

## Delivering energy on fast track

*Should not circumvent norms of procedures or law*

Does one have to throw the normal order of work or for that matter the established procedures of the government, out of the window to deliver something to the people in quick time? And should speedy work necessarily entail bending the rules for which the government functionaries need protection of the law through enactment of a 'Super Law'? That is exactly the impression we get from what the government is trying to do to give itself immunity from prosecution in respect of projects related to quick generation, distribution and marketing of power and gas for the next two years.

As reported in this newspaper on Monday, the proposed legislation will keep the action of the government, related to awarding energy contracts on the basis of unsolicited negotiations, out of the court's purview.

We appreciate the fact that the government is under great deal of pressure to ameliorate the conditions of the power and energy sector. And given that the power generation sector had suffered the most during the almost nonproductive years during the 4-party rule, it feels it must deliver fast to the people on its promise to add to power output, which, regrettably, has not happened as yet.

It is acknowledged that bureaucratic procedures are more often an excuse for inaction rather than action. But why is it that anything that has to be done fast need the circumvention of the normal rules of procedures. Delivering quickly needs quick decision making ability and thinking process that allows for quick analysis, and perhaps also working overtime and with due diligence rather than discarding the laid down system. Our worry stems from not only the possibility of misuse of power but also from the fact that trimming the procedures will invariably compromise the quality which in turn will go against our national interest.

We stress that no democratically elected government can make any of its actions unaccountable to the people through legislation or keep it beyond the scrutiny of the judiciary. And we would like to ask why this law after almost two years of the present regime in office? Why the work in this regard could not have been started sooner? And in any case the government has already entered into agreements to obtain electricity with several companies and even governments.

We would like to make it unequivocally clear that the proposed legislation has all the makings of a bad law. We wonder why a democratically elected government has felt compelled to resort to such a legislation that has many legal loopholes. Being unconstitutional, it runs the risk of being challenged in the court because it purports to take away the jurisdiction of the highest court to look into allegations of government's misuse of power.

## Right to Know Day

*Reap the benefits of RTI*

THAT the UN has dedicated a day to the people's Right to Know is a significant development. The right is considered sacrosanct in any civilised setting and is the cornerstone of democracy and good governance.

We are observing the day and are proud to have the Right to Information Act legislated here in Bangladesh it is indeed a triumph for our democracy. It is now a legal guideline, like the right to speech or assembly, that will give people unconditional access to information on governmental activities. It will ensure transparency and accountability and should also be a potent weapon to fight against corruption and poor performance by government functionaries. It should also give the people a much clearer view of how they are being governed and where things are going wrong.

However, the benefit of such a law being in place cannot be reaped fully due to certain constraints like a) people do not know much about the law and b) demand for information is not yet high and the supply side is also not free flowing. The government departments need capacity-building to serve people with information. Similarly, the culture of maintaining secrecy, rather unnecessarily in most cases, has to be done away with. It is an open world today and the days of an inward-looking, self contained and detached bureaucracy are over.

The government has much to do to create the conditions in which people will exercise their right to information in a constructive manner. It should launch a publicity campaign to inform people on the RTI and how it can work to their benefit.

The role of the media has also not been effective enough in making the citizens familiar with various aspects of the RTI. The media has to adopt a proactive position in this respect.

Finally, it is the people for whose benefit the RTI has been enacted and it is they who have to be active participants in the process of disseminating and sharing information. They have to start on a positive note and believe that the government officials are there to serve them and they cannot hide any information. Having access to information is not a privilege, nor is it an attempt to bring out secrets; it is a right that the people have been given by the state, thanks to the RTI. They have to exercise the right, if and when necessary, to make governmental activities more transparent and accountable. After all, secrecy is the evil doers' weapon, while openness is a powerful trait of the honest and efficient.



KAKOLI PRODHAN/DRKNEWS

## Do farmers benefit from farm subsidy?

It is, therefore, imperative that farmers should derive benefits out of the given opportunity. As input subsidy is given to all areas of the country, the costs of fertiliser and irrigation are expected to be more or less similar in all areas, and farmers should be able to harness the benefit from the subsidy program.

M. SHAHE ALAM

In Bangladesh, modern rice varieties (MVs) were introduced for the *boro* and *aus* seasons during the mid '60s and for the transplant aman season in the '70s. Rice is grown in three seasons. Out of 10.84 million hectares under rice production in Bangladesh, modern *boro* rice alone covers about 4.70 million hectares, of which nearly 98% area is under irrigation facilities of various kinds.

Available statistics indicate that roughly 70% of the MV *boro* area falls under diesel operated irrigation schemes (run by DTW, STWs and LLP etc.) and about 30% area falls under the less expensive power operated irrigation tools. Nevertheless, adequate irrigation and timely application of fertilisers are the key inputs for the input intensive modern *boro* rice production.

Irrigation alone determines the substantial variation in the adoption of modern varieties in *boro* season. As such, irrigation is considered as the leading input for desired adoption of high yielding modern rice varieties. In fact, the development of irrigation facility renders multiple advantages in enhancing yield increasing factors (e.g. MV seeds, time of planting, fertiliser application etc), cropping intensity and over-all productivity.

With the advent of modernisation in the rice sector, the demand for inputs like quality HYV seed, fertilisers and irrigation

facilities has been increasing rapidly. On the other hand, among different inputs, cost of irrigation has risen by more than 20%, followed by fertiliser (about 18%), because of the price increase of these items both in the national and the international markets.

However, in order to keep pace with growing demand for food emanating from population growth, rice production has to be increased at the desired rate. The government is also trying to take initiatives like offering input subsidy almost every year with a view to ensuring proper supply and utilisation of these inputs. During 2005-06 period, the government allocated Tk.1,200 crore as subsidy on different inputs (fertiliser, electricity etc.) in order to maintain a conducive production environment.

It is, therefore, imperative that farmers should derive benefits out of the given opportunity. As input subsidy is given to all areas of the country, the costs of fertiliser and irrigation are expected to be more or less similar in all areas, and farmers should be able to harness the benefit from the subsidy program. During the *boro* season of 2009-10, the government introduced input subsidy card for the farmers in order to provide cash subsidy on diesel, and as much as 10 million farmers were brought under this program.

Available research findings showed that mainly marginal and small farmers bene-

fit out of the program while the benefit derived by others (e.g. medium and large farms) was a bit less due to high cost of irrigation (Ref: Unnayan Onnesha, 2010). However, it is widely known from different reports that irrigation price varies from location to location and the modes of payment of irrigation are also different. In fact, due to the differences in mode of payment the cost of irrigation also varies substantially.

Moreover, farmers sometimes had to face shortage of fertilizers, specially urea, during winter-*boro* season. It is indeed imperative to understand the existing discrimination/ disparity in input pricing, because the input (irrigation and fertiliser) pricing mechanisms vary in different regions.

The cost of irrigation for diesel-operated machines always remains quite high under all the prevailing payment systems. Due to volatility in the world market, there has been instability in the prices of inputs, specially of fuel and fertilisers. The increase in diesel price appears to be the main factor for high cost of irrigation. Power shortage along with low voltage causes severe disruption in running power-operated irrigation machines, which eventually leads to crop failure in many cases.

There has also been high variation in fertiliser prices at different locations, particularly in some border areas (e.g. Satkhira, Khulna, Lalmonirhat, Sylhet etc). Due to the long distance from the central input supply point, the carrying cost of fertiliser is usually added to its price, leading to a rise in per unit price. This has a secondary implication, i.e. higher unit price always causes low application, leading to poor plant growth and yield.

Most of the times, the prevailing market prices of different inputs remain at much

higher level than the farmers' expectation and affordability. The price of subsidised fertiliser also remains high because of inadequate monitoring by the relevant authority. Very commonly farmers have almost no idea about the given subsidy, which might due to inadequate publicity.

Based on the findings of previous research, the following points could be taken as the note of commendation for future/successive programs:

- At the onset of the crop season the unit price of subsidised inputs should be circulated through the mass media so that farmers are informed about the subsidy;
- Local government representatives, members of the fertiliser distribution and monitoring committee, fertiliser dealers and representative of concerned offices should be involved in awareness creating programmes like farmers' rally, farmers' training, field day, etc. in order to enable the concerned personnel to play their role in implementing the program;
- Adequate and timely supply of fertilisers and diesel should be ensured so that no one can increase the price on irrelevant excuse;
- The number of dealers in each upazilla should be increased for smooth distribution of the inputs. Proper monitoring must be ensured. In case of any malpractice in pricing and distribution, immediate action should be taken against the concerned dealer.
- Uninterrupted supply of electricity during *boro* season has to be ensured and more areas should be brought under power-operated irrigation scheme to minimise irrigation cost.

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## A walk close to the precipice

It needs an answer to only one question: have the parties to the dispute reached a settlement outside the court? If the answer is no, as is likely, then before the Supreme Court rises it must give leave to its brothers on the Lucknow bench of the Allahabad High Court to deliver their judgement. That is the only safe route back from the precipice.

M.J. AKBAR

It is never easy to walk close to the precipice. The Supreme Court must be feeling very sure-footed to test its vertigo level on Ayodhya. It has put six decades of anguish, turmoil and a legal endurance test on the edge of a calendar.

If there is the slightest mishap, and even the Supreme Court cannot claim the divine power of predicting what unknown factors might spin the coming week out of control, the Allahabad High Court judgement on the Babri title dispute could fall into a bottomless abyss.

If the judgement is not read out before the end of the month it becomes infructuous since one of the judges is retiring. India does not have the energy to start another six decades of social, political and legal acrimony.

It would of course have been heavenly if time was the solution to a problem that has proved intractable for both the British Raj and free India. Many problems in India do merge and disappear in that glacier called time. Faith, alas, arouses passions that have the resilience to defeat time. There is a view among

those who have not experienced the depth of faith that the dispute has faded into unimportance.

It was perhaps this assessment that persuaded Rahul Gandhi to claim that other things were more important. A little reading of history would be useful. The Babri-Ayodhya dispute has lain dormant for long spells before erupting suddenly, volcanically, and spreading its lava far and wide into the social streams of our nation. Sometimes it rumbles before bursting, and sometimes it surprises us with its arbitrary vehemence.

This is why Sardar Patel, whose understanding of India was unmatched, advised Jawaharlal Nehru to find some way towards immediate closure of the two issues that had become symbols in the Hindu subconscious, the temple at Somnath destroyed by Mahmud of Ghazni and the Babri mosque. Nehru was uncomfortable, but did not interfere with the reconstruction of the temple at Somnath, except that he would not allow the project to become a state enterprise.

Somnath was comparatively easy, since no one had built a mosque at the site. Patel warned that if the Ram-

birthplace dispute was not resolved it would return to haunt India five decades later. It did, in less time than that.

Ayodhya was different because there was a mosque, built during the reign of Babar. L.K. Advani linked the two when he started his *rathayatra* towards Ayodhya from Somnath, exactly 20 years ago on September 25. Another two decades of time have not brought any resolution.

Perhaps we are being lulled by the fact that there has been no violence over Ayodhya after 1992. Mistake. Indians, of any religion or denomination, are instinctively repulsed by violence, even if they can, on occasions, get as appallingly murderous as any crowd in history. But there is rarely exultation and always guilt. Even when top-of-mind recall has dimmed, it does not mean that an issue such as Babri-Ayodhya has disappeared from hearts.

The consequences of non-judgement will be horrendous. It is obvious from the statements of their spokesmen that the Congress is, typically, committed to irresolution. Its politics impels it to hunt with the mosque and run with the temple. This fudge was possible as long as the courts were taking their time. Time -- a chameleon component of this drama -- has run out, at least in the legal sense. There is at long last a judgement, by a respected high court. Even a stay on its implementation and the reality of an appeal cannot diminish the power of a verdict.

The government would be very foolish to believe that it can bury the judgement in some legal maze, making it untrace-

able. If the judgement is not read by the court, it will still find its way to the people, through the media perhaps. The happy fact of any democracy is that suppressed information, like water, always leaks through the shackles of government.

The parties involved are already raising dangerous apprehensions. It is only natural for either, or perhaps both, to feel that the government is using delay as a tactic to deny them justice. The only salutary outcome of such a situation would be that the two parties forget their bitterness towards each other, and divert it towards the government in a common cause. Do not laugh. Stranger things have happened in Indian politics.

The Supreme Court has the liberty to hope that something could happen in six days that has not happened in six decades, an amicable settlement. But it has no right to abort the course of justice for reasons extraneous to the law. Tuesday is going to be a tense day, but I have no doubt that the Supreme Court will apply its own means test.

It needs an answer to only one question: have the parties to the dispute reached a settlement outside the court? If the answer is no, as is likely, then before the Supreme Court rises it must give leave to its brothers on the Lucknow bench of the Allahabad High Court to deliver their judgement. That is the only safe route back from the precipice.

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