

## Objective Journalism

**S**PEAKERS representing different shades of political opinion in the country expressed their feelings against politicised journalism and urged the newsmen to uphold true professionalism. This healthy consensus emerged through a discussion meeting on 'Accountability of Newspapers' held at the Jatiya Press Club on Wednesday by BFUJ and DUJ.

This coincided with the 'Black Day' observed every year since 1975 when on June 16 that year the then Awami League government closed down all but four newspapers in the wake of the introduction of one-party rule. BFUJ president Amanullah Kabir presented the keynote paper. Leaders of the community, eminent editors, former ministers and senior journalists and lawyers took part in the discussion.

The speakers were critical of the trend set by a section of the press that smacks of politicised journalism much to the peril of objectivity in disseminating information. Lack of objectivity in newspapers, especially in reporting, has been causing concern among readers. A former information minister thought it was the journalists' responsibility to remind the political leaders of their commitments to people by bringing up those points repeatedly in their papers which the leaders 'deliberately forget.' The newspapers' sole loyalty should be to truth if they really want to establish themselves as the Fourth Estate.

Speakers emphasised the need for accountability of newspapers to the readers but we must take into account the total circulation of newspapers. In a country of 130 million the number of newspaper readers is pitifully small. A vast majority of our people living in rural areas hardly have the capacity to buy or read newspapers. The newspapers have responsibilities to be accountable to them and work for the fulfilment of their basic needs like food, clothing, housing, health, education and employment. This can only be achieved by projecting the development activities of the government and its subsidiaries instead of giving priority to the hackneyed political debates and boasts of political parties. Although the newspaper readers are in a minority they are the leaders of the community and they are the people who matter when it comes to shaping the future of the country. Only objective journalism where presenting facts in pure form is the sacred duty of a newspaper can put forward strong messages to the people who matter in guiding the destiny of the country.

## Adieu, Mandela!

**W**ITH a disarming smile on his face and an all pervasive message of tolerance, African National Congress (ANC) chief Nelson Mandela undertook the Herculean task of uniting the racially divided South Africans, five years ago. On June 16, when he officially stepped down to make way for his long-time comrade and deputy through the first five years of democracy in the country, the smile was still there and so was the message of tolerance. As Thabo Mbeki took oath of office, it marked the end of an era, marked by one man's relentless struggle towards the dawn of democracy in a country riven and ravaged by three centuries of apartheid rule.

After nearly three decades of life in prison when he came out and was subsequently elected to power in 1994 following the first apartheid-free elections, fears of repercussions of three centuries of racial discrimination hung heavy in the air. Given the long-drawn era of black repression, revenge on the minority whites had sounded almost justifiable. Nevertheless, for one man, Mandela, the country was spared any vicious spate of bloodshed. His message of equality and peaceful co-existence allayed fears of racism and ethno-centric reprisals; and in no time, the nation went through a metamorphosis. Democracy was put above racial and ethnic consideration. All was possible for his political acumen, accommodative views and, above all, deep-rooted love for humanity.

There are instances in the history of human civilisation where such personalities were deified letting in indirect dogmatism in the process. Mandela has consciously avoided the pitfall, never allowing his private emotions to get the better of his best judgement. There were opportunities, like in the case of his ex-wife Winnie's dubious activities, to exercise his power. He didn't, and that is what makes him a great man. While he received the Nobel Peace Prize, the humanity, feel rewarded by the legacy of his great deeds. We wish him long life and the new leadership godspeed.

## Thrown to the Wolves

**S**OMETHING has gone wrong in creating a socially vulnerable position for the women of the country. Reports in the print media clearly indicate that with each passing day the plight of women is getting more precarious. The society is completely baffled by the mounting incidence of abduction, rape and murder of women all over the country.

According to a report in a prominent Bangla daily on Thursday: Two housewives were gang-raped at a village in Netrakona; Shujala Rani Das has been missing for more than a month from Feni Railway Station; and a six-year-old was violated in Brahmanbaria. The list can be frightfully long.

These manifest a sort of morbidity which threatens to tear apart the entire social fabric. Why is the society so repulsive? Why such criminal and savage instincts are on an alarming rise? The socio-psychic reasons behind such cannibalistic behaviour will have to be addressed.

In trying to make the society safe for women, efforts by human rights organisations and women activists have admittedly proved to be inadequate. On the other hand, national leaders are locked in a war of words in the parliament, undermining each other, ignoring the escalating crime in the country that affect half the population directly. It's time we took honest initiatives to create a women-friendly society in which every female, irrespective of age, can feel secure. It is at the local community levels that respect for women needs to be enforced.

**F**INANCE Minister S A M S Kibria recently presented the national budget to the Parliament for fiscal 1999-2000 and the supplementary budget for fiscal 1998-99. It is the 4th budget of the three-year-old Awami League government and 28th budget of the 28-year-old Bangladesh. This last budget of the 20th century has been prepared, we presume, in the backdrop of a lash caused by an unprecedented flood that swept Bangladesh during July-September 1998.

Quite obviously, the assumptions under which the calculus of the budget 1998-99 was based were upset giving rise to unexpected high food imports and hike in other revenue expenditures.

Both in the pre- and the post-budget discussions, the very nature of the budget-making process in this country and the participation of the common people therein — especially of the poor — tend to become a tone of contentions. Historically speaking, budget figures have been produced mainly by bureaucrats. Of course, of late, we noticed that the Finance Minister delved into dialogues with trade bodies, journalists, intellectuals, economists etc.

On the other hand, the elected representatives in the parliament — provided they do not have love for bickering — could reflect the views of the commoners by pointing at specific issues that are of permanent importance to their constituencies. And finally, the opposition as a whole can present a "shadow budget" to the public to overshadow the non-participatory nature of the budget. Things relating to budget preparation and presentation seem to be improving over the years — albeit marginally — and more could be achieved in this regard provided we give our best to this uplift. Even then, we have a proposal to ponder with. We

would expect that in each pre-budget dialogues the Finance Minister concerned would sit with Union Parishad Chairmen and Members. This could be done by randomly drawing a manageable sample of participants from the grassroots. If necessary, the women members could be called separately. When we allege that the poor do not have participation in the budget-making process, we should bear in mind that the rural poor are represented by them and hence their views should also be taken into account.

This year's economic growth rate figures as quoted by the Finance Minister sparked off substantial heat. While the government side appears to be 'gloating' over the glittering 5.2 per cent plus growth rate achieved, the opposition side led by the former FM M Saifur Rahman gnashes teeth arguing that the figures are 'fake' — and 'frailty.' This seems, to me, an interesting rejection of BBS statistics since while in power or out of power, the opposition try all their credits by citing figures which are not lagging behind in fashion trends. A lot of padding is called for hiding the chronic malnutrition, and the artificial props are used rather generously, especially at the official level. But one area of weakness continues to befuddle the users of the modern techniques: financial halitosis cannot be suppressed, creating impediments to acceptance — keep away, or smell the fra-

not rise above 4 per cent given the scenario of the massive rehabilitation programmes undertaken so far. What about the poverty level? There is no clear evidence that the poverty level worsened following the months of the flood. So, if 5 per cent plus growth rate ensures a certain level of poverty and if that level remains unchanged, can we not infer that the overall growth rate did not dwindle drastically?

Beneath the Surface  
by Abdul Bayes

**E**n passant, we think Forest Cookson is right when he says that Bangladesh's GDP could be 30 per cent higher than that stipulated by government statistics.

The last budget of the 20th century should invariably embrace the challenges of the 21st century and should therefore part with old perceptions. The 21st century is foreseen as a fiercely competitive global economy where those with human development, technological innovations and good governance would survive well. The reduction of customs duties on industrial raw materials is welcome move to gear up competitive industries. Other steps would also help in this regard.

To this effect also, more allocation in education sector ful-

fills a necessary condition although the sufficient condition warrants that among the educational subsectors, basic and technical education should get more of the pie rather than the so-called general, higher and religious education.

In fact the growth of expenditure in "unproductive" sectors should be guillotined to make a breakthrough. Unfortunately, we observe that expenditure on these unproductive sectors are

a budget appears with no new taxes or so to say, even with no taxes at all, that does not mean that prices of commodities at the retail level is just the cost of the products plus the marketing margin. The additional new argument in the cost function stands out to be "maastan's margin."

In fact it is our belief that people would not mind paying more taxes to government — since at least a fraction of it could go to their welfare — but they are scared everyday to pay taxes to maastans and extortionists, to government officials and customs. So, Fisher's equation that price level is a function of money and its velocity, should include a new element: maastani and its ferocity. With this kind of scenario at hand, even zero tax on commodities can mean more taxes. A welfare-minded government should therefore see that people are not subjected to non-formal taxes.

The various steps outlined in the budget should help raise revenue. But could those steps be so quick and drastic to raise earnings by 22 per cent? We shall be very happy if the share is raised by 10 per cent. The biggest problem with the history of domestic resource mobilisation in this country is that if misappropriation and corruption could be reduced, the chunk of the revenue could look much bigger than it is. We also propose that the government lands, under siege by encroachments should immediately be procured and put to economic use for enhancing

revenue. We suppose that the budget presented by the Finance Minister is not totally traditional as his critics would try to label it. It continues to contain some social undertones which past budgets miserably missed to reflect. Of importance is the provision for old age pensions, divorced women and the destitute, housing for the poor etc. Despite donors' demand to withdraw subsidy from agriculture, provisions for agricultural subsidy would help stem the rot.

To this effect, we propose that rural non-farm sectors should be given a separate treatment in the budget instead of just pointing out the linkage between farm and non-farm sectors. Over the years this sector has been a boon to the poor (also rural development) and hence should demand separate policy and credit considerations.

The last (but not the least) factor for the success or failure of a budget in alleviating growth or alleviating poverty hinges on the kind of political environment that persists domestically. Figures are important but feelings about the socio-economic and political environment seem to matter most. The Finance Minister's observations — that we are faced with the frontiers of potentials, and 'fears' — are possibly right. Bangladeshis displayed their potentials many a times, but at the same time, fears loomed large and negative activities upset the results. Only a consensus politics on major socio-economic issues could lift us from the bottom.

For Bangladesh, non-economic factors have emerged as important determinant of growth and development than economic factors. Budgetary figures are important but more important are those non-economic facts that unfortunately do not find a place in common discussions.

## 'Diet' Budget

by A M M Aabad

**There are some contradictions. For example, VAT means Value-Added Tax. What we need in addition is VDT or Value-Deduction Tax (applicable to the service providers), as QC or Quality Control is not yet popular in the country, and the expected value is not added to the product or service. The Tenders are over-valued, and the subsequent hand-overs after commissioning of a project are under-valued.**

where, and are, made to lie, and stand up boldly, like the neon lights advertising Jinjira products. Although numbers in mathematics denote precision, there is also a zero-sum game hidden in the interpretations when complex formulae are handled, or mishandled.

Budgets in the Third World countries are not lagging behind in fashion trends. A lot of padding is called for hiding the chronic malnutrition, and the artificial props are used rather generously, especially at the official level. But one area of weakness continues to befuddle the users of the modern techniques: financial halitosis cannot be suppressed, creating impediments to acceptance — keep away, or smell the fra-

grance BO (body odour).

Capitals like Dhaka have more flowing neckties, and wallets held somewhat closer. Budgets are exercises in austerity for in-house policy, and for external publicity, and the rehearsed display is akin to the release of publicity balloons. The balloons tend to burst at the higher altitudes; as would be apparent from the monitoring of the newspapers for some weeks following the presentation of the budget.

Presenting a budget is more of an art than a science, although the Finance Ministry might be secretly chanting some Houdini mantras. The equation is simple: the output has to be apparently greater than the input. Theoretically

and scientifically, this is impossible. Add the system or processing losses. What comes out needs a magnifying glass to decipher. It is an unpleasant job, trying to please everyone.

There are some contradictions. For example, VAT means Value-Added Tax. What we need in addition is VDT or Value-Deduction Tax (applicable to the service providers), as QC or Quality Control is not yet popular in the country, and the expected value is not added to the product or service. The Tenders are over-valued, and the subsequent hand-overs after commissioning of a project are under-valued.

The bakshish or commission is not recognised officially; but the white ants are working

away merrily out of public sight. The former has become a big informal 'industry', but it is invisible. Road surfaces do not last; nor do the shallow tubewells. Maintenance is overloaded because no maintenance is done. The LDCs cannot afford the modern Zero Maintenance goodies. The huge human systems losses in the three areas: Capital investment or projects, operation/management, and maintenance are indirectly indicated in the budget through additional tapping arrangements to keep the pot boiling. There is also some pollution in the public kitchens.

But it must be conceded that the state-owned enterprise is generous with the distribution of power at bargain prices, not available at any Sale campaign in any shop (correction: for 'power', read 'electric power'). Power is also wasted at much levels with impunity. Formerly the national

health service centres were segregated according to professional speciality, with the result the family members in a rural area had to visit several separate health service centres for treatment. Now these are being integrated for one-stop service. Restructuring in marginal areas are acceptable to a certain extent, and it is done every part of the world; but core changes are too fundamental and costly for the rising nations; resulting in stunted growth patterns.

Putting the ball in the court of the government is a convenient scapegoat culture practised with open hypocrisy by all groups in the society; as if the government has the panacea of all illnesses. There is a practical partiality in the conception of rights and duties in the citizens, who tend to make unreasonable group demands from time to time, disrupting public and other services, without mentioning efforts at self-improvement exercises. It spools both the parties (the pressure groups and the government), leaving the third party (the public) stranded.

The budget is a theoretical exercises — the taste of the pudding lies in the eating.

## To the Editor...

## Make them feel proud in the right way

Sir, I have been going through all the letters/writes-ups relating to the recent victory of Bangladesh cricket team over the Pakistan cricket team on 31 May in Northampton during one of the preliminary matches of the World Cup 1999.

My joy is boundless and I convey my warmest felicitations to our cricket team and Bangladesh Cricket Board for this unique feat in the sports arena. Unlike many, I feel obligatory to give credit to Gordon Greenidge no matter how controversial his role might have been recently. We should not forget the fact that the present status of our cricket team bears the tolls of sweat of Gordon Greenidge.

Coming to the point of reactions by the cricket fans of Bangladesh: while I appreciate the praises showered over the cricket team for their excellent performance in the event, I strongly oppose the comparison of this victory to that of the War of Liberation in 1971. This comparison is improper and demeaning to the sacred spirit of the War of Liberation. I think 'self-restraint' a virtue which every civilised human being should possess, be it in respect of language or any activity. It really illuminates one's personality. We cannot deny the universal truth that there is never any boundary limiting or separating the areas of arts, sports, culture and literature. Otherwise, why do we need to study foreign literature for even crossing the steps of Primary School? Therefore, it is absolutely against the spirit of sports to express such biased or prejudiced opinions.

I refer to the recent letter by Ms Najma Ali published in the 15 June edition of the DS and consequent protest by the High Commissioner of Pakistan to Bangladesh in the 17 June edition of the DS. Ms Ali's comment on Miandad's role during the tour of Bangladesh in the early '80s is reasonable but pointing out the matter of language communication is far from being logical. May I question her, what language did Gordon Greenidge speak or for that matter other former coaches did? Furthermore, spilling out bitterness towards the Punjabis in general is not only indecent, but also irrational too.

Let me point out that patriotism does not in any way imply bearing malicious attitude. A good salesman will never criticise the competitors' products.

Rather, he will try to convince the customers by displaying all the positive aspects of his own products. As Muslims, we believe that our religion prohibits any hatred or criticism towards other religions. If we have to cherish or display our patriotism then start exercising from the initial institution — the HOME. Teach our children the history of Bangladesh, the War of Liberation, build the spirit of self-respect as the citizen of a sovereign state. Teach them to nurture the spirit of victory so that they realise how nature takes its own course in giving justice and the wrongdoers are punished after all. This spirit will give them freedom to choose right from wrong and the strength to excel in every field for competing the modern world. Make them feel proud being a Bangladeshi and let them bear the courage to pronounce their individuality at home and abroad. Arouse their conscience to feel bad at any form of a negative activity in the country. Teach them to be stinging whenever the national feelings are abused and defend themselves from derogatory remarks by foreign nationals.

Neelima Islam  
House: 49, Road 2  
Mohammadpur, Dhaka.

## Open air raw meat vs law enforcing agencies

Sir, I wonder how the people of the capital eat beef/mutton which has been selling in the open air, hanging for hours, in front of a snuff space of the grocery/department stores and also on the pavements beside the main roads viz Mirpur Road (near Road No 27, Dhanmondi), Hatirpool, Jhikataola, Hazaribag, Thatar Bazar etc.

I think these raw meat are becoming poisonous by absorbing easily black and white gases (e.g. SO<sub>2</sub>, CO<sub>2</sub>, CO and Lead etc.), which are coming out from the plying taxis, buses, coasters, trucks etc., and also contaminated with harmful germs through flies, viruses, bacteria from dirty polluted surroundings which are origins of various types of serious diseases such as heart problems, jaundice, typhoid, gastro-intestinal diseases etc.

I am also astonished to see how the environmental and law-enforcing agencies are sitting quiet and failing to stop selling of these types of unhygienic raw meat for human consumption.

I draw attention to take posi-

tive step towards selling open-air raw meat with a proper care by covering it into a glass-chamber the way the tuck-shops usually sells their sweets.

M Khatun  
43, Dhanmondi R/A  
Dhaka.

## Illegally realising crores of taka by GP

Sir, Grameen Phone has been realising Taka 1000 (one thousand) from each subscriber along with the bill for the month of May '99 in the name of royalty. GP might have paid royalty to the Bangladesh government for doing business in the country but that is their legal investment for the line rent and call charges. There is no government order authorising GP to realise this money. It is also realising license fee from each subscriber. We do not know whether they are authorised by the government to do so. It has been realising in-coming charges in violation to the terms of sales agreement.

Besides, the company disconnects line instantly without giving any notice if any customer fails pay. The customers cannot afford to get the line disconnected because of the necessity and of the social position. The company has been fully utilising this opportunity.

RI Khan  
Dhaka

## Bravo Nato, bravo US

Sir, Hats off to NATO. Especially to the US and Great Britain for their bold and magnificent military action against Yugoslavia.

UN resolution or not, they have acted exactly in accordance with the teaching of Islam. God almighty enjoins on us to rise up and fight against oppression and tyranny. NATO action was not designed to gain any territory or to establish hegemony in the Balkans but to save the people of Kosovo from the most beastly and monstrous tyranny inflicted on Kosovars by the Serbs.

I have no doubt that by this sort of military action the NATO has earned the pleasure of God almighty. May it flourish and may it prosper in the prayer from the hearts of all the Kosovars; shame to those who did not so much as expressed words of sympathy, let alone taking any action.

H Rahman  
Banani, Dhaka

## Greenidge — the scapegoat

Sir, Bangladesh cricket team should be grateful to Gordon Greenidge. No one can deny or forget his contribution to improving the standard of our cricket. Under Greenidge, Bangladesh became ICC champion, got the ODI status and won two matches including the one against the hot favourite Pakistan by 62 runs in the 1999 World Cup. Still he was sacked in a discourteous way by the BCB officials for saying what he thought was correct (Bangladesh is miles away from getting test status now).

But when manager Tanvir Mazhar Tanna said that Bangladesh would lose all the five matches even against Scotland in the World Cup, those BCB officials kept quiet.

DCC mayor Mohammad Hanif, who is also the president of the BFF, played a major part in ousting the cricketers from the Dhaka Stadium as well as destroying the cricket pitches and he also presided over the civic reception accorded to the Bangladesh cricket team.

A fine example of cutting the roots and caring for the branches.

Iqbal Ahmed  
Dhaka-1000.

## Wrong rules

Sir, Recently on the way to Mohammadpur from Gulshan, a traffic surgeon stopped my car and asked me to go to the police station or to hand over relevant documents of the car because my car had two arrest warrants due to violation of traffic rules in 1996 and 1997 of which I am completely unaware of. The arrest warrant did not mention time, date, place, vehicle type of mistake done by the driver. The person violated the rules are Nabab Kha and Abul Kalam, the first person was my driver but the other one is unknown to me.

According to the traffic police they have sent summons to these two persons but they neither attended the court nor pay the fine. Ultimately the traffic authority has decided to issue the arrest warrant against the car and as I am the owner of the car I have to pay the penalty, without any prior information.

Had the traffic authority informed me earlier by mail or through BRTA, I would have been exempted from this hazard.

Dr Azizul Kabir Shaheen  
Gonoshasthaya Nagor Hospital  
Dhaka

OPINION  
The Vitality of Statistics

Tanweer Akram

Data and statistics produced by the Government agencies are a public good paid for by the taxpayers. In a democratic state, people have a right to information. Hence, the authorities have a responsibility to provide high quality data and statistics to all concerned citizens. The methodology of collecting and processing the data should be publicly available and ought to be subject to independent scientific scrutiny by national and international scholars. The authorities should provide access to all government generated data and statistics. Discussion of the quality and reliability of official data should not be a taboo subject. Thus, the recent pronouncement of the authorities that foreigners should refrain from analyzing official forecasts of macroeconomic variables seems counter-productive, and profoundly silly. It could be comparable to NATO countries announcing that its present policy of bombing Yugoslavia may not be even discussed by non-NATO citizens.

Widespread and disseminated access to information is essential for the functioning of markets and the economy. Economic agents (traders, businesspersons, brokers, importers, exporters) need reliable data to undertake economic decisions. The lack of authentic data can lead to misallocation of resources and speculative frenzies based on hunches and rumors. The stock market bubble in Bangladesh was partly caused by the poor accounting standards and unchecked misinformation provided in annual reports of publicly traded corporations.

The forecast of economic growth and other statistics should not be a controversial issue but a routine function of the state. In fact, the controversy arises due to the smoke-screen associated with the methodology of manufacturing statistics and data in Bangladesh. Data and statistics is quite difficult to obtain from government agencies. Too much emphasis is made about the confidentiality of government data and statistics for no good reason. In all advanced countries, national income statistics is widely available and the methodology of data collection

is widely reexamined by independent scholars from time to time to improve the quality of official statistics. It is really a very important matter for the Government of Bangladesh to provide reliable and up to date data concerning national income and product account, revenue and expenditure, and a wide variety of macroeconomic and microeconomic data. Indeed, even Bretton Woods Institutions, such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, are increasingly making their own documents widely available through the Internet. By providing their statistics, documents and analyses, such organizations can influence policy, their reputation and influence. The Bretton Woods Institutions should continue further to provide more and greater access to their internal documents, statistics, and the methodology of reaching the claims and policy prescriptions that they recommend.

The Bangladesh authorities' credibility would be vastly enhanced if Bangladesh official statistics and statistical methodology were subject to independent verification and readily accessible to the public, citizens and foreigners. If the Bangladesh government wants citizens and foreigners to believe its claim about the growth, then the authorities should provide convincing data about the components of national income, and other statistics, such as international trade data, that provide good indication of the actual performance of the economy. Perhaps an important step for the government would be to make its quarterly growth forecasts and the data substantiating such forecasts available in the Internet. The Press in Bangladesh has a crucial role in exposing misinformation and propaganda, and false claims, whether by government officials, businesses, or international agencies. The economic growth rate of the country is far too important a matter to be left alone to government officials, donors, or "intellectuals" in service of the state or of multinational agencies.

The writer is a graduate student at Columbia University, New York.