

'If People Want Us to Stay in Power ...'

by Anwar Hossain Monju

WETHER new tax has been levied in this budget or not has been the major topic of discussion in this year's budget session in the parliament. In all my years on the government, I have sensed frustration in those at the helm of the finance ministry. While our friendly neighbours and organisations who want Bangladesh's economic development, poverty alleviation and improvement of the poverty-stricken people's lot ask us to expand our tax-base and raise our foreign reserve. Unfortunately, there is no means or option to directly expand the tax base in our country. People in power only recognise its importance. Those in opposition feel there is no need to expand the tax base for public welfare, as if it could be done with a magic wand or some other means or wishful thinking.

In 1977, I had a conversation with the then minister for finance and planning Fazluddin Mahtab. He had just proposed a Tk. 500 crore budget. When I asked him what was his impression of the country's economy, he said, "I have proposed a Tk 500 crore budget. Say, it will lead to creation of funds generating a surplus of another 500 crore taka. Its equal distribution will lead to the rise of a discernible class, a class that will manifest the country's development." Mr. Mahtab was not perhaps a politician like me, but the fact is that we no longer think of improvement of the people. We are more in favour of distributing the money to a few people whose personal gains like air-conditioned residence and cars will create a good image of the country. Whether the people feel it or not, the donor agencies will be satisfied that there has been economic development in the country.

In 1977-78, I had the opportunity to accompany late President Ziaur Rahman on a visit to Indonesia. There I heard that if the road from the airport to Sheraton Hotel was developed, if sky-scrappers were built on both sides of the road, it would convince the donors and creditors that their money was utilised. Yes, Mr Speaker, that is what has been happening here. We now have large buildings along the road from the airport to the Sheraton Hotel, we are constructing an eight-lane road from airport to the cantonment. We are constructing four-lane roads, by-passes. We now see neon lights decorate them. Only the other day Mr Harun, who was the owner of the Pakistan Times and came to Bangladesh after 28 years, said in a speech, "I opposed Mujib

when he wanted independence for Bangladesh. I had told him to negotiate. Today, having come to Bangladesh 28 years later, I think Bangabandhu was right. Bangladesh has really prospered." But, Mr Speaker, one renowned economist from Pakistan and one from Bangladesh have said that Pakistan and Bangladesh have only got poorer between the 60s and the 90s. We cannot arrest the downside, Mr Speaker, nor are we coming up with any solution.

When President Hossain Mohammad Ershad assumed power then Bangladesh had a burden of 2,000 crore taka in tax and in 1990 we wanted to levy 10,000 crore taka in tax.

When the democratic government of Khaleda Zia stepped down the tax-burden was 17,000 crore taka. Now, it is 19,000 crore taka. What do we do with the money collected through tax? For the sake of argument we say that we have to levy tax for public welfare, but, what do we actually do? In reality, all the money is spent for the ministers, bureaucrats, and government officials and employees; and to meet the deficit in state-owned enterprises like industries, and power and railway sectors. As a result we are left with nothing for development. Then we have to depend on foreign grants and plead for exemption of previous grants.

I am a Jatiya Party man and part of the opposition. This government was not formed by my vote. Even then, the incumbent prime minister has made me minister in her cabinet. Not only she has also made ministers two BNP legislators. She has created a consensus government. It is certainly a novel concept, but what has actually happened? It has been criticised. The parliament has not yet become the centre of political activities.

Many a peer Awami League

legislator says that a politics of conspiracy has started in the country. We cannot come out of this politics of conspiracy. I had the chance to listen to Amir Hossain Amu's speech the other day. He said, "We have been in politics for so many years but still could not manage more than 30-35 per cent votes whereas those who came to power after 1975 managed 98 per cent votes. How could that happen?"

There lies the conspiracy. We came to this parliament with 98 per cent vote. We have to sustain this change after 1990, for our own interest and for the interest of the people. We claim that the constitution says people are the determining force, people are the driving force. Then why are we not turning to the people? Why Hussain Muhammad Ershad goes against the constitution and also Begum Khaleda Zia is the question when it is said that people were not allowed their rights to choose in successive autocratic regimes since 1974. Why is the compassion to turn back the clock to those days when only the TNOs and SPAs cast their votes. I tell my friends that it won't happen again.

With the advent of new age, the end has come to the politics of conspiracy, the politics that ignore people for power. No more can a dictator or an autocrat come to power. In this world, there will be no Marcos.

The author is the minister for communications of the Government of Bangladesh. The above is an abridged version of his speech in the just-concluded budget session of the parliament.

Concerns over Tanbazaar

by Salma Ali

THE recent steps taken by the government to bring an end to prostitution in Tanbazaar and the subsequent measures taken to rehabilitate the these women into the social mainstream has caused me great concern. I applaud the sincerity of the government in its efforts in making the flesh trade to an end. But as an activist who is directly involved with the sex workers, I believe the system is failing to foresee many of the complications related to rehabilitate these individuals. I command the decision of the government to rehabilitate sex workers for which it has all my support, but I would also like to state that the dissipation of centuries-old profession cannot be brought about drastically without consideration of the serious repercussions it has for the nation as a whole.

The grim determination with which the government has embarked on such a project seems to suggest that the efforts are entirely divorced from the subjects, i.e. the prostitutes, and this can only mean a failure in the measures in the long-run. My personal experience in working with prostitutes and victims of sexual abuse and rehabilitating them as healthy functioning members of the society has shown that this is a long, tedious and exhaustive process, which is plagued with possibilities and actual incidents of failures. I feel there are certain issues that the government has to take into consideration before following through their ambitious programme.

The urgency of the local authorities and government to rehabilitate the sex workers together with the unnatural death of Jesmin have led to these women including over 70 per cent of the minors moving away from the red-light area. They are now spread all over the city and the outlying areas of the country. This means that there are many who will continue being prostitutes at the cost of fatal health consequences. The continued efforts of BNWLA to rescue prostitutes and women

subjected to sexual abuse since 1991, have systematically exposed a grim pattern of serious diseases among these women. The organisation has, to date, rescued over a hundred women and young girls. And it has been found that out of every 20, two have been tested positive for the HIV virus, 80 per cent of them have been inflicted with STDs and hundred per cent of them have skin diseases. If the results found are anything to judge by, it can be stated without any doubt that the dispersal of the sex workers will pose as a serious health problem of calamitous proportions in the near future.

Rehabilitation does not only imply the physical movement of a group into an existing framework. I feel that the government has not put any thought into the whole issue of psychological trauma that each of the sex workers carry with them, especially the minor girls and the need for psychosocial counselling before they become integrated into the social mainstream. Rehabilitation requires time and the dedicated work of experts- moving the sex workers to another area and providing them with another profession does not begin to address the roots of the problem.

Experience has shown that victims of sexual abuse and systematic and continued sexual exploitation suffer from serious often devastating psychological disorders. Younger children are plagued with PTSD (post-traumatic stress syndrome) which involves frequent nightmares, flashbacks and acute sensitivity to their social surroundings. They also suffer from depression, inability to confide in anyone, distrust of themselves and others around them, are volatile in their behaviour and engage in destructive behaviour including self-mutilation and destruction of personal belongings.

This is the grim reality which I face in my line of work and I do not think that learning a different profession is an adequate measure to deal with the multifaceted aspect of rehabili-

ation as individuals into the society.

In trying to deal with the issue of the sex workers in Tanbazaar, the government should be aware of the lessons learned from Kandaputti. In trying to eradicate prostitution, the government and the local authorities should not work with a political or personal agenda, but should work with existing NGOs with experience and knowledge in this area. The betterment of these women should be the one and only goal. And as I pointed out, the road to success in this respect is very long with too many pitfalls.

The author is Executive Director of BNWLA.

ation. In a situation where 95 per cent of the sex traders are illiterate and are very much bound by the social and cultural norms and don't I find it difficult to accept any easy solution to the flesh trade.

In trying to provide an alternative to prostitution, I believe the government is engaging in a simple case of putting the 'cart before the horse'. Teaching them a different trade is not the way to reintegrate the sex traders. What causes me concern is the fact that the government has not recognised that the mentality of the workers themselves has to be changed. They themselves have to come into terms with the fact that their old profession is over and they have to be willing to accept it and work within their actual limitations. Even if many of the madams took away most of their earnings, the tips they received promised them fineries which as garments workers they will not be able to afford. By looking at them as subjects of a project only, the underlying issue of their existing mental framework will not change.

It is important to recognise the importance of these women understanding their limitations and being satisfied with their new way of life. Otherwise, they will not be rehabilitated into the very society that is trying to reform them.

What a proposal is that detailed action research is carried out instead of haphazard surveys which only gloss over the problem. It is vital that the government listens to what they have to say about their wants, needs and problems. The needs of the children of sex traders too cannot be ignored. Otherwise there is little possibility that the government endeavour will succeed. While reintegrating the sex workers of Tanbazaar, it is also important that level of secrecy is maintained.

Otherwise these new training areas will be identified as areas where these women have been rehabilitated, and will only mean a relocation of the problem without actually accepting

that throughout history, one of the strongest forces driving the development of human society has been concern for health. Many fundamental scientific and technological advances have occurred as a result of the desire to control or eradicate disease and to improve the quality and duration of our lives. In the 20th century, a huge international industry has grown up dedicated to the promotion and achievement of good health and prolonged fitness. It covers everything from drugs and medical technology to our lifestyle habits and the food we eat.

Most recently, what has become almost an obsession with health has led to renewed interest in traditional medicine and in the potential of biological treasures such as those contained in tropical forests, which harbour a vast array of plant species with possible medicinal value.

At the same time, however, the health industry and public expectations have combined to produce new branches of science based on interference with the fundamental materials of life. The study of genetics, of course,

Liberation and Beyond

by J N Dixit

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1972: Efforts at National Consolidation

Part VI



derstanding of the deep undercurrents in the psyche of the Bangladesh power structure under Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. Indian anticipations also lacked in political realism, as we shall see in later developments.

Bangladesh attitude under the leadership of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, though not expressed overtly and clearly, were quite different from Indian expectations. Mujib of course appreciated India's help in the liberation struggle. He despaired a practical and friendly relationship with India. He was also conscious that if Bangladesh earned sufficient recognition from important countries and developed the minimum required levels of bilateral political, economic and technological relations, he would not need India's substantive support and assistance. In keeping with this approach, he was clear in his mind that he did not wish to be over-dependent on India. He also (quite logically) did not wish Bangladesh to be dubbed a client State of India, as was being anticipated by many political observers and analysts from different parts of the world. He was of the view that while pending disputes and issues should be resolved amicably through political dialogue, there was no going to be any compromises on the part of Bangladesh on issues which could affect Bangladesh's vital interests as perceived by him.

As far as Bangladeshi is concerned, the Shimla Agreement embodied the following decisions: all the prisoners of war were to be repatriated to Pakistan. India conveyed to Pakistan on behalf of Bangladesh that no war crime trials would be held. India also suggested to Zulfikar Ali Bhutto that he should recognise Bangladesh and establish diplomatic relations with it. An in-depth analysis of the Shimla Agreement in the context of India-Pakistan relations is not relevant here. (I have already covered the subject in some detail in my book published in 1995, *Anatomy of a Flawed Inheritance*.)

After Mrs. Gandhi's visit Indo-Bangladesh relations settled down to normal patterns of bilateral interaction. These of course were subject to the political attitudes in India and the political developments in Bangladesh. On second thoughts, to claim that Indo-Bangladesh relations settled down to normal and positive inter-State patterns by March, 1972 would be an over-simplification. As for the Indian attitude towards Bangladesh, there was the strategic and political situation of having achieved a decisive military victory over Pakistan.



Sheikh Mujib is flanked by Mr. Tajuddin Ahmed, Prime Minister of the Mujibnagar Government, on his right and Syed Nazrul Islam, Vice President, Mujibnagar Government to his left.

There was also the feeling that India had outmanoeuvred and isolated Pakistan in the international community despite a majority of the countries supporting Pakistan bilaterally and at the United Nations. There was also euphoric hubris that the people of Bangladesh seceding from Pakistan to establish an independent State on the basis of their linguistic, cultural and intellectual traditions had finally disproved the two-nation theory which led to the partition of India. The prognosis was that given the massive local popular support and India's military support for the liberation struggle, Indo-Bangladesh relations would be close, warm and based on mutual trust and goodwill. There was also the expectation in Indian public opinion that the Government and people of Bangladesh would be grateful for many years to come for India having helped them break the shackles of West Pakistani domination and discrimination.

India desired the closest economic, political and defence cooperation with Bangladesh. It also expected that the issues inherited from Indo-Pakistan relations 1947 to 1972, would be resolved peacefully without acrimony and by mutual accommodation. Issues like the sharing of the Ganga waters, the exchange of enclaves and the granting of mutual transit facilities for travel and tourism were expected to be sorted out in the context of goodwill and mutual cooperation which characterised India's relations with the Mujibnagar Government during the liberation struggle. As events from the second half of 1972 showed Indian expectations proved to have lacked a clear understanding.

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Most recently, what has become almost an obsession with health has led to renewed interest in traditional medicine and in the potential of biological treasures such as those contained in tropical forests, which harbour a vast array of plant species with possible medicinal value.

We have been eating plants and animals which have been produced with the help of man for centuries. Plant and animal breeders have always mixed and matched genetic material to create the species of vegetables, fruit, cattle and so on that we take for granted. Those are growing that genetically modified crops such as soya, corn, maize, rape and potatoes which have been developed by conglomerates like Monsanto and Novartis, chemical firms which now prefer to describe themselves as 'life science companies'.

All this is worrying enough, to the extent that agricultural GMOs have been dubbed 'Frankenstein foods'. But there are wider implications that concern us at WWF - effects that could radically alter the biological structure of the entire planet.

An example of what can happen when GM crops are introduced was reported last month in the USA. Pollen from corn into which a toxin called

Bt had been genetically engineered killed nearly half the butterflies in a test at Cornell University. The really worrying point of this is that the test was carried out only after the Bt gene had been added to almost a quarter of the US corn crop.

Imagine the possible results if GMOs were widely used. Cross-pollination could transfer the foreign genes to other plants, with the result that weeds could become resistant to diseases, pests and herbicides. Monsanto has patented seeds that are genetically immune to its own product Roundup, one of the world's leading weed killers. If those plants cross-pollinate, Roundup could become useless against species of super-weeds and the whole exercise would be a best counter-productive and at worst highly dangerous.

Similarly pest-control genes spreading into the wild could wipe out countless animal and insect species.

Now that such risks are beginning to be understood, a fierce international debate has begun over GMOs. Some countries, such as Switzerland, are demanding clear labelling of foods containing genetically modified material so that worried consumers can avoid them. WWF believes that is not enough. Certainly people should be able to identify products containing the now widely used genetically modified soya and other GMOs, but the broader environmental threat demands much stronger action.

WWF is calling for a moratorium on the use or release of GMOs until their potential impact on the general environment has been carefully researched and evaluated - and proper safeguards have been established. Moreover, it is vital that the implications for the food chain and the natural environment are openly communicated to the public so that informed choices can be made. Nor should control of gene technology be left to scientists and commercial organizations: there must be a general regulation through independent statutory bodies with the power to ban future GMO releases until agreed standards have been met.

— WWF Features

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Food and the Frankenstein Factor

Claude Martin writes from Gland, Switzerland

is not new, but what is different about it now is the ability of scientists to manipulate genetic material easily for the production of drugs.

But the science of genetic engineering has also responded to the other great current theory on health, which concerns diet. The race is on to create almost unlimited quantities of what is considered to be good, healthy and affordable food. Here, though, genetic manipulation has run into trouble. Fears are growing that genetically modified organisms, or GMOs, will produce food that is itself dangerous.

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TOM & JERRY



By Hanna-Barbera

