foreign observers than the objections raised by almost all the parties. The complete overlooking of the numerous allegations can reasonably cast

a shadow of doubt that the election was not absolutely free and fair everywhere. In 1991 there was no allegation raised by any quarter except one comment of a respectable leader which was also repudiated by the other senior members of the same party. No withholding of result and no repolling was necessary unlike this time when repolling had to be conducted in as much as 27 constituencies.

However, we are happy that all the parties have gracefully accepted the result of the election and the 7th Parliament is going to start functioning. Let us hope and pray that the Parliament is taken by all parties as the only forum to settle all national issues and it becomes the main platform for all political debates.

We should not however forget that, the very purpose of last two years' continuous movement which almost destroyed the national economy was to install a caretaker government to conduct the general election under an absolutely neutral atmosphere. This election has left enough ground to ponder whether people had been really able to enjoy that right and whether there was no interference on exercising their voting right. The new Parliament should take up the issue in all earnestness at a convenient time and find out ways and means so that the future elections are held free from all controversies. The introduction of identity cards to all voters and other necessary measures to effect a flawless voting system must have to be taken up before we go for another national election.

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Allegations of BNP

Sirs, The much-awaited elections are over under the caretaker government. Though the election was reported to be a fair one on the surface, there were some irregularities involved in the process. Unprecedented turnout of the voters might have encouraged some contestants to send fake voters to the polling centres. In some constituencies the leading candidates were ultimately defeated during the announcement of results over the Radio and Television. The BNP being the sufferer of these misdeeds called for proper investigation specifically mentioning number of constituencies where irregularities had occurred. But no action has yet been taken either from the government or the EC in this regard which tantamounts to injustice to the party. The government and the EC must pay heed to the allegations made by the second largest party of JS to prove their neutrality as well as to satisfy the people in general.

We hope that the government and the EC would make prompt and proper investigations and give their judgement. The party deserves this as they had filed complaints before the authority reportedly with 'evidences' in accordance with the law.

In this connection we like to thank the BNP leadership for making complaints officially to the EC, and not to come onto the streets with slogan of 'subtle or, massive rigging'. This is a positive attitude towards politics and people as well.

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