

## Shameless bill default

### Is it lawmakers' prerogative to break law?

THIS is budgetary season. Time for self-auditing and stock-taking, almost involuntarily to brace for the new fiscal on as clean a slate as possible. Are the incorrigible telephone bill shirking MPs listening? As if to rhyme in with the season of financial consciousness and ethical compunction, a prominent Bangla daily has raked up the issue of telephone arrear bills piled up by 607 MPs, former and incumbent included, to the tune of Tk 12 crore.

The break-up is a tale of a spiralling curve of default, a Manhattan in unpaid bills for the use of residential telephones. Twelve MPs of the first Jatiya Sangsad (1973-75) accounted for Tk 78,440 in outstanding bills; 29 MPs of the 2<sup>nd</sup> JS (1979-82) owed Tk 2,58,900; 58 MPs of 3<sup>rd</sup> JS (1986-88) had Tk13, 14,000 in dues; 114 MPs of the 4<sup>th</sup> JS (1988-90) owed Tk 1,04,83,200; 211 MPs of the 5<sup>th</sup> JS (1991-96) owed Tk 3,68,45,513; 220 MPs of the 7<sup>th</sup> one (1996-2001) accounted for Tk 3,07,19,202 in arrear bills. The payment backlog for all MPs in terms of using the JS PABX numbers amounted to Tk 2,92,83,720. The figures for the nearly two years of the current parliament are not represented here. These are yet to be compiled. The incorrigibility of default is sharply etched by 12 of the MPs having reportedly piled up arrears for the last 29 years! Surprisingly still, their lines were not disconnected, albeit in contravention of the rule applied in case of ordinary subscribers who are disconnected if they have Tk 2000 in dues or have not paid bills for three consecutive months.

All are equal in the eye of law, according to the Constitution of the Republic. The double standard in the application of telephone usage rules is discriminatory against ordinary citizens being unduly advantageous to the elected representatives from whom the public expect the highest standards of behaviour and conduct. The MPs, both as custodians of the constitution and lawmakers under oath should have the qualms to pay up their arrear telephone bills to set the records straight. They have not paid the dues despite drawing Tk 4000 as monthly telephone allowance. They owe it to the public now to clean up the image on the question once and for all.

## Jail reform can't wait

Increasing space only a part of it

PRISONS will have an additional capacity of accommodating another 2,500 inmates by the year-end. This expansion plan is a step in the right direction, but hardly goes far enough.

This addition to the existing facilities, welcome as it is, sounds rather insignificant as 71,290 prisoners are now accommodated in the jails which have the space for around 25,000 people. They live in subhuman conditions in those cramped and extremely unhygienic places. They have to sleep and use other facilities by rotation in most of the jails. The convicts, under-trial prisoners, women and children are all huddled together into limited spaces. It seems the basic human rights of prisoners do not figure in our scheme of things. Jails are also supposed to play some kind of reformatory role to enable the inmates to lead normal life once they come out of confinement. But our jails cannot yet think of playing such a role.

It is indeed good news that the government is planning to make it mandatory to count the days spent by an under-trial prisoner before conviction as part of having served the sentence. This will in many cases shorten the jail sentence since under-trial prisoners at times have to spend months or years before being convicted or acquitted. The government is also thinking in terms of releasing a number of prisoners to take the pressure off the jails. This is, however, a more complicated matter that will have to be resolved on the basis of sound legalistic decisions.

We would like to point out here that a large number of people are arrested on suspicion and put on remand and they add to overcrowding of jails. The jail authorities are reported to be toying with the idea of video conferencing to cut down the number of times an accused has to be produced before court. However, what is more important is to reduce the number of 'jail worthy' people by judicious application of the law. Creation of more space in jails is a welcome move, but at the same time it has to be seen that people are not pushed to jails unless there is sufficient ground for doing so and nobody is left to rot in jails without trial. All these issues must be addressed within the framework of a comprehensive jail reform package.

# Big budget but some big barriers too



ABDUL BAYES

ONE of the respected and learned economists of the country -- when requested -- refused to reveal his reactions on the budget 2003-04. According to him, the budget presented in the parliament is a paper of proposals or letter of intents. The revised budget, according to him, shows the materialisation of those proposals. Therefore, one should attempt to analyse the revised budget to arrive at the convergence or divergence with the original document. I accepted his arguments. But columnists and economists running for newspaper coverage need to insert instant reactions, sometimes reading, sometimes hearing.

### Good and bad news

Finance Minister M Saifur Rahman presented the budget for 2003-04 before the Parliament last Thursday. To our knowledge, this time Mr. Rahman tabled before the parliament the largest budget ever witnessed in Bangladesh. He has, in his bag, the credit of presenting national budget for the highest number of periods. While we should feel no shy in congratulating him and his government in setting records in these fronts, equally, we should feel shocked at the way the country is being run by the present regime. What is rare now is a sign of relief among people. The last observation, possibly, hints that all that glitters is not gold.

### Mirrors and messages

Just scan through the news paper headlines of the day the budget was presented in the parliament. A vernacular daily reported that Chinese engineers working for the construction of Rupsha bridge are being harassed and threatened by local goons for the payment of tolls (Janakantha, 12 June). The brother of the local MP, allegedly, has been leading the team of mastans. As a result, the construction work of the project slowed down and could be at the point of being stalled. The main opposition party Awami League called a countrywide hartal on that particular day to protest against the deteriorating law and order situation in the country. Especially, the party

rose in protest of the killing of its ex-MP, reputed social worker and a freedom fighter from Natore who was shot dead in broad day light by terrorists. There is allegation that the top notches of the party in power tame the killers. The number of deaths till the day of the presentation of the budget spanning for a week or so, reportedly again, averaged 10 throughout the country.

These figures, of course, exclude rapes, attacks on minorities and other abuses. On the other hand, already at the top of the list of cor-

Minister-- immediately after being sworn in -- severely criticised the preceding Awami League government for making a 'big' ADP at the last leg of its tenure. His main concern seemed to have been hovering around donors' disgust over the size of the then ADP. The minister and his ministry then attempted to axe it down but finally settled at close to what Awami League government did. The honorable minister also -- from time to time -- unleashed his attacks over donors' dictations and sponsored development. Apprecia-

calculus of relevant variables that affect growth and development.

Another seeming U-turn is in the case of trade liberalisation. The present budget saddles with a volley of supplementary duties on imported items to protect domestic industries or to raise revenue. At this point, we can only remind the honorable finance minister of a remark made by Paul Samuelson -- the first American to win a Nobel Prize in economics. In fact, Samuelson linked protection to venereal disease, which appears even as you

textiles sector is awaiting a big hit with the removal of the MFA but nothing seems to be on board to arrest the ailment. Only the provisions of income tax facilities might not cool down the heat. The growth of agricultural sector could hardly exceed the rate achieved during the last regime. Foreign direct investment continues to be constricted by the bureaucratic barriers and poor governance.

More importantly, the tasks of strengthening local government institutions- the planks of promoting

concern is that macro stability and high reserves are not being translated into higher levels of growth of the economy. The provision for a handsome amount for agricultural subsidy is a positive proposal in the light of the level of agricultural subsidy prevailing in India. But it should be ensured that the subsidy reaches the needy ones. The increase in allocations in some of the welfare oriented schemes initiated earlier is in the right direction. On the other hand, additional taxes could fuel the inflation rate and make the lives of the middle and poor class more miserable.

One of the disturbing features of budget making in Bangladesh is the provision of supplementary budget. It means that, the exercise is revised through closer scrutiny at the end of the period and subsequent adjustments to income and expenditure are made. More importantly and frequently, revenue expenditures (unproductive in conventional sense) are found to have risen and development allocations fallen. It was no exception this time and is not likely to be an exception in the next year also. The rise of the revenue expenditure and fall in the development expenditure is, possibly, an indication of growth with poverty. The clarion call of the hour is to lower revenue expenditure, increase development expenditure, lower government size and make a small but efficient budget to achieve what we can actually achieve. The absorptive capacity is a big issue here.

### The same last words?

Every Finance Minister in Bangladesh concluded his speech with an assurance of good governance and appeal to all to build consensus for development. The last words are being repeated every year. But in practice, we noticed just the opposite: good governance is never attempted at earnestly and opposition parties are dashed to the sideline. Years after years, we are on the same sand with little scope to lift ourselves out of poverty and hunger. We hope that in his next budget speech, Mr. Finance Minister would apprise the nation of the achievements on account of good governance and participatory approach to development.

To see that the last words last short, the government needs to sit with the opposition parties, value the opinion of the opposition members in the parliament, make the parliamentary standing committees strong and strive at making the country livable and lovable. A small and effective budget is preferable to a big but ineffective ones.

Abdul Bayes is Professor of Economics at Jahangirnagar University.

## BENEATH THE SURFACE

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rupt countries in the world- corruption has been creeping up and up with no sign of abatement. In Bangladesh, corruption constraints GDP growth rate by about two to three percentage point every year. By and large, the happenings since the government assumed power point to another record being set and that is the worst ever corruption, deterioration of law and order situation and violation of human rights in the country.

### Riding on realities

Any Finance Minister should take the above mentioned facts into serious consideration. A budget is neither merely an arithmetic exercise of income and expenditure nor an area of accounting only. Primarily it is economics but the boundary also behoves social and political parameters, which are no less important to determine the fate of a Finance Minister and hence of his budget. The budget has to be based on realities on the ground. If, for example, development works cannot be completed on time due to bureaucratic dilly-dallying or muscle flexing of mastans, there remains little justification for aiming at a big ADP. If markets are controlled by the local mastans and tender copies are snatched away at gunpoint, there remains miniscule meaning of a march towards market economy. If people of the society do not feel secured to exchange commodities and services, speak out against the prevailing odds and write about the reeling realities, there is no meaning in talking tall about democracy and human rights.

### U-turn and downturn

I recollect that the present Finance

Minister, to me, he seemed to have, at that time, become a mini 'swadeshi' to advance development by deploying domestic resources and relying very less on outside help. But suddenly, the tone changed and the present ADP size is reported to have been increased on the basis of assurance of assistance from donors' desks. Again, while he severely criticised the past government for borrowing from banks, this present budget has provisions for doing the same. The U-turns and back gears could indicate to us that all that is said by the Finance Minister is not always sensible. Or it could be so that the Finance Minister does not sometimes say all that seem to be sensible. It could be a good exercise in the field of politics but not for economics. Economics needs coherence, commitments and

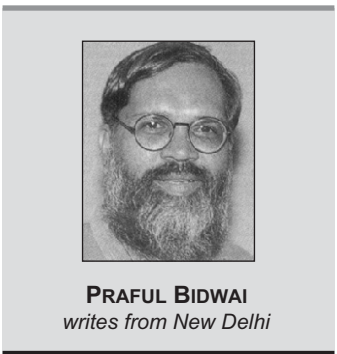
creat it.

### Defaults and deterrents

Economic growth rate achieved during the last fiscal year was estimated to be 5.3 per cent. It is below the target set at 6 per cent (but possibly rewarding in the face of worldwide recession) and also below the average achieved during the past five years of Awami League rule. In the last decade or so, poverty has been reduced by mere one percentage point each year in the face of a 5 plus percentage GDP growth rate. But the fact is that the economy needs to grow at 7 per cent per annum on a sustained basis to make a dent to the present pervasive poverty situation. In his budget speech, there is very little said and done to meet the challenges of growing globalisation. The



# Shooting itself in the foot: BJP's leadership fissures



PRAFUL BIDWAI  
writes from New Delhi

FOR many Bharatiya Janata Party supporters, one of its major attraction used to be its image as a relatively cohesive and disciplined party driven not just by power, but by ideology too. After its five years-long rule in New Delhi, this image has been badly dented.

The party has become notorious for its venality and opportunistic alliances. It has developed a stake in big-time corruption. Its sister organisations oppose its policies. Discipline is rampant in the parivar.

Now, the image of the BJP's top-level leadership has also taken a serious knock owing to party president M Venkaiah Naidu's too-clever-by-half attempt to project his mentor L.K. Advani along with Mr Vajpayee as the BJP's 'twin mascots'.

The abject manner in which Mr Naidu withdrew the proposal is equalled only by the wicked way it was made -- during Mr Vajpayee's

absence from India. This wasn't as a storm in the teacup, but a significant crisis. It passed only after Mr Vajpayee threatened to 'retire' and then resorted to blackmail by declaring that Mr Advani would lead the party in the next election. All this highlights personality clashes and fissures within the BJP's leadership.

Mr Naidu ate humble pie, and the Advani camp -- of which he is a leading member -- abandoned its crude attempt to stage a palace coup. The party realised that Mr Vajpayee is indispensable for the

Mr Advani's followers have marginalised the NDA's non-BJP Hindutva component. Proof for this comes from the latest Cabinet reshuffle, discussed in this column earlier.

Mr Vajpayee has yielded ground to the Advani brigade partly because he lacks the stamina for day-to-day party affairs. But he has never conceded there's room at the top for two leaders.

Mr Advani can rise in importance -- but only at Mr Vajpayee's plea-

Ultimately, however, they know they need each other for the sake of party and government. This sometimes clashes with short-term moves dictated by power ambitions.

One cannot understand the Vajpayee-Advani relationship through factional dynamics. Accurately speaking, they aren't faction leaders. The BJP isn't democratic enough to have factions based on ideology, social base or regional affiliation.

Many party managers see the BJP in pre-modern terms as a Hindu

sions notwithstanding. Whoever has confronted him in the Jana Sangh/BJP has been brutally punished -- right from Balraj Madhok in the 1960s to Mr Govindacharya and Kalyan Singh recently.

Mr Vajpayee is vindictive, and Mr Advani cunning. When Mr Kalyan Singh -- the BJP's biggest-ever asset in Uttar Pradesh -- called Mr Vajpayee a 'tired leader led by retired bureaucrats', he was expelled. Mr Govindacharya was axed for saying he's a mukhauta (mask).

The BJP cannot easily deal with internal tensions and power struggles. It doesn't freely debate differences. Its cadres obediently take their cue from the top bosses...For decades, the RSS would mediate BJP power struggles. A key to this was the distance it kept from the nitty-gritty of politics. But today, the RSS soils its hands to the point of taking sides in BJP power-tussles.

National Democratic Alliance's survival and the coming elections.

Mr Advani is a seasoned apparatchik (organisation-man). But he's no vote-catcher. His elevation to Mr Vajpayee's level isn't acceptable to NDA constituents. Mr Vajpayee remains the BJP's sole acceptable public face.

The 'two-mascots' formula was a blatant, but not a new, attempt to alter inner-party power balances. Last year, Mr Advani was promoted to Deputy PM, and Mr Naidu to party president. This group now totally controls the party apparatus and BJP-RSS relations.

sure. This is a paternalistic relationship typical of the sangh parivar, which sets great store by ekachalak-anuvartitva -- the RSS 'principle' of authoritarian, absolute rule of a single leader.

Both men are deeply rooted in RSS culture. They have a personal equation, but it's skewed. Both are under pressure from their respective loyalists to demand their 'rightful' share of power. According to people who have been privy to their personal conversations, neither hides his ambition nor his (sometimes unflattering) opinion of the other.

Undivided Family, in which the paterfamilias (Mr Advani) holds absolute power.

Internal differences scare BJP cadres. They always deny or cover them up. They blame Mr Vajpayee for plunging the party into crisis by threatening it. In their eyes, he is the loser.

Instead of factions, the BJP has power-centres based on personal loyalty. When these get assertive, Mr Vajpayee sulks or threatens to quit. Mr Advani gives in, but creeps up to a higher level of influence.

Mr Vajpayee is an extremely insecure person -- poetic preten-

It's supremely ironical that the RSS should warn the BJP against the 'cult of personality'. The RSS bases itself on that very 'cult', in which sarasanghachalak or Supreme Leader is worshipped. All former and current swayamsevak pay him gurudakshina. In this secret society-like organisation, there are no elections; all appointments are made from on top.

Yet, 'cult of personality' describes the BJP's culture accurately. Everyone must speak reverentially about Mr Vajpayee. His face must appear on all party posters and hoardings. In this, the BJP imitates

the Congress in its worst dynastic phase.

A particularly obnoxious ritual Mr Vajpayee revels in is lining up the whole Cabinet to see him off on his foreign trips. Nehru discouraged this when international air travel was far less frequent and much riskier. Such practices are repugnant to a democratic culture.

The BJP cannot easily deal with internal tensions and power struggles. It doesn't freely debate differences. Its cadres obediently take their cue from the top bosses.

Take the Gujarat massacre. Mr Vajpayee called the killing a 'black mark' on April 4 last year. BJP leaders agreed. Exactly eight days later, in Goa, Mr Vajpayee exonerated Mr Narendra Modi and his vile Hindutva, and vilified Muslims. No BJP leader questioned him.

For decades, the RSS would mediate BJP power struggles. A key to this was the distance it kept from the nitty-gritty of politics. But today, the RSS soils its hands to the point of taking sides in BJP power-tussles.

Riven by unresolved differences and bitterness, the BJP is headed for more turmoil and incoherence. Its cadres cannot come to terms with new tensions, aggravated by the coming state elections. Now, the BJP's political credibility is set to take a beating.

Praful Bidwai is an eminent Indian columnist.

## TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR

Letters will only be considered if they carry the writer's full name, address and telephone number (if any). The identity of the writers will be protected. Letters must be limited to 300 words. All letters will be subject to editing.

### Proton plant in Bangladesh

It is a good news that Malaysian car giant Proton wants to set up an assembly plant in our country.

They can do this because -

1. The annual demand for cars in our country is for about 20,000 according to your newspaper report on 14.6.03. The demand is quite high indeed.

2. They will get manpower at cheaper rate in our country.

3. They may even try to capture the Indian market from here just like the Maruti is trying to do in our country.

This deal will also be highly beneficial for us because -

1. It will save us lots of foreign exchange.

2. It will create job opportunities for Bangladeshi engineers and help stop 'brain drain' to an extent.

3. Many middle-class families will be able to buy new cars.

4. It may help reduce pollution with use of improved technology.

Seeing all these benefits for both sides, I request both the parties (Proton and Bangladesh Government) to look into the matter seriously.

We are hoping for an early start. Reaz Mohiuddin  
Outer Circular Road, Dhaka

### The government's economic policies

There are many economic policies of the government that I believe must be reconsidered. First of all the idea of identifying agriculture as the thrust sector of the economy. I think protectionism is the word better associated with agriculture. A thrust sector is normally defined as the sector that drives the entire economy of a nation. The wealth generated in this sector creates employment in other sectors and it accounts for the largest marginal addition to GDP.

Now as it is with agriculture:

1) Prices of agricultural produce and products are subject to considerable fluctuations which leads to low farm incomes in some years, consumers having to pay more in others, producer uncertainty and a subsequent lack of investment.

2) Farm incomes rise less quickly than other incomes as instanced in Honduras when in 1987 they had to purchase one tractor for 3 tons of bananas and in 1998 one tractor cost them 14 tons of bananas (Geography in Action 2, Chapter 3: Asian Revolution). It is for this very reason that Malaysia diversified itself from what was once a country dependant on tin and rubber exports that accounted for over 50 per cent of GDP to what is now one of the Tiger Economies of Asia. And that did not happen with agriculture as their thrust sector.

Yes it is true that our agriculture sector requires protection against competition like that in all economies

of the world, and it is important for poverty alleviation but calling it a 'thrust sector' would be wrong and maybe an economic blunder.

Mohammad Arbaaz Nayeem  
Mastermind School, Dhaka

### "Anti Americanism"

This is in reference to S. Khan's and Mahmud Elahi's letter published under the heading "Anti Americanism" on June 4 & 3 respectively.

It is not clear whether S. Khan supported American mass citizens or Bush administration's dose stance in legalising the war against Iraq violating UN resolutions on the pretence that Iraqi administration possessed WMD and fostered terrorist networks world-wide. Bush administration's failure to place any veracity of alleged existence of WMD even months after war created a furore among the people from every corner. I doubt that they have any purview left to encounter this

uproar after the statement from chief UN weapon inspector that Iraq was divested of any smoking gun that can create mass destruction much before the war had begun. Now it's an open secret that Mr. Bush and his astute associates are using 9/11 as a launching pad in combating unprecedented American economic recession.

In his letter Mr. Elahi boasted about the American democracy only to reckon that how little Mr. Bush, like a tyrant, bothered about daily swarm of anti-war demonstration in his country. Now his excellency, the president of USA, is in a bid to make a play to do the same with Iran. For a situation akin to Iraq or two, the rest of the world will only wait for an American dooms day as an errant superpower.

Last of all I strongly support Shahjahan Ahmed, Omar Sharif and specially Nabila Edris for the contents of their valued letter.

Shoaib Ahmed

Green Road, Dhaka

### Expectations from university students

Education is beacon light with which we would like to see our way of life. Without education we have no cognitive power to judge between good and bad. University is the highest place of learning where independent thought is cultivated freely with the objective of nurturing the pent-up intellect into the young learners. But what is going on there today is really unexpected and unprecedented from the right point of view.

As Bangladesh has been dubbed as the top most corrupt country for the two consecutive occasions, our university students are also suffering from scathing compunction as they are indulging in gross violation of law, human rights and many other 'vices'. Now

who come forward with the ray of hope for the grassroots people suffering from innumerable problems in their practical life?

Today we see no leader who can come with hope and aspiration for the student community so that they can be reinvigorated. Students are assets of a country but the situation has changed and now our students have badly become burden to the nation. The other day, while talking with some students I was so surprised when I saw a pall of gloom in their eyes. It has been ingrained in them that the present state of the society could not be changed. If things go on like this what can we expect from our probable future leaders?

Bazlu Rahman  
On e-mail

### Canadian tourists in Bangladesh

My wife and I, both are Canadian law-

yers, specialised in the travel field, speak English, French, German, Spanish and Thai. We write in several magazines including Canadian Travel Press, Tourism Plus, Astrolabe, Thai Diver etc.

We spend several months every year diving and making underwater videos about leopard sharks, black tip reef sharks, giant squid, barracudas etc.

We've learned from experience that every city is so much more fascinating if some local persons explain to us the sights and sounds we're observing.

In October, we'll be in Bangladesh for a few days. Would you have among your readers someone who would be interested in meeting us and telling us about your country?

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