

Government action against dubious NGOs

The bad eggs in the basket must be jettisoned

THE government plans to shut down altogether 2,931 NGOs in 16 districts of the country owing to what it considers their inactivity, absence of transparency in fund-related matters, faulty registration and alleged involvement with militancy. Obviously, if the charges levelled against these voluntary organisations are true or turn out to be true, the authorities would be right to think that a slapping of a ban on their activities is necessary. The clear feeling is that these bodies have violated the rules pertaining to their functioning through some or all of the activities noted above. In a number of instances, as reports suggest, they have also been engaged in questionable work in the guise of offering micro-credit facilities to people.

There are quite a few thoughts that spring up relating to NGOs. An important one is that in Bangladesh, NGOs have generally played a very significant role in developing society and carrying it to a stage where people, especially at the lower economic levels, have found in them a means of emerging from their hard conditions and on to a respectable stage of survival. In such areas as primary education and health care, together with an empowerment of women, NGOs have complemented the work of the government in a promotion of social welfare. That is the unadulterated truth. And yet it is equally true that over the years a very large number of unscrupulous individuals have undermined the NGO concept through setting up their own NGOs, which eventually turned out to have been fake ones. At this point, there are many such individuals in trouble with the law for the cavalier manner in which they have set up and operated such so-called NGOs. So when the government decides to clamp down on the bad eggs in the NGO basket, we can only say that it is an act we cannot but endorse.

That brings us to the rather grave matter of a supervision of NGOs in Bangladesh. Quite clearly, there exist a multiplicity of government organisations where registering NGOs is concerned. That in turn leads to an overlapping of functions as well as general confusion, the result being that the government as a whole remains unaware of the actual situation on the NGO front. In a good number of instances, some of these organisations turn out to be mere skeletons of what they claim to be, with office bearers existing in name or most of them actually being members of a single family out to derive undue advantage from circumstances. Again, there is the critical question of how audit is done in the case of the NGOs. These shortcomings on the part of the authorities must be studied and rectified if a dark shadow is not to fall on the positive concept that non-governmental organisations have by and large symbolised.

Meanwhile, let the authorities keep the public posted on the action it takes against the 2,931 NGOs in question.

Industrial sector in a bind

Fuel crisis has its productivity tumbling

A MONG public outcry over unprecedented power outages, the concern being voiced by industry owners about a declining productivity is evidently drowned out. But this is an issue that needs to be attended to if we are to avert any adverse impact on macro-economic management.

Gas and electricity scarcity has pushed many an industrial unit deep into a production crisis. If not already shuttered down, several of them are having to face a prospect for closure.

Our economy is export-led. And, just when the clouds of global recession overhanging export trade are lifting and the demand for our products overseas growing, we are handicapped through a gas and power crunch. Several industrial units are operating at 20-30 percent of their capacity. Of course, big and established industrial houses are depending on their own captive power or standby generators which, need we say, are cost-intensive.

In terms of FDI, generally speaking, we have not been faring too well and thence came the global recession to trigger a decline. To illustrate the point, there has been a 67 percent fall in the FDI flow during July to December compared to the same period last year.

By contrast, indicators of domestic investment show a positive trend. For instance, disbursement of industrial term loans increased by 41 percent in July-December period of the current fiscal. There was negative growth in the same period of 2008-09. Also, credit to private sector increased by 13.06 percent compared with 8.65 percent in the same period last fiscal. As for the other indicators of investment trend, such as import of capital machinery, number of LCs opened and the demand for call money, the sound bytes are positive.

With such favourable vibes of overseas demand for Bangladeshi products and an upbeat in terms of domestic investment, what the government needs to do is to adopt a crash programme for gas exploration and addition to electricity generation capacity through short-gestation power plants coupled with a shift away from critical dependence on gas for production of electricity.

The GDP doctrine

In the GDP world, a dead tree is more valuable than a living one, contaminated air is more progressive than sparkling air, a smoker's blackened lungs reflect higher income and profit than healthy lungs.

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IN ordinary people's understanding of economics, GDP indicators focus largely on market transactions, and are prejudiced towards increased production, consumption and investment, whether this output is essential or desirable. In simple economic terms, it is an algebraic aggregation of the total value of all products and services bought and sold in an economy. What exactly does this mean?

Unfortunately, the actual meaning is not only highly disturbing, but also quite alarming.

When a country cuts down its trees and sells them as timber, it adds to its GDP. When a country fights a war, kills people, and makes shells and bullets to kill more, it amplifies its GDP growth. When a country grabs indigenous lands and gives them away to big corporations, its GDP increases. When an air-conditioned mall replaces a country's last playground or when its last river is filled with industrial waste, that country's GDP flies high.

In the GDP world, a dead tree is more valuable than a living one, contaminated air is more progressive than sparkling air, a smoker's blackened lungs reflect higher income and profit than healthy lungs.

The GDP growth doctrine made us believe in a slanted idea of progress. It distorted our rational thoughts and made us believe our lives will be more air-conditioned and perfumed with more Dominos and McDonalds in our cities. More high-rise buildings, fried chickens, Coca-Cola, and chewing gums qualify us as a civilised nation. We believe that a higher GDP growth is the ultimate answer to our misery. GDP lionisation thus implanting unbridled materialism into our national economic behaviour at the cost of our environment, cultural heritage, and community ties.

There is more. GDP as an indicator not only proves unable to value a nation's meaning of human, social, cultural and ecological capital, but does not reflect the unequal distribution of wealth. The so-called Horse-Sparrow Theory: "If you feed the horse enough oats, some will pass through to the road for the sparrows," failed pathetically since wealth, with its inherent connection to greed, never leaked through to those at the bottom.

Thus, it is Economics 101 that the co-existence of a handsomely growing GDP and mass poverty is the usual scenario that exists in a large number of developing countries across the globe. India, surely, could be an ideal example.

It is vital for us to be aware that a large part of India's economic progress has been at the



Is money more important than our well-being?

cost of her land, forests, air and rivers, the use of which displaced millions of poor farmers and indigenous families. Though India's economic progress made it the 5th biggest economy -- with a GDP of \$3.3 trillion -- shockingly, it has the world's largest number of children suffering from malnutrition.

The so-called Indian economic reform of the early 1990s, aimed at a higher GDP growth rate, not only brought India's rural agrarian economies to the verge of collapse but also greatly raised the inequality level, and the number of farmers committing suicide rose alarmingly.

However, our narrow political/economic vision has always made us envy India for its "double digit" growth rate. Can we be unwise enough to blindly follow India's footsteps when clearly while India grew fabulously rich its people remained depressingly poor? India hides its 500 million poor with the assistance of a GDP mask.

Undoubtedly and unfortunately, GDP gives us the wrong picture. It not only misguides us for long but is driving our society in the wrong direction, inflicting greed and cash-oriented values on our minds and souls.

Our sole reliance on GDP indicators while deciding on national policies forces us to

confront false choices and make ridiculous trade-offs between economic output and people's well being. Doesn't what we measure overwhelmingly affect what we do?

Interestingly, economist Simon Kuznets, who guided the US Department of Commerce in standardising GDP measurement in the early 1930s, himself nullified GDP's use as a general indication of a society's welfare.

answers them all. It considers the subjectivity and non-economic nature of happiness, and identifies it as a collective public good that all citizens are entitled to have. Apart from economic wellness, the Bhutanese GNH model puts equal weight on other non-economic elements -- spiritual development, community values, ecological diversity, time utilisation, living standards, and quality of governance.

In his words: "The welfare of a nation can scarcely be derived from a measure of national income." Kuznets was wise enough to limit the scope of his own invention. And we were greedy enough to ignore Kuznets!

Now what do we do about it? Interestingly, the notion of corresponding happiness with economic progress had been long adopted by our neighbour. Bhutan was one of the few countries to bluntly reject the World Bank's stand for adopting and applying GDP indicators as the "only perfect model" in classifying economies.

Instead, it developed a powerful model with relatively richer and more compassionate indicators of success/progress, and implemented it for the last three decades. They named it GNH. Gross National Happiness.

How did they do it? Is it that simple, or even possible, to measure happiness? Isn't happiness a subjective and non-economic term? How practical it is to collaborate happiness with a nation's progress? Does happiness matter in the discourse of economics? Is happiness a state of mind created only through a monetary transaction, and thus could be best measured by one's purchasing power?

Unexpectedly, the Bhutanese model

Therefore, rather than getting carried away with the most prevalent scam of our time -- "the GDP doctrine" -- the creation of collective happiness through cultural, political, ecological and spiritual cohesion became the decisive guiding goal for its development agenda.

How did we allow the GDP indicators to steer our economic and political life for so long? Why did we remain so loyal to such a flawed measure? Were we too busy pleasing our economic mentors that we simply had no other choice but to swallow their recipe?

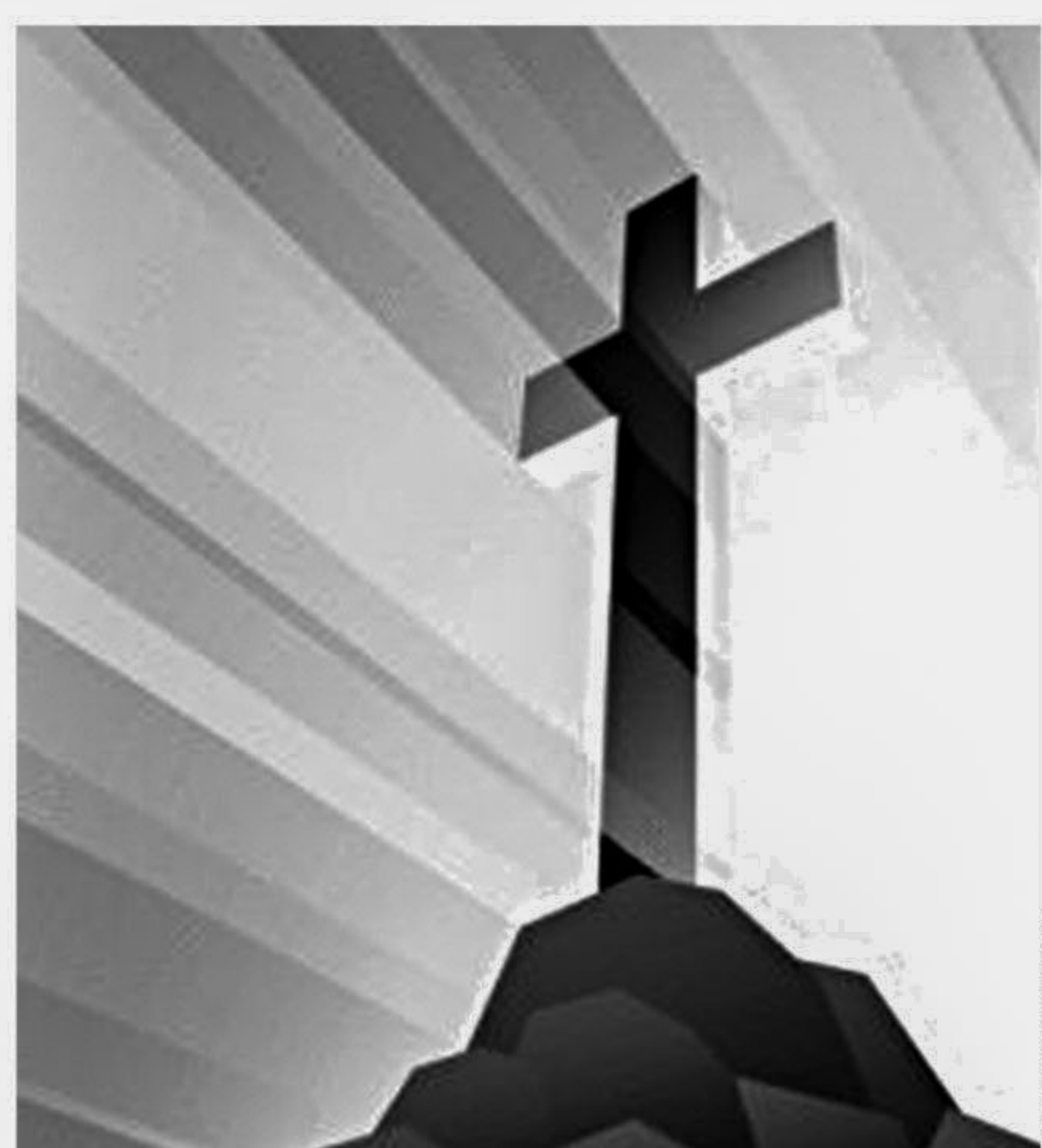
Or is it because the World Bank continued to designate GDP as the only perfect indicator of branding different economies, and we surely have proven ourselves to be the well-behaved subject of the empire of the World Bank?

Nonetheless, it is certain that without such an absurd obligation towards GDP indicators, our policy-makers' minds and brains would surely be more resolute toward ensuring the well-being of our people. Therefore, can we think of a world without the burden of GDP, and create a more relevant and a more compassionate way to define progress?

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The glory of Christ's resurrection

In a world characterised by lust for power, Christ did not show or parade his power, though he could, but he humbled himself for fulfilling the holy will of God.



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CHRISTIANS all over the world celebrate the Resurrection of Jesus Christ on Easter Sunday. God vindicated and glorified His Son by raising him from the dead. Christ glorified God in

his obedience to His will for the salvation of man from sin. Jesus said before his death by crucifixion: "Now is the Son of Man glorified and God is glorified in him. If God is glorified in him, then God will glorify the Son in himself, and glorify him at once. (John 13:31-32)."

The humiliating death and the glorious resurrection of Christ are the two sides of the same coin. One propitiated and satisfied the demand of divine justice and the other vindicated and glorified innocent and vicarious sufferings. Both were preplanned and uniquely central to God's drama of human salvation.

In a world characterised by lust for power, Christ did not show or parade his power, though he could, but he humbled himself for fulfilling the holy will of God. People in authority and position like to show off their power. The ancient Greek philosopher, Sophocles, rightly said: "But hard as it is to learn the mind of any mortal, or the heart, till he is tried in chief authority. Power shows the man."

Resurrection testified to the deity of Christ; it is the seal of our having been justified before God since Christ has conquered death, which is the wage of sin. Through it, God and man are reconciled. This truth cannot remain as mere dogma. This needs to be real life experience. The message of the resurrection should renew the believer's life altogether. Christ's holy life, his teaching, and his selfless love for people are of supreme didactic value in our life. This is true for all who truly believe in, and take their commitment to, Christ seriously and pattern their lives on his.

Much of Jesus' teachings were against the ritualistic worship and lip-service of the hypocritical religious teachers of his time. So he quoted them God's utterance from the Old Testament: "These people honour me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain; their teachings are but rules taught by men (Matthew 15:8-9)."

Today, human society is experiencing erosion of human and ethical values, and the values of genuine and sacrificial love and care for others. St. Paul, the greatest exponent of Christianity, wrote to the Romans: "Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God -- this is your spiritual act of worship. Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world,

but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is -- his good, pleasing and perfect will (Romans 12:1-2)." We have thus a challenge for a commitment of total life. This involves our body, social relationships, mind and spiritual life. Christianity is a holistic faith encompassing the whole of life.

The Resurrection is celebration, but primarily with a challenge for positive change and renewal of our lives and relationships. It confronts us with the call to death-to-self and following a new kind of life to live in a right relationship with others and with God. Christ did not teach complicated tenets and formula of religion. He taught "love God with all that we have and also love your neighbour and other people."

We need to change our selfish ways, repent for our sins and turn to God. Today, human civilisation is faced with a real crisis resulting from debilitating erosion of moral and spiritual values. Sins have bound man's mind and will. Where is the way out? Only a change of heart, mind and will is the answer. No amount of scientific advancement, no good deeds, no human development will sustain and create peace for the restless soul of man. We need to seriously ask the question today: "What is wrong with Man?"

Today, all sensible people need to be serious about what faith in God implies in practical life and conduct. These words of James are pertinent: "What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you? You want something but don't get it. You kill and covet, but you don't have what you want. You quarrel and fight. You do not have, because you do not ask God. When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures (New Testament, James 4:1-3)."

How true are these old admonitions! Let the resurrection challenge us. Let us change, and then change! Christianity is a belief not only to be believed, but also a life to be lived.

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