



# Five-year plan for Union Parishad

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TOFAIL AHMED

THE Union Parishad (UP) is one of the oldest functioning local government institutions in Bangladesh. The common people's affiliation with this institution is very close and intimate. The recently enacted Local Government (Union Parishad) Act 2009 has added a few new dimensions to the traditional functions of UPs, which are vital institutions for local governance and local development.

These are the ward committee, ward meetings, participatory budget and participatory planning. Chapter II (structure, function, power and operation) of the Act deals with the formation of ward committees and the functions and procedures of ward meetings. Section 47 (Gha) and Schedule 2 under the same section placed preparation of five-year and annual plans as the first function of the UP.

Chapter X (on budget and audit) of the Act under Section 57 (1 & 2) mentions the open budget and the role of ward meetings in the process of preparing the budget. Ward meetings, participatory budgets, and placing of budgets in public meetings were introduced and practiced under the initiative of a few civil society organisations and NGO-led projects, and the latest law (2009) has made those practices mandatory for 2010 for all UPs.

Planning, budgeting and financial management are a few of the weakest areas of UP activities. The budgets that were presented were imaginary wish-lists. In the name of planning what had been practiced so far was mainly discussion for preparing a list with a populist overtone. Some of the schemes are prioritised after the meetings, and implementation depends on the resources available to the UPs. This is called "participatory plan and budget" of the UPs in some donor-funded project documents. In fact, there are no planning documents in the UPs with any medium and long-term visions and goals.

Nowadays, resources given by the government to the UPs have increased. Though the revenue budget did not register substantial growth, the development budget increased substantially. If the resources under food-for-work, cash-for-work, GR, TR, LGSP-LIC and ADP are added together, the amount will be roughly around Tk.5-Tk.7 million per UP.

Under the social safety-net programs, resources channeled for old-age pensions and stipends for poor, disabled, freedom fighters, poor pregnant and lactating mothers and other stipends in primary and high schools, on an average, reach Tk.5-Tk.8 million per UP. In addition, if there are national projects under implementation in any UP, the amount increases.

The point I want to make is that if any UP directly and indirectly receives Tk.10 million and gets the opportunity to utilise it under a well thought-out plan, it can perform miracles in five years. This has to be understood at the highest policy level as well as at UP and Upazila Parishad levels.

UP elections will be held in May. I suggest that every UP should have a development vision and prepare a plan that will cover the period 2010-2015. 2015 is the year the MDG decade ends and the 6th five-year plan (SFYP) of the government ends. The five years between 2010 and 2015 may be taken as the period of UPs' first five-year plan.

Earlier there were "Thana Plan Books" and "Union Plan Books" for physical infrastructural development, documentation of which could be found in Bard and LGED. LGED and Bard also initiated planning exercises at the village level under two projects -- Small Scale Water Resources Development Sector Project (SSWRDSP -- in 200 village units under ADB finance) and Comprehensive Village Development program (CVDP -- in about 100 villages), which could be used to get information. But socioeconomic and poverty reduction strategies or plans at the UP level were never seriously practiced.

A comprehensive plan has to be developed, and UP leaders have to understand the need, importance and methods of making and implementing the plans. Infrastructural development like roads, bridges and social development programs like education, health, agriculture, poverty reduction etc. could be consolidated under one single plan, which will in turn be reflected in the budget. Capacity building is needed for development, and some model plans in some progressive unions can be started; others can learn later from their progressive and pioneering efforts.

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# A nightmare for children

Admission to a handful of top ranking schools of the city may be a dream for guardians and a business for some, but is a nightmare for the child who has to spend months in the coaching centres learning answers to all sorts of questions she is not supposed to answer at her age.

HUSAIN IMAM

SHE is a student of class five in one of the leading Bengali-medium schools of Dhaka. When she was hardly 5, her parents sent her to a private coaching centre to prepare her for admission. She took private coaching for one year before going through the admission test and coming out successfully.

If she hadn't, she would have, as most others do, again gone back to the coaching centre, studied for another year and made a second attempt. If she were not successful, her parents would have probably landed her in an English-medium school.

Admission to a handful of top ranking schools of the city may be a dream for guardians and a business for some, but is a nightmare for the child who has to spend months in the coaching centres learning answers to all sorts of questions she is not supposed to answer at her age.

It is unfortunate that we have to send a child to a coaching centre to prepare her for a dreadful admission test at an age when she is supposed to only play, have fun and move around to see, learn and get amazed at the mysteries of nature as they unfold before her eyes. Have we ever thought that by doing so we are doing no good to her or anybody else, except to those who make a business out of coaching centres?

We are in fact causing unforgivable harm to

these children by exposing them to such a situation, frightening as it is, before even starting the first year of their student life.

Now that she is in school, she has to study everything our rulers and policy-makers can think of -- English, Bengali, mathematics, science, social studies, agriculture, religious matters, national history, etc.

Then there is the history of our independence, the liberation war and contributions of our national heroes that the child has to learn afresh every time a new government comes to power. What she learned last year may not be true this year, if the party in power has changed.

Worst of all, the ghost of private coaching will not leave her alone. The teachers of her school will compel her to take private coaching from one of them, albeit on payment. So the child has to leave her house for her school teacher's coaching centre early in the morning, spend an hour or two, along with many others, taking notes, suggestions and plenty of homework, and then go to school and spend another 5 or 6 hours there before returning home, exhausted.

That is not the end of it either. To do the homework from the coaching centre and the school she needs another teacher. This time it is the house tutor who will help her do the home work -- essays in English on "Your native village" -- which she had never seen -- and on "A journey by boat" -- which she had

never made.

Fortunately, unfortunately to be more appropriate, she does not have to think or write anything on her own. The private tutor and the notebooks (banned but available) will do everything for her and she will only need to memorise and deliver when the examination comes.

I asked some of these children: "You are only in primary or junior stage of school and you are studying in some of the best schools of the country. The schools must have some very good teachers. Then why do you have to go for private coaching, and that also from the teachers of your own school? Don't they teach you well in the class?"

Their reply was: "There are some who do teach well but there are others who don't. There are also other reasons for private coaching. One is that there are some teachers who do not give us good marks in the school tests unless we take private coaching from them. If we go for coaching, we get full marks. If we don't, we get much less. The other reason is that we cannot get good suggestions for examinations unless we attend the coaching classes."

Make no mistake. This is not the story of one or two schools. This is more or less the same scenario in most, if not all, the reputed schools of the country, and the same problems for most of the students studying in these institutions.

There have been many experiments with the education system, especially at the primary and secondary levels, since independence, and every time, the kids have been the guinea pigs. Innumerable changes have taken place in their textbook curriculum, examination system, teaching method, merit determination and so on and so forth, but nothing seems to have changed for the better.

It is now an established fact that the overall standard of education has declined and the educational environment deteriorated. The experiments, carried out without enough thought, have benefited the coaching centres, some immoral teachers, corrupt board officials, greedy book publishers and substandard writers.

If the government is serious about bringing about a change and improving the overall standard of our education system, it must start from the roots. It has to develop a system that will ensure that a child will enter the first year of his/her school for formal education free of any dreadful experience -- no private coaching for admission, no rigorous admission test; that, once in the school, that child will not be burdened with too many subjects, nor be required to take extra classes at the coaching centres, not at least until crossing a certain stage.

One may ask, how will it be possible to enroll students without testing them, even at the entry level, when the number of admission seekers is much higher than the number of seats available?

One way could be to make a short-list of the candidates seeking admission, taking into consideration: (a) the age (b) the place where the child resides -- local residents or those who live within certain distance from the school will get preference, (c) a very easy and simple written test -- those who will get a minimum, say 40 percent, mark in the test will qualify for the short-list -- and (d) a lottery.

To be specific, let the children, at least at the primary/junior levels of education, be spared from being exploited by the immoral moneymakers.

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# Mystery of Pi

With digits continuing on infinitely in a seemingly random fashion, pi has caused countless scientists to scratch their heads in vain as they tried to determine what it exactly is. Throughout history, stretching back to as long as we have written records, there has been much effort to determine pi more accurately and to understand its nature.

SEAMA MOWRI and RIDWAN KARIM

PI Day is celebrated internationally on March 14, and is observed by math enthusiasts and schools all over the world. The first Pi Day celebration was held at the San Francisco Exploratorium in 1988, with staff and public marching around one of its circular spaces, and then consuming fruit pies. Mathematicians, museum directors discuss the relevance of pi, pi recitations, pie-eating contests (you knew it was coming) and other math related activities. What is more, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology often mails its acceptance (and rejection) letters to be delivered to prospective students on Pi Day!

The truly divine notions are those that are simple, yet impossible to grasp in their totality. One such notion that has evoked wonder and captured the imagination of the human mind since time immemorial is the mathematical constant pi -- the ratio of any circle's circumference to its diameter. How is it that a circle, which is so simple in shape, can boast of a proportion that is so complex in

nature?

Fascination with pi has even carried over into non-mathematical culture. There are now poems and songs about pi, and greeting cards relating the power of relationships to the "infinite number of digits" in pi. In some parts of the world the observation of Pi Day is even legally mandated.

With digits continuing on infinitely in a seemingly random fashion, pi has caused countless scientists to scratch their heads in vain as they tried to determine what it exactly is. Throughout history, stretching back to as long as we have written records, there has been much effort to determine pi more accurately and to understand its nature. And yet, despite the best efforts by everyone from Archimedes to Sir Isaac Newton, to modern day mathematicians equipped with super-computers, there is still no single formula to figure out the last digit of pi without having to calculate all its preceding ones. Its decimal representation never ends or repeats. Pi is an irrational number, meaning that it cannot be written as the ratio of two integers. Pi is also a tran-

scendental number, meaning that there is no polynomial with rational coefficients for which pi is a root. The implication is that virtually any string of numbers you can imagine is somewhere in pi.

Great architectural feats like suspension bridges and underwater tunnels would not be possible without this constant. Pi is used in calculations involving lengths, areas, and volumes of circles, spheres, cylinders, and cones. It also arises frequently in problems dealing with certain periodic phenomena (e.g., motion of pendulums, alternating electric currents). Designing any structure with cylindrical components, even a wheel, requires the application of this constant. So perhaps the wheel wasn't the first momentous discovery in human history after all! If you're still not convinced of the power of Pi Day, you must know that March 14 also marks the birthday of the Nobel Prize winning scientist Albert Einstein.

Dwelling on the significance of pi, one cannot help being struck by the relevance of this enigmatic mathematical construct in describing the process of change that Bangladesh itself is going through right now (not because of pi's affiliation with the Chaos Theory). That the wheels of change are already whirring merrily in this country cannot be disputed. Among the Frontier Five Economies (according to J.P. Morgan) and the Next 11 (according to Goldman Sachs), it is apparent that Bangladesh is a country that is on the verge of stepping into the global limelight, albeit a bit gingerly. And that is

understandable.

Dealing with change is not easy, especially for a country like ours with deeply entrenched social and cultural values. But perhaps this apprehension is unfounded. The values and beliefs that we deeply cherish can easily be harnessed to bring about a profound change in our mindset, so that we become more forward-looking in our approach, more aware and environmentally conscious in our actions, and more innovative in our pursuit of sustainable progress. The trick would be to strike a balance between being receptive to the opportunities that change offers while retaining our core identity, to embrace the path to ceaseless change while preserving who we essentially are.

Bangladesh is, of course, not entirely new to the game of coming up with radically innovative ideas to deal with change. This is the country where the concept "the poor are bankable," regarded as irrational everywhere else on the globe (as irrational as pi, maybe), proved to be a huge success. We are not a nation that can be neatly boxed into one identity. We are a tremendously diverse nation, simple in our wants, but complex in our emotions, simple in our livelihoods, but complex in our capabilities. Pi is already an integral part of our lives, in many more ways than we imagine it to be.

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