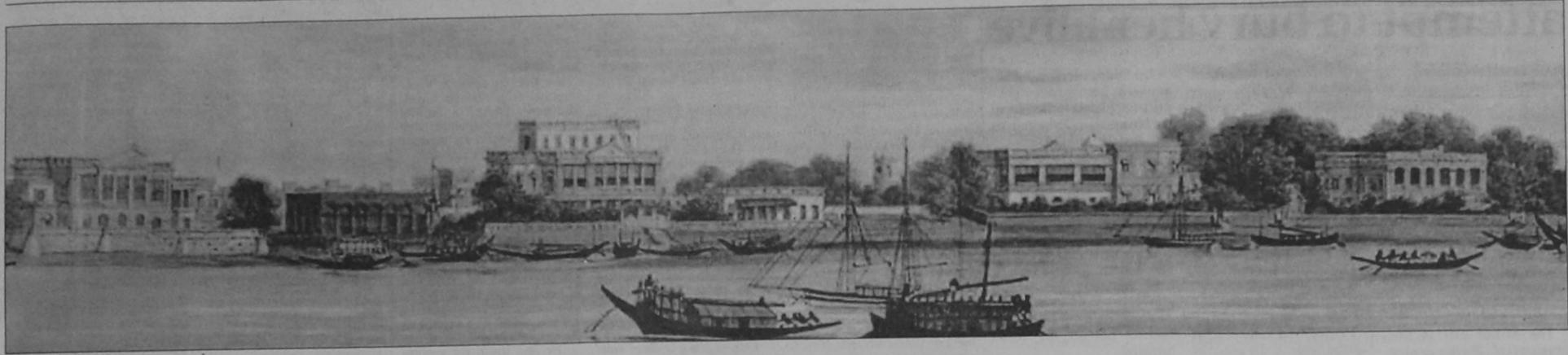


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Designing the beginning



KAZI KHALED ASHRAF

SADARGHAT is where it all started, more or less. The city of Dhaka began a love story there with the river, which became the social, economic and cultural foundation of the city. If an area in the city displayed some semblance of a "designed" or "decent" urban space linking the river, that too was Sadarghat.

The phrase "Buriganga is the lifeline of the city" gathered meaning in the above context. But much water has flowed along its banks, of which most is now unholy effluence, sewage and pollutants. It's a love story that has gone awry.

Now, Sadarghat is an emblem of the

rape of the river and its banks. With vanishing riverbanks, and even vanishing aquatic life (thanks to our toxic gift to the river), we are close to declaring the river as near as dead. The savaging of Sadarghat is symptomatic of our overall apathy to make our collective lives better, our pathological inclination to commit self-mutilation.

Sadarghat may be the original urban riverbank, but now it is one of many. The riverbanks of Dhaka describe a diversity of habitations and territorial conditions along its various edges. It shows a high degree of urbanity at places like Sadarghat, agricultural and wetland landscape at many points east and west of the city, and haphazard build-ups at places like Gabtali and

Tongi Bridge area.

A broad development plan -- what is described as a master plan -- for Dhaka must consider that diversity. Urban design approaches are much more precise and definitive, and need to respond to specific locales and conditions while at the same time connecting to the larger plan. Sadarghat dearly awaits an urban design intervention that will renovate that area and also at the same time be a catalyst for the overall resuscitation of Dhaka's riverbanks.

There are many reasons to target Sadarghat. First of all, it's where it all began: it represents the original vibrancy of the city. If we can show the audacity and boldness to recover the original river landscape of the city and transform it in tune with the spirit of the time, we can certainly re-address the rest of Dhaka's riverbanks.

The reason Dhaka's urban ills keep proliferating with no end in sight is because the city has not witnessed any viable and inspiring urban design model. With no alternative in sight, and no visionary example to point to, the only option left for the city is self-mutilation. And that is another urgent reason to consider a major urban design intervention at Sadarghat.

For the full version of this article please read this month's Forum, available free with The Daily Star on July 6.

Kazi Khaled Ashraf is an architect, urbanist and author. He teaches at the University of Hawaii in Honolulu. Main images for the article were created by architect Masudul Islam following suggestions by Salauddin Ahmed (of Atelier Robin Architects) and Kazi Khaled Ashraf.

Our rivers, our dreams

MORSHED ALI KHAN

ON the wall of the Dhaka WASA's Drainage Circle at Topkhana hangs an artist's impression of the Dhaka Flood Protection Embankment. Drawn just after the great deluge of 1988, the image depicts the embankment in a most civilised manner.

The unnamed artist took great care in giving the future beri bandh all the components that we might deem necessary for aesthetics -- a wide walk-way, lush green grass, trees, street-lights, and a tinge of blue in the nearby water of the river Buriganga.

The dyke today, more than twenty years later, bears the testimony of utter negligence and mindless planning. From Tongi by the Turag up to Postogola on the bank of the river Buriganga, the 30-kilometre long dyke that should have been a great facilitator to Dhaka's road communication system and to people's leisure, cries loud for help.

Instead of being a lovely drive, by-passing dozens of places with an unhindered view of the river, it offers instant dismay for obvious reasons.

Locals know why the bank of the river is so neglected and left to rot. These areas by the river are hardly used by the affluent section of the city population.

The whole stretch of the embankment is thus left outside the purview of city development. After all, none from those impoverished areas are going to complain. Their commissioners and the members of parliament are too busy to look into their day-to-day problems.

Imagine a one-stop office under the jurisdiction of a powerful "commission" to deal with anything involving the rivers around the city -- their flow, cleanliness,

navigation, dredging, embankments and walkways, banks, resources, security and development. The commission is constitutionally empowered and technically equipped to deal with anything to keep these rivers safe, unlike current situation when at least ten different departments stagger to keep these rivers protected (or else). The commission is under a single roof that takes decision and implements those within the sharpest possible time and skill.

Imagine a four-lane highway on either banks of the rivers, encircling the capital with vast walkways. The streets are well-lit with solar panels and the elite river police patrol the area with their walkie-talkies to update each other regularly.

The clean water of the rivers flows without the slightest hindrance where laden vessels, river buses, floating restaur-

ants, traditional fishermen and boatmen pursue their everyday businesses. Children walking with their parents along the broad walkway stop and gaze in wonder at half a dozen rowers speeding past in their kayaks.

A group of gardeners water the plants and mow the lush green slopes. Elderly men play garden chess at a piazza beautifully created along the walkway where scores of onlookers watch patiently. The party partially dissolves with the setting sun and the concurrent sound of azan from loudspeakers atop hundreds of mosques for which the capital Dhaka is so famous

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Morshed Ali Khan is a special correspondent of The Daily Star.



ARIF HAQUE

The good, bad and the uncertain

SYEED AHAMED

THE budget for the fiscal year 2009-10 (FY2010) has attracted a mixed response and has been termed since as bold as well as exaggerated, conservative as well as ambitious, and challenging as well as full of rhetoric by different quarters.

While pro-poor allocations and taxation has been appreciated, controversial proposals such as the black money recycling scheme invited widespread criticism.

While the budget has taken some traditional stances such as block allocations and high government borrowing, it has also introduced some new approaches in such as the public private partnership and economic decentralisation.

This article will analyse some good, bad and unknown issues of this year's budget by exploring different budget proposals and post-budget discussions.

The good

Bangladesh's GDP growth slowed down by 0.31 of a percentage point during FY09 (from 6.19 percent achieved during FY08) owing to multiple disruptions of political uncertainties and consequential low public investment, as well as the global recession.

While the global recession seems to be bottoming out, its delayed impact may continue to hurt Bangladesh's growth prospects during the coming quarters. Keeping in mind the slowing down of demand in our exporting markets, performance of neighbouring economies, and projections of ADB-IMF, any growth figure over 5.5 percent in FY2010 would suggest a resistance to further slip and a 6 percent growth would mean a good resurgence.

Hence, while the growth target for

FY2010 -- set at 5.5 to 6 percent -- may appear unadventurous, attaining this target will be quite an adventure itself.

To achieve this growth target, the government's forecast of investment efficiency, measured by incremental capital-output ratio (ICOR), may seem odd. It is predicted that the ICOR will increase in 2010, meaning more investment will be required to achieve a similar level of production. There are possibly two explanations behind this projected drop in investment efficiency -- the recession-recovery dynamics, and the lagged response of rural investment.

During a recession, private sector is typically reluctant to invest and government often adopts expansionary fiscal stance to revive GDP growth. As a result, the "projected" ICOR appears low in the context of a modest GDP target. Once the proposed stimulus package and public investment programmes will be put into effect, the private sector will recover and the actual investment efficiency will look better in the backdrop of a moderate growth attainment and revised (downward) public investment figures.

The budget allocations, which shifted its focus from urban-industrialisation to economic devolution and rural development, may reduce the investment efficiency in the short-run as rural development shows a delayed (but sustained) response to investment.

A study on China's economic growth between 1978 and 2000 (Journal of Asian Economics, 14, 2003) shows that in the long run, investment efficiency can be reaped through the rural industrialisation and proliferation of small firms in non-state sector. The current budget seems to have addressed this stance.

Hence, an annual fall in projected ICOR can be ignored if economic devolution can

be ensured and a reasonable growth is achieved during the current fiscal year.

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Syeed Ahamed is a public policy analyst based in Australia.

The long view

JYOTI RAHMAN

TO recap then, the economic growth forecasts underpinning the budget are rather prudent. While there are serious concerns about implementation of various expenditure

and revenue measures, these challenges are not insurmountable. And finally, the government should be held to account for its promise to reform the tax system over the medium term so that ambitious development programs can become sustainable. It is the medium term growth prospects that this section focuses on.

Recall from above that an export boom is forecast for 2010-11 and 2011-12.

Is this sensible?

This forecast appears to be rather rosy if one considers that Bangladesh's major export markets -- the United States, the United Kingdom, the euro area -- are likely to remain mired in a sluggish recovery over these years. True, our ready-made garments and knitwear, servicing the budget end of the market, have proved resilient going into the recession. However, there is no reason to think that the so-called Wal-Mart effect will underpin an exports boom.

However, there is an interesting assumption that may explain the forecast export revival. The economic growth, and by extension fiscal, forecasts rest on a number of medium term assumptions. One of them is: "sustained high growth rates in exports through exploitation of new market opportunities and export market diversification."

It's not clear what exactly "new market opportunities" and "export market diversification" refer to. However, the giant economies of China and India -- among the first to recover from the global slump -- appear to be natural candidates. Rightly or not, there is a perception that the government enjoys a special relationship with India, while the Chinese alliance has been a constant in our foreign policy since the

1970s. It is about time that the government cashes in those friendship chips so that Bangladeshi goods can enter these massive markets.

In addition to exports diversification, there is a lot of emphasis on small- and medium-sized enterprises being an engine of economic activities. While this is a welcome focus, many impediments -- from infrastructure bottleneck at the broadest level to access to finance, market, business skills, and supply network at the micro level -- need to be addressed for the SMEs to be serious driver of sustainable growth.

And, finally, the budget assumes "greater efficiency and technological progress across the economy, partly driven by increased investment in information and communication technology."

Political gimmickry such as the term "Digital Bangladesh" notwithstanding, a lot could be done to streamline service provision and reduce transaction costs, thereby enhancing economy-wide productivity growth that could sustain a growth pick up into the next decade. However, measures such as digitising the land records that could underpin this growth spur will require significant political courage.

In the long term, how the government steps up to these challenges will prove lot more important than any specific measures contained in this budget. As they put the budget behind them and start working on the five-year plan, Mr. Muhith, the planning minister, and their officials, should keep that in mind.

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