

Government's job scheme for the extreme poor

Whichever is the implementing agency it must deliver

THE government's Employment Generation Programme (EGP) targeting 12.5 lakh ultra-poor of which at least one-third beneficiary will be women has got under way from March 4. This follows vacation of High Court stay order on the programme issued on February 28.

When the Food and Disaster Management Ministry decided to appoint officials at upazila level and put them in charge of the committees to implement EGP instead of the upazila chairmen who were heading them, the latter filed a writ petition before the HC contesting the government decision. This resulted in the stay order which the HC has since vacated on an appeal from the government considering the pressing need for the scheme to catch up with the beginning of the lean season.

The programme has all the elements of a good, pro-poor safety net livelihood line being thrown to the extreme poor for 40 days during the March-April lean season. But an undertaking on such a scale involving Tk 600 crore worth of cash to be distributed on a daily basis covering a very short span of time could easily lend itself to corruption. That is why there is likely to be an interplay of interests to take charge of the programme, although different agencies would like to be credited for having associated with it and achieved success on it. Not unsurprisingly, therefore, one saw a tussle between the Union Parishad chairmen who used to head the EGP committees and the Ministry of Food and Disaster Management which is placing upazila level bureaucrats at the head of the implementing committees.

In principle, let's make it clear though, we are for elected local leaderships to take charge of such a pro-people project rather than bureaucrats. It is true historically speaking that elected local leaders have often been under pressure to please their constituencies. Whether they will use the money to strengthen their hold on people keeping in view the Union Parishad and upazila elections is something that cannot be brushed aside. But again because of the election they also likely to be cautious to avert acquiring any stigma of corruption, an obligation and compunction that bureaucrats need not have to do with. Essentially, we believe in strengthened and empowered local bodies with an improved gender balance to be the cornerstone of participatory democracy from the grassroots upwards. Already, the MPs have been given an advisory role in the local bodies and now the bureaucrats are taking a slice of what should be their function.

That said, we would urge the Union Parishad chairmen to keep their protests in check and allow the employment generation programme to go ahead given its very short gestation period. At the end of which after all its results or lack of them will be for all to see. The revised arrangement could be on test for a year. It is in this view of the matter that the programme should be constantly monitored, so it does not degenerate into doles that too with cuts pocketed by the corrupt. All the canal digging, dam and road construction, elevating grounds of educational and religious institutes as cyclone shelter premises and preparation of organic fertilisers that are planned through the programme are tangible physical targets which if not met can be easily audited, responsibility fixed and infractions punished.

Remembering March 7, 1971

Soul-stirring eloquence at the defining moment

WHEN Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman rose to address the huge mass of humanity at the race course on March 7, 1971, he knew full well that what he said there would reverberate around the world, that its ramifications would be greater and wider than one could imagine. There was the simple truth he needed to expound before his people and before the world at large. It was that the Pakistani military junta, in cahoots with its political allies, was engaged in trying to repudiate the resounding victory the people had given him and the Awami League at the general elections of December 1970. And in light of that conspiracy to deprive the Bengali nation of its fair share in the administration of the country, it fell to Bangabandhu to define the course the Bengali nation would take in the days to come. Part of that course had already been indicated by the non-violent non-cooperation movement he had launched earlier in the month to drive home the Bengali response to the gathering crisis.

In the event, the declaration made by the Father of the Nation on March 7, 1971 turned out to be a defining moment in the history of Bengalis in that it firmly set them on the road to political liberty. It was at once an instance of the courage Bangabandhu had always been known for. He made it clear to the junta that the Bengalis were united as never before in the struggle for their rights, a cause for which they were willing to shed the last drop of blood. It was a bold example of the forthrightness Bangabandhu had consistently employed in his articulation of political belief when he warned Pakistan's rulers that they could not expect him to talk to them without first setting a few crucial matters right. His demand for an end to martial law and for an immediate transfer of power to the elected representatives of the people was, in that sense, a reflection of the inner urge of his people. Note that the impassioned nature of Bangabandhu's oratory did not obviate the need for a reasoned approach to the crisis. He not only offered people an overview of the flawed nature of politics in Pakistan but also recounted the ceaseless struggle the Bengalis had waged since the language movement of 1952 and all the way to the movement for the ouster of Ayub Khan in 1969.

On that bright afternoon of rich expectations, Bangabandhu engaged in a brilliant internalising of the power of the masses, the same that had reposed their trust in him through giving him the huge mandate he had asked for at the elections. In what remains an outstanding instance of political oratory, he had the world know that the Bengali nation was not opting for secession from Pakistan. The majority, with their electoral strength, would not and did not secede. But what the Bengalis knew was that they were headed on the path to freedom. When Bangabandhu orated that the struggle was for emancipation, that it was for independence, our future lay clear and open before us.

When we crossed the threshold

On March 7, 1971 Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and with him the Bengali nation crossed a threshold. If there is any particular point to be cited as a defining moment in the gathering surge for our freedom, it was the oratory that came our way from the undisputed leader who would soon be the founding father of a free Bangladesh.

SYED BADRUL AHSAN

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That Bangabandhu envisaged a sovereign republic for his people had never been in doubt. It was made clear in late 1969 when he told the nation on the anniversary of the death of Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy that henceforth East Pakistan would be known as Bangladesh. It was an act of courage tempered with vision. With the Six Points before him, the future father of the Bengali nation knew the course his people needed to take.

That course was set on March 7, 1971. Years after Bangabandhu rose to address the million-strong crowd at Dhaka's Race Course, there are the powerful associations with the moment which continue to revive the spirit of a generation that heard him speak that afternoon.

On that day, the Pakistani military authorities compelled the Dhaka station of Radio Pakistan (by then already known as Dhaka Betar to Bengalis) not to broadcast Bangabandhu's speech live from the Race Course. Helicopters hovered in the afternoon sky, over the crowd, with dark hints of an immediate military assault should the Bengali leader go for a unilateral declaration of independence.

In the preceding few days, rumours of an impending act of secession of Pakistan's eastern province had made the rounds. In distant Rawalpindi, the

Yahya Khan junta and its political allies, notably Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, waited in intense apprehension of what could be happening in Dhaka on March 7. In Dhaka itself, Bangabandhu was coming under huge pressure from his followers, from students, indeed from an entire nation, to sever all links with Pakistan.

Bir Bangali ostro dhoro Bangladesh shwadhin koro became a recurring slogan, with the young training for what they foresaw would be a long and bitter struggle against Pakistan. As he slowly ascended the steps to the dais on the afternoon of March 7, Bangabandhu carried the weight of the world on his shoulders. As for the world, it waited to see his next move in the developing conflict with the Pakistani establishment.

In the event, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman carried the day on his terms. His speech was a masterpiece of political sagacity and ingenuity, one more sign of the substantive that had gone into his evolution as a people's leader. He deftly recapitulated the oppressive nature of the Pakistan state in the years since its creation; he recalled the many phases of the Bengali struggle for democratic rights; he made it clear that by deferring the meeting of the newly elected national assembly Pakistan's vested interests were only undermining the verdict delivered by the country at the December 1970 elections; and he noted with passion the sacrifices made by his people in defence of their heritage, of their self-esteem, since their early days of the Pakistan state. He castigated General Yahya Khan and Bhutto for the conspiracy they had hatched to undercut the transition to democracy.

Bangabandhu was in his element as he reminded the junta, in his articulation of the political program he planned to



STAR FILE PHOTO

pursue henceforth, that the immediate future of politics in Pakistan lay in his hands. His call for an immediate end to martial law, for an inquiry into the killings indulged in by the army, for an immediate transfer of power to the elected representatives of the people was the weapon he wielded on March 7.

He was too conscious of the lessons of history to go for a UDI. He was unwilling to do what Ian Smith had done in Rhodesia in 1965. Neither was he ready to emulate Odumegwu Ojukwu in Biafra in 1967. And there was that other, supremely important fact; he was the elected leader of the majority party in Pakistan. Elected leaders do not preside over the secession of their people from the rest of the country.

Besides, since Bangladesh had to all intents and purposes opted for a sovereign status for itself, it was Bangabandhu's considered view that Bengalis would be better served through a negotiated way out of the Pakistan federation. It was a reflection of the constitutional politics he had always upheld, and promoted, through his rise to the peaks despite the fundamental flaws of

the state Mohammad Ali Jinnah had cobbled in a vicious summer of partition in the Indian subcontinent.

In the end, Bangabandhu did not promise Pakistanis that he would uphold the interests of their country. Neither did he give them the excuse (and UDI would have been that excuse) to accuse him and his people of a secessionist move that would need to be put down harshly. But he did let his fellow Bengalis know that freedom was in the air, that it was on its way. The struggle, he said, was one aimed at emancipation. The struggle, he continued, was directed at an attainment of independence. He had soared and with him had leapt skyward the dreams of his nation. Joi Bangla reverberated all around.

Pakistan ceased to be in its eastern province, effectively, on March 7, 1971. It was a mere formalisation of its demise that came through with the surrender of its army in Dhaka on December 16 of that year.

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Service @ your doorstep

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ANIR CHOWDHURY

Iwould like to start by relating a remarkable personal experience in Jhenidah. There, for the last two months, farmers have been receiving purchase orders for sugarcane through text messages. I found that 80 percent of them could not read the English message, and 20 percent of them were totally illiterate -- they could not read even Bangla. And yet 100 percent of them are able to act on the message since there is the concept of "indirect literacy" in Bangladesh. The reason I have brought this up is to respond to a comment that the Digital Bangladesh vision is quite meaningless when 50 percent of the people can't use a keyboard. I

congratulate the principal secretary for explaining the vision where most of the people will not have to use a keyboard.

In no way am I suggesting that illiteracy eradication should not be a priority of the government. All I am suggesting, firstly, is that Digital Bangladesh has found many creative ways of delivering vital information and services to common citizens without depending on computers and internet. Both the government and the development partners must recognise this fact and plan innovatively.

Digital Bangladesh is not a promise for a different world. It's actually a promise for the same world, much better, much quicker, much more responsive and less costly. At the same time, it's a different

world to different people. To a student, it's higher quality of education and being market-ready; to a farmer, it's right information at the right time at the right place; to a patient, it's access to quality healthcare without having to stand in long queues for days; to a serving government officer, it's triumph of merit and performance over connections; to a retired government officer, to a freedom fighter, and to a widow, it's delivery of safety nets and pensions transparently. To all, it's services they deserve and expect at their doorsteps.

Secondly, ladies and gentlemen, we have a draft Skills Development Policy before us, while we are also faced with the reality of a "youth bulge" with a third of the country's population in this category. ICT can help in two ways; market-focused distance education by utilising the government's second terrestrial channel which lies unused today, and development of ICT-focused skills to employ a large number of young people in the IT-enabled services industry.

Let me cite two success stories of the ICT-enabled skills development in our

country; the very large work of voter registration was done electronically by over fifty thousand secondary and higher secondary students, who were trained for a week on ICT. The second example is from the industry, where hundreds of higher secondary graduates are employed to develop graphic designs for American, European and Japanese companies. We definitely need a software industry to support the implementation of Digital Bangladesh for both the citizens and the government.

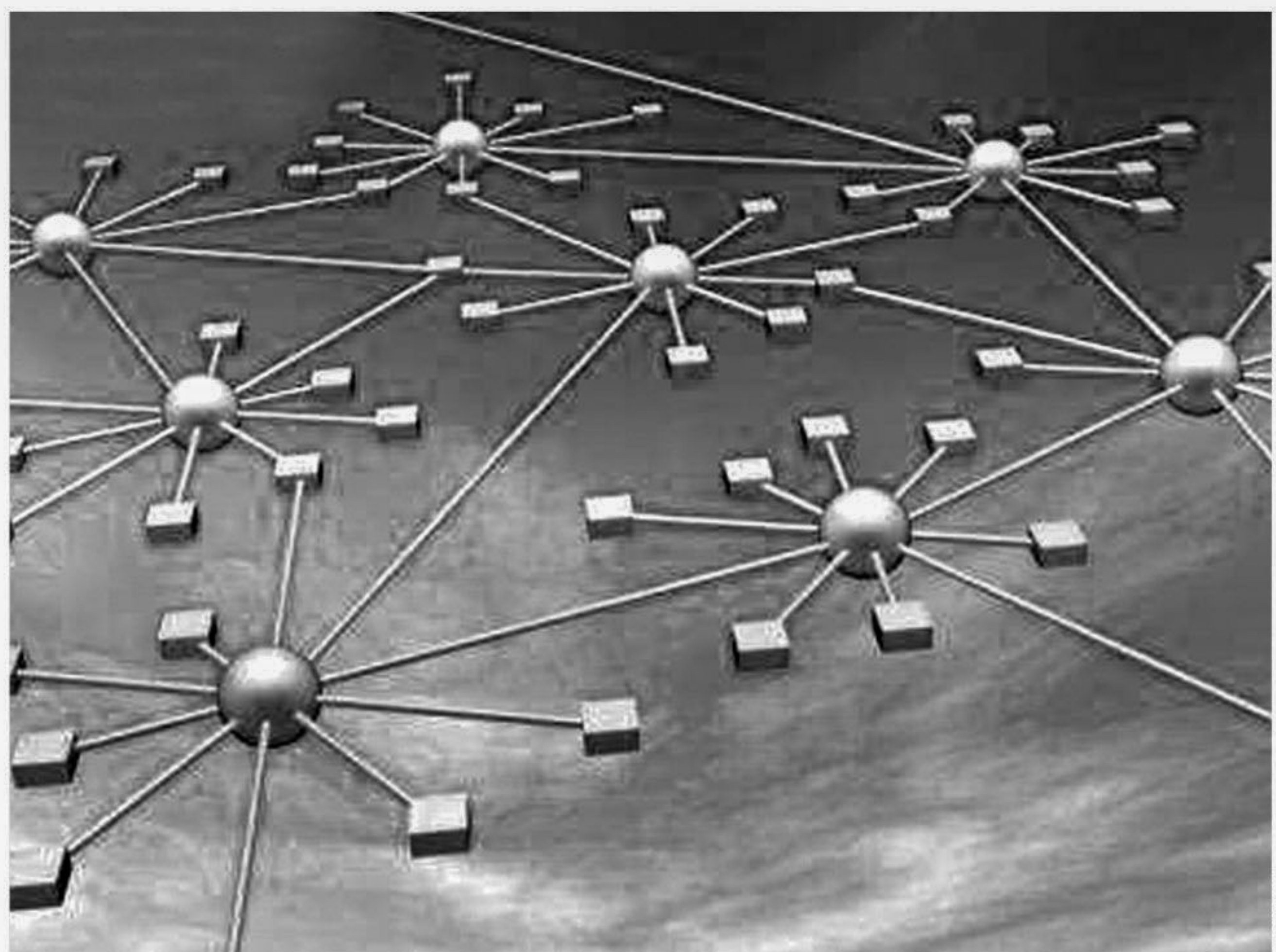
I would like to point out that the return on national investment will be much higher if we pay more attention to the secondary and higher secondary graduates. I believe inter-ministerial coordination among the ministries of education, labour, expatriate welfare, youth, ICT and others, in collaboration with the development partners, private sector and non-government actors, will yield very effective results for the nation, no matter which ministry owns the policy.

Thirdly, we need to be very careful about striking the right balance of equity vs. growth in the Digital Bangladesh vision. There is a danger of adopting western-led concepts of Digital Bangladesh, which may contribute to growth but will miss the equity parameter by a large margin. In fact, it may lead to further inequity in the form of digital divide. ICTs can make the strong even stronger or empower the weak and the underprivileged. It is up to us to make the right choice. As we prioritise the action items in the ICT Policy, we must always ask ourselves whether the common man will benefit from a particular digital initiative.

Lastly, I would like to draw your attention to developing a knowledge management platform and decision support system within the government. This will connect the officers of different ranks in the centre and in the field, ensure interoperability of the current islands of information, and allow proper implementation of the Right to Information Act and decentralised service delivery. I am glad to note that the ministry of establishment has included these issues in the civil service reform roadmap.

In conclusion, I would urge the development partners to explore creative ways to include the Digital Bangladesh agenda in the existing programs they are supporting. Local government strengthening, justice sector reform, education and health projects, capacity building efforts can all be made much more effective, and to deliver more, with a digital edge. I am confident of this.

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From the sky to you!