

Anything new in the ADP?

Typically a pre-election year programme

THE Annual Development Programme (ADP) 2012-13 with a projected outlay of Tk 550 billion has been announced with the least of fanfare. It could not be a big deal because of the burden of carry-over projects it has had to contend with.

Of the total number of 1037 projects some 1007 have been ongoing. 720 unapproved projects with a lump allocation of Tk 19 billion have also been adopted. Some large projects have been put under PPP and Tk3 billion has been allocated to kick-start the Padma bridge project.

In terms of the size, the 'new' ADP is higher by Tk 140 billion than the revised ADP of the outgoing year at Tk 410 billion. It is claimed that higher demand for funding various projects has pushed up the projected allocation. This catering to higher demand sounds contradictory when you consider oft-discussed underutilisation of allocated funds in the various ministries. So we are led to deduce that the higher allocations have had a good deal to do with the election approaching. Now there are the electoral pledges which the planning secretary has adduced to that requiring attention and then there is the shoring up of electoral prospects through lump-sum allocations.

The order of priorities runs like this: power, communications, infrastructure, education, health and religious affairs. Sectoral allocations apart, lump allocation of Tk 19.38 billion for unapproved projects; Tk 15.17 billion for supporting local level development activities by city corporations, district councils and union parishada; and 17.4 billion for handling emergency have earmarked.

There are three overarching points to be made: first, development expenditure ought to be made on purely economic considerations. Secondly, given the cutback on development partner's contribution to the budget in the outgoing fiscal, is it realistic to rely on 61 percent domestic to 39 percent external infusion of resources? Last but not least, ADP implementation from the very word go would have to pick up, gather momentum and end up meeting both the financial as well as physical targets.

Implementation remains the issue. It is good to note that a committee headed by the finance minister would ensure intervention where needed in the processes of ADP implementation. We have had committees galore; we hope this one will stand out and be effective.

An MP and his weapon

What a display of arrogance!

IF a picture that was carried in almost all the major dailies in the last two days, of a member of parliament from Gaffargaon, firing his pistol, reportedly in self defense, is not outrageous than what is.

The place where the incident occurred was the MP's constituency and the self defense he was assuming against was the people that had voted him to the parliament with a huge margin in the last election. The matter should evoke a serious introspection in our politicians because of the tone and tenor that politics is assuming in Bangladesh. If an MP has to protect himself from his people's wrath and that too by using dangerous weapon that kills, than there must be something intrinsically wrong with the system.

We wonder why and how a situation would come to such a stage when voters turn their anger on their representative. And why should it ever come to such a pass that the MP has to resort to firing in self defense. In any case, the picture does not show that he was trying to shoo away people but rather taking a pot shot at them.

It is also patently disingenuous of the MP to suggest that those who had turned against him were criminals. Reportedly, he was besieged by people in his constituency because of their discontentment with the site selection of a new Thana in the area and they had confronted him with their demand. Apparently, there is intra-party rivalry in the area and disgruntlement about the way things have been handled by the MP in the last three years. We understand that it was the MP who behaved in an imperious manner rather than like the 'servant' of the people they promise to be while seeking votes.

The MP's behaviour was most unwarranted, having taken up law in his own hands. The party must go into the reason why this happened and also into the various alle-

Transparency in governance

ZIAUDDIN CHOUDHURY

I wanted to write about honesty in politics, but then I realised there could not be a bigger oxymoron than this concept. Honesty and politics are like oil and water, at least that has been our national experience. Politicians mask their actions with rhetoric aimed to please the public, or delude them. George Orwell once remarked: "Political language is designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable, and to give an appearance of solidity to pure wind." This is where a statesman or national leader differs from a run of the mill politician. Then this is expected of the politicians, and we should not be surprised by this dichotomy in their speech and actions. A statesman uses truth to keep power in the hands of the people while a politician uses euphemism to gain power over the people.

However, we would like a draw line between a run of the mill politician and a national leader -- particularly when they lead the country either as the head of the government or of the opposition. We expect a different standard of behaviour, and a different approach to politics from them when they are in charge of leading the nation.

In Bangladesh, unfortunately however, we have been deprived of this experience. We have not seen a separation of national interest from partisan interest, a distinction between actions that benefit the country from those that serve narrow personal or party gains. We have not witnessed any maturity of our political leaders growing from avaricious self-interest

to larger national interests. Our leaders never assumed the role of statesmen that we sorely need. They remained and continue to remain leaders within the narrow confines of their parties with myopic view of what is good for the country and the people. They have put their own individual agenda ahead of the country's agenda.

From the look of the happenings of the country in the past weeks, and from the ongoing obstinate positions

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of the feuding parties that led to these happenings we have very little hope that circumstances will change in the new future. As concerned Bangladeshis, this is what we observe from abroad. There is complete breakdown of law and order; the law enforcing agencies have either become totally inept or are being restrained from performing their tasks. There is little credibility in government assurances since these are not matched by actions. People are getting away with murder, loot, and daylight robbery, while people in important positions give hollow assurances of remedies that are never fulfilled.

The list of unsolved violent crimes and other criminalities has expanded to unimaginable proportion in just few weeks. Two journalists were mur-

dered in a posh residential area two months ago; a foreign diplomat was murdered in broad daylight; and a housewife was brutally killed in her own house. We still do not know who their assailants were, not to speak of any arrests. A car was found with a box full of currency with government officials; no credible information on the ownership of the money, and its origin and destination has yet surfaced -- at least that we know of. And the crowning event of this ongoing

haps of the past few weeks could have been avoided if there were genuine intentions to do so. For example, there could have been more information coming from those at the top explaining the mystery of murders and disappearances, by explaining the process and attempts being made to resolve these, instead of one-line statements on the state of affairs that add more to the confusion. There could have been more transparent evidence of the government's attempt at unearthing the box full of money being carried in a government car at dead of night by government officials. There could have been more palpable actions that testify to the government's genuine efforts to resolve the mystery of a political leader's disappearance. Transparency of information and its communication to public could have helped in diffusing many of the violent events.

We have a Freedom of Information Act in theory, and we also have an enforcer of this Act. What we lack, however, is real information and truth in communication. Rumours and speculation thrive when facts are scarce. Politicians may not like to admit to facts, but statesmen do; people who lead nations do. Abraham Lincoln had famously said: "If given the truth, they (people) can be depended upon to meet any national crisis. The great point is to bring them the real facts." We can only wish that our leaders will adhere to this principle to resolve the ongoing crisis; otherwise we only have a very bleak future ahead.

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PRAFUL BIDWAI COLUMN

Defiling Ambedkar's legacy



PRAFUL BIDWAI

IT is profoundly distressing that India's political parties unanimously condemned an inoffensive 1949 cartoon about

Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar's pivotal role in the making of the Constitution. The cartoon, reproduced in a Class XI textbook published in 2006 by the National Council for Educational Training and Research (NCERT), shows Ambedkar riding a snail depicting the Constitution and Prime Minister Nehru standing behind him with a whip in hand.

Politicians put the worst possible interpretation on this work by the great cartoonist Kesava Shankara Pillai, who empathised with Nehru's Constitution-based liberal-democratic nation-building project.

They claim the cartoon shows that Nehru is about to whip Ambedkar, while a motley crowd sniggers. They of course don't relate the cartoon to the text, which richly praises Ambedkar. They deny that caricatures are integral to political commentary and to playfully inculcating a critical attitude among students.

In reality, Nehru's whip wasn't aimed at Ambedkar, but unequivocally at the snail. The crowd is shown concentrating on the snail. This captured the public's keenness to speed up the slow process of Constitution-making.

Only the crudest and most literal view of the whip as an instrument of punishment and humiliation permits the offensive interpretation that Shankar wanted to insult Ambedkar. The interpretation is ridiculous and contrived. It denies the legitimacy of the art of cartooning, whose very rationale is to make irreverent, acerbic, and sometimes shocking comment.

Banning cartoons reflects intolerance -- and mocks at the Constitutionally guaranteed right to free expression, which Ambedkar held to be inviolable and part of democracy's charter. And yet, education

minister Kapil Sibal wants to review "inappropriate" material in all NCERT textbooks.

However, these textbooks, produced in 2005-08, marked a massive pedagogical improvement, besides correcting gross distortions in textbooks rewritten along communal lines during the tenure of the Bharatiya Janata Party-led government.

The process of writing the new textbooks was exemplarily inclusive and drew upon a wide range of scholars. (Declaration of Interest: I was also a member of the monitoring commit-

tee for the textbooks; but the cartoon was not included in the text-only draft under scrutiny.)

The post-2005 NCERT textbooks encouraged teachers and students to think independently and critically, and appreciate the complexities of crafting a modern republican order in India. They highlighted the emancipatory vision of India's constitution-makers, and the great distance this society still has to travel before realising it. They took the pupil beyond uninformed glorification of India's past and complacency about its governance.

The textbooks were a significant UPA achievement. But it's cravenly apologising for them, and thus insulting the intelligence of students by assuming that the textbook would foment disrespect for Ambedkar. Muzzling free expression legitimises crass intolerance. The worst expression of this was the ransacking in Pune of the office of Suhas Palshikar, an NCERT adviser, by Dalit

activists. Underlying such intolerance are two ideas: crass literalism about symbols and metaphors, and sacralisation and deification of human beings. Literalism inspired the notorious protests against M.F. Hussain's celebratory depiction of Hindu goddesses in the nude, without a hint of vulgarity. More recently, Hindutva supporters conflated the geological structure called Adam's Bridge off Tamil Nadu's coast, with the mythical bridge to Sri Lanka built by Lord Rama's followers. They launched a violent agitation against a proposed shipping canal

The present controversy is bound to lower the prestige of Dalit politics and tar it with intolerance. It is all the more regrettable because it has been raked up by some of the most oppressed people of Indian society justice, who have a rich history of iconoclasm and questioning received wisdoms while fighting for social justice.

which would "desecrate" it. They dubbed the proposal an "insult to the Hindus." L.K. Advani even claimed, "the government has ... wounded the very idea of India."

The Archaeological Survey of India filed an affidavit, based on studies by the Space Applications Centre and evidence obtained by drilling at the site, that it's a purely natural, not human-made, formation. The project was dropped -- not rightly, for ecological reasons -- but out of deference to the "hurt sentiments" of a community. The then law minister abjectly apologised and said: "Lord Rama is an integral part of Indian culture and ethos ... and cannot be a matter of debate ... Just as the Himalayas are the Himalayas ... Rama is Rama ... It's a question of faith" and needs no proof.

Sacralisation or deification of humans is equally pernicious. Dalit studies scholar Kancha Ilaiah argues that Ambedkar is for the Dalits what the Prophet or the Koran is for the

Muslims. Ergo, the Dalits' "hurt sentiments" on the cartoon must be respected. The argument was powerfully refuted by Ambedkar himself in the Constituent Assembly in 1949: "Bhakti in religion may be a road to the salvation of the soul. But in politics, Bhakti or hero-worship is a sure road to degradation and to eventual dictatorship." Deification elevates fallible human beings to the status of God.

Thus, however much we respect Ambedkar, Gandhi, Nehru, Marx or Freud, we must recognise that they were human beings who often changed their positions depending on the context. In fact, it is their resilience and alertness to changing ground realities that gave them their exceptional leadership qualities as thinkers and doers. As has been said, for every statement that you find in Gandhi, it is possible to find the opposite quote. This applies to Ambedkar or Marx too.

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That's the illustrious social reform tradition to which Jyotiba Phule, Shahu Maharaj, Periyar E.V.R. Naicker and Ambedkar belong, which has inspired generations of Dalits to fight for social emancipation.

Some years ago, Dalit activists forced the Maharashtra government to lift the ban on Ambedkar's Riddles in Hinduism. They also successfully combated Arun Shourie's anti-Ambedkar polemic in his *Worshipping False Gods*, and defended the Bahujan intellectual legacy.

The best weapon to fight slanderous attacks is reason and logical argument, not proscription. Banning books at the drop of a hat can only defile democracy.

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THIS DAY IN HISTORY

May 21

878 Syracuse, Italy, is captured by the Muslim sultan of Sicily.

1904 The Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) is founded in Paris.

1966 The Ulster Volunteer Force declares war on the Irish Republican Army in Northern Ireland.

1982 Falklands War: British amphibious assault during Operation Sutton lead to the Battle of San Carlos.

1990 The Democratic Republic of Yemen and North Yemen agree to merge into the Republic of Yemen.

1991 Former Indian prime minister Rajiv Gandhi is assassinated by a female suicide bomber near Madras.

1994 The Democratic Republic of Yemen unsuccessful attempts to secede from the Republic of Yemen; a war breaks out.