

Defence Budget of Bangladesh: An Analysis

THERE are two opposing views on defence expenditures. On one side are those who consider defence expenditures as a burden on scarce national resources. They argue that money spent for defence could be better utilised in various development activities. Others view defence forces as guarantor of peace and tranquillity, a prerequisite for overall social development. In the real world, we need to draw the right priorities. While we cannot wish away the need for defence forces, and therefore, of defence expenditures, we cannot also sacrifice socio-economic development.

World-wide Trends in Defence Expenditure

Defence allocation reflects the state's response to perceived threats. During the Cold War years, the Western countries were heavily investing in building up formidable defence establishments. Since the end of the Cold War, defence budget has been declining in the West and so have been their forces. During the last decade, defence expenditures in North America and Europe declined by 30 per cent and 55 per cent respectively. Defence as a percentage of GDP declined in the USA from high of 9.5 per cent during the Vietnam conflict to 2.9 per cent today.

Defence Budget in the Developing Countries

The peace dividend following the end of the Cold War was not so evident in the developing countries. While the defence expenditures in the West are in decline, those in the Southern Hemisphere remain high. For example, in 1997 while UK, France and Belgium spent 2.8 per cent, 3 per cent and 1.6 per cent of their GDP on defence respectively, those of India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka were 3.3 per cent, 5.8 per cent and 6.1 per cent respectively. Defence ex-

penditures in the less developed countries often reflect military's power and influence rather than the perceived military threats. Pakistan can be cited as an example. Military intervention in politics in Pakistan largely contributed to her break-up in 1971. Pakistan's huge military expenditures ensured perpetual presence of the military in the domestic politics, but could not ensure security and stability of the state. Too much military hardware and not much food or other social services have created states of anarchy in countries such as Somalia, Zaire, and Rwanda. Ethnic strife, poverty, disease and hunger threaten the very structure of these states; tanks, guns and bombs are of little use there.

Defence Expenditures in Bangladesh

In the early years after independence the defence budget of Bangladesh was 1 per cent or less of the GDP. The perception of external threat was minimal at the time due to close and friendly ties with India. However, defence expenditures showed a sharp rise after the military takeover of 1975. The military regime apprehended intervention from across the border. Meanwhile, the insurgency in Chittagong Hill Tracts intensified. At the same time, the Ganges water issue became a major irritant in the Indo-Bangladesh relations. The result was increased military spending. The defence budget soon crossed 1 per cent of the GDP and since then varied between 1.5-1.9 per cent of the GDP. In recent years, while the average GDP growth rate hovered little more than 5 per cent, the defence budget increased by double digit annually. Defence budget growth rate was highest i.e. 17.6 per cent in 1995-96. Since then however, the growth rate has been declining. In the financial year 1999-2000, the

There is a need to review the role and task of the defence forces. The forces should be asked to perform only those roles, which they could with the given resources. It is better to do fewer tasks effectively, rather than trying to do too many tasks and not being able to do any one well. On army's part, there is a need to tailor the force to fight the type of conflicts that we visualise in the future. In the same way, we should think of the number of squadrons in the air force and the shape and size of the naval fleet.

by Ishfaq Ilahi Choudhury

growth rate is only 8.4 per cent. Signing of the Chittagong Hill Tracts Peace Accord, the Ganges Water Treaty with India, and improvement of relations with both the neighbours — India and Myanmar are apparently having their impact. Yet critics argue that the defence budget is high and it should be further reduced. Let us examine the validity of this criticism.

Threat Perspective of Bangladesh

Bangladesh shares 4000-km land boundary with India. Except for a stretch of 6.5 km, the rest of it is demarcated. Our land boundary with Myanmar is well-demarcated too. The maritime boundary between Bangladesh and her neighbours are yet to be demarcated, but there is little likelihood of a major conflict on this issue in near term. There are unresolved issues and minor irritants between the neighbours, but none are likely to flare up into major armed conflict. One, therefore, concludes that, in short term, the threat of external aggression against Bangladesh is negligible. Meanwhile, the military will continue to perform the traditional role of acting as deterrence against possible aggression, however remote may be the possibility. It will continue to support our diplomacy so that we could negotiate from a position of strength with our neighbours. While the external threat environment remains calm, new threats are emerging

- around and inside Bangladesh. The most probable security threats against Bangladesh in the coming decades are: a. Proliferation of drugs and arms resulting in deteriorating law and order situation in the country. b. Growth of organised Mafia-like criminal gangs engaged in extortion, kidnapping and ransom seeking. c. Disenchantment and isolation of ethnic and religious minorities from the mainstream politico-social life, resulting in violence and insurgency. d. Foreign intelligence agencies using Bangladesh as a launching pad to prosecute their individual objectives. e. Insurgents in the India's NE states and Myanmar using Bangladesh territory as sanctuary or hideout. f. Rise of religious fundamentalism in Bangladesh and its attempt to seize state power through violent revolution.

Socio-Economic Conditions vis-a-vis Defence Budget

Human Development Indicators (HDI) published by the UNDP shows that out of 175 countries of the world, Bangladesh's position was 143 in 1997; it was 147 in 1998 and 150 in 1999. Our HDI is the lowest in South Asia. Despite having one of the lowest life ex-

pectancy and highest infant mortality in the world, we allocate only 2 per cent of the GDP for health and social welfare, compared to 3.5 per cent in Pakistan and 5.6 per cent in India. In the absence of an immediate threat of external aggression, we need to consider putting a moratorium on the upper limit of defence expenditure vis-a-vis the GDP. At this stage, maximum national resources should be invested in productive sectors of the economy so that the GDP grows at a faster pace. If our GDP increases, then, even with a moratorium on the upper limit, we could spend far more for defence in future than what we could today with a small GDP. For example, while Japan spends less than 1 per cent of the GDP for defence, because of the very large Japanese GDP, her defence budget in 1998 was the fourth highest in the world, after the USA, Germany and France. If the GDP growth rate continues to languish at 4-5 per cent, it would be difficult for Bangladesh to get out of underdevelopment. Even if the defence budget is increased to 2-3 per cent of the GDP, we still will not be able to create a balanced force structure because of a very small GDP.

Meeting the National Security Objectives

Closely connected with the defence budget is the question of meeting the national security objectives. We need to clearly identify the threats and define

rather than trying to do too many tasks and not being able to do anyone well. On army's part, there is a need to tailor the force to fight the type of conflicts that we visualise in the future. In the same way, we should think of the number of squadrons in the air force and the shape and size of the naval fleet. Should we continue to operate aircraft and ships, which have no operational utility, or should we concentrate on a small but effective fleet? We need to tackle these important questions now. Since the restoration of democracy in Bangladesh, we witnessed a gradual shift towards transparency and accountability in defence budget formulation and spending. This trend should continue. We should encourage greater popular participation in security and defence policy issues. The defence budget should truly reflect popular consensus.

Conclusions

Bangladesh's defence expenditures, which was less than 1 per cent of the GDP in the early 70s, was close to 2 per cent in the mid 90s. However, in recent years, while the gross defence budget continued to grow, its share of the national budget and the GDP showed a declining trend. Defence is still one of the largest heads in the revenue budget and consumes about 9-10 per cent of the government's total expenditures. Some critics argue that this is too much. Bangladesh shares a peaceful border with her neighbours. Despite some unresolved issues, she enjoys good relations with both the neighbours — India and Myanmar. There are no tangible external military threat against Bangladesh in the coming decades. However, there are emerging threats to the national security where de-

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Kazi Nazrul Islam — Poet of Renaissance

T HE word renaissance means rebirth or revival, but metaphorically speaking it is the re-establishment of human glory. Historically, Renaissance refers to the intellectual and artistic movement beginning in 14th century Florence (Italy) and extending throughout Europe by the 17th century. It is the cultivation of reason, love, beauty and imagination.

The central truth of renaissance has been expressed in a few words: "man is the measure for everything". This is why free thought is given superiority over any particular doctrine.

Let us have a cursory glance at our country and literature now: We are acquainted with some idea or hint of renaissance in our mediaeval Bengali literature created by Muslim writers and poets. This age was the age of cultural opulence and prosperity for the Muslims. This is why their endless curiosity, at this time, opened the floodgate of scholarly pursuits. It is only when the Muslims of bygone age took up myopic doctrines as the only guiding force of life that they fell into the deep pit of ignorance from the pinnacle of glory and enlightenment.

It was Poet Kazi Nazrul Islam who appeared as the 'messenger of spring' abruptly, to refurbish our cultural identity.

With the emergence of Kazi Nazrul Islam, renaissance came into our literature. He gave vent to the pent-up feelings and imaginations of the Bengali people, thus opening up a new horizon of humanism in our literature. His 'Rebel' is nothing but the epic of human glory.

Who does not know that modernism is also indebted to traditionalism in endless ways? An attempt at the co-ordination of history and tradition is apparent in the poetic life of Kazi Nazrul Islam. Nazrul's poems carry a unique blend of modernism and traditionalism. It was Nazrul who epitomized the Hindu and Muslim mythology into his poetry and music, which speaks volumes for his broadness of outlook. Such vastness and valour is the symbol of renaissance. "It is the onerous responsibility of the Muslims and not

the Hindus to bring about an interaction and ad-mixture of both Hindu and Muslim mythology," wrote late Motaheer Hossain Choudhury in one of his articles on Nazrul Islam.

"Because it is the Muslims who possess both the heritages that they can work miracles of the scale of modern European civilization by fusing these two



impression. Renaissance does not apply to the consciousness of a particular nation only. Renaissance is for the humanity as a whole.

The re-awakening of the teeming millions has found predominance in Kazi Nazrul Islam. This is why now, at this

hour of trials and tribulations of the nation on the occasion of the poet's birth anniversary, to remember Nazrul is to remember the rank and file of Bengal. Nazrul who kindled the flame of hope in the breasts of myriads of down-trodden; oppressed, depressed, and suppressed humanity, knew it full well that none on good God's earth can silence the voice of people. Because, Vox populi vox Dei — voice of people is the voice of God. There is no denying the fact that Nazrul was among the first protagonists of the working class movement in the country. In an article he says, "My brave

men, raise your head and declare, we are all kings. In his poem 'Samya' (equality) he describes thus his ideal society:

"There is no king or subject here. None there is poor or rich. None can here enjoy milk and butter. While others do not get even broken rice."

In the Poem 'Fariad' (complaint) he tells God, "The world you created belongs to all."

His "Shramik Majur' (Labourer) is a manifesto of the oppressed class: "We were ignorant, and the learned ones cheated us. But now we know our power, and will suffer oppression no longer. These our hands constructed the palaces. The same hands can bring them down."

Nazrul wrote songs in praise of the labourers, peasants and fishermen and exhorted them to demand their rights from society. Nazrul moved from place to place like a fiery minstrel, seeking to inspire the youth and to rouse the teeming millions through his poems, songs and speeches. He may be rightly described as the most passionate patriotic poet for the proletariat. As a poet of sorrow, sympathy welled up within his heart for the have-nots.

It is Nazrul who wrote his "songs of the peasants" which is to a great extent applicable even to this day to the present day society of Bengal.

"Arise O peasants and citizen of the world and hold your plough straight and tight. The exploiters are sucking our blood like liches and snatching away our platted rice. Our children die at our breasts. But we cannot prevent their death.

The cunning are playing ducks and drakes, with our innocent daughter's dress. With fire at home and storm outside we have no place for shelter.

The hordes of Yazid are striking us from all sides, wake up peasants, wake up. Nazrul was most unhappy at the sight of the demoralised, de-

caying Muslims of his time. He felt that they had forsaken the path of truth and justice, forgotten the teaching of equality, liberty and brotherhood of Islam stooping to a life of foolish luxury. He wrote poems after poems, composed songs after songs in a bid to rouse his fellow brethren from their deep slumber.

That a Muslim is cosmopolitan, is beautifully expressed in his songs. "Not for the Muslims alone had Islam come. One who owes allegiance to Allah, And seeks truth, above all things, Is indeed a true Muslim."

"Let us all the Muslims of the world combine again, and form a mighty community — It will be an act more virtuous Than going a holy pilgrimage. The red torch of Islam is blazing forth again, and spreading its light on all sides. Now, you too must shake off your stupor. You must wake up from your sleep. Now you too must light the lamp of your life."

"Like Ashab-Kahaf we go on sleeping for a thousand years. Should we wake up even now. The world will tremble again with every footsteps of ours. Nazrul was greatly pained by the laziness, cowardice, superstition and ignorance of his countrymen. His heart bled to see their moribund condition and immeasurable plight. He was hard on false patriots and so-called leaders. Now that our present day society is undergoing an ordeal, we cannot but remember Nazrul at this hour of national crises.

Today our land is sadly lacking in true patriots, ideal leaders and ideal students — valiant fighters who can stem the tide of any calamity and danger lurking in the distant horizon. In his Poem "Bidroher Bani" Nazrul describes the false patriots thus: "They mouth the slogan of liberty. But their thought is always of money alone. To become a leader is all they want. Liberty is an idle talk."

In the Poem 'Chor O Dakat' (Thief and Dacoit) Nazrul says: "The world has become prison — custodians and guards have become dacoits. Thieves are hand and glove with each other. Losing food, health, mind, soul, hopes and aspirations and everything. Human beings have become bankrupt. They are on the brink of ruin."

I think this poem is very appropriate for the present day society of our country and its unhealthy politics using students for the realisation of selfish ends. In a nutshell, Bidrohi, the poem which gave Nazrul worldwide fame, is an impassioned outpouring of the spirit of freedom: "Say hero — Say, I hold my head high At the sight of me The Himalayas bows down its head in shame."

Nazrul was first and foremost a poet, and out and out a poet — he was above all a poet of humanity, of revolt against injustice and tyranny of society, for all times and climes. He was a Poet of Renaissance.

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Directorate General Defence Purchase Ministry of Defence New Airport Road, Tejgaon, Dhaka-1215 Tender Notice 1. Sealed tenders in local currency are invited from bonafide manufacturers/dealers/suppliers (For enlisted firm only) for evaluation of the following item for Bangladesh "Army".

Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh Office of the Chief Conservator of Forests Ban Bhaban, Gulshan, Mohakhali, Dhaka-1212 Tender Notice Tender Memorandum No 43/CCF/FAP/99-2000 Dated: 18.5.2000

Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh Public Works E/M Division-7, Dhaka Memo No E/M-7-126/4483 Dated, Dhaka: 14-5-2000/31-1-1407 BS Tender Invitation Notice No 177/1999-2000

Comic strips featuring Tom and Jerry and James Bond. Tom and Jerry: I PUT A MOUSE-TRAP IN THE FRIG. James Bond: THEN WE'LL SIMPLY WATCH THE AREA WHERE YOU SAW THE MAN FROM THE HOSPITAL.