

Safety net benefits auditing

Loopholes need plugging

ONE major instrument of the government for poverty alleviation consists of safety net coverages called Vulnerable Group Development (VGD), Vulnerable Group Feeding (VGF) and Employment Generation Programme for the Poorest (EGPP). How such potentially impactful projects are working and to what extent they are benefitting the target groups need to be monitored periodically to find out if they are on the right track.

After all, the government's allocation to these projects in the current fiscal year amounts to Tk. 25,371 crore. This constitutes 11.4 percent of the total budget and 2.13 percent of the country's GDP. The stakes are, therefore, very high to ensure that the projects benefit the people for whom they are meant. In this context, the findings of the social audit carried out by two non-government development organizations, Governance Coalition and People's Alliance between January, 2013 and January, 2015, reveals the successes and pitfalls of VGD, VGF and EGPP programmes.

A majority of respondents from VGD and VGF programmes were happy with the selection processes but those not content with the procedures were 36 percent and 10.38 percent respectively. As for the employment generation project 32.05 percent were not happy with the selection process. In other words, substantial numbers were discontented with the way the programmes were managed.

The people who need the support most are deprived while single individuals get multiple benefits.

The inherent problem is easily identified: lack of coordination among as many as 22 ministries, which causes overlapping in the schemes as well as mistargeting. The important step for a turnaround will be drastically reducing the number of ministries thereby facilitating coordination.

Lax progress in Taqi murder case

Delayed justice is justice denied

WE would like to add our voice to that of the eminent citizens in their plea made to the prime minister calling for proper investigation to find out the real culprits in the gruesome killing of a young boy in Narayanganj. It has been two years since the killing but, regrettably, no charge sheet has been served as yet.

But should one have to implore the chief executive of the country for something that should be done as a matter of routine and part of the legal process? This case should have been handled even more promptly, particularly when there are allegations of complicity of politically powerful people in the killing. And this is borne out by the statement to the media in March 2014, of Rab's then additional inspector general that they had found involvement of the son and nephew, of two powerful politicians belonging to the AL and JP, and his 11 associates in Taqi's murder.

It seems that, in spite of what we hear from people in high places that nobody is above the law, there are indeed people who are above the law. Although we believe in law taking its own course it seems that there is deliberate soft-pedaling of the issue. We understand that the investigating agency has completed its probe. If so what is keeping them from submitting the charge sheet, unless of course, the allegation that there is interference from powerful quarters, an allegation made by Taqi's father, has some substance.

We call upon the relevant agencies not to tinker with the legal process. Let justice be done without unnecessary delay.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Neglected Suhrawardy Udyan

No other place in Dhaka can claim to have witnessed so many historic events like Suhrawardy Udyan. It witnessed Bangabandhu's clarion call for independence in his historic 7th March speech. The infamous Pakistani occupation forces surrendered there to the liberation forces. Bangabandhu returned triumphantly to independent Bangladesh and delivered his first epoch making speech there. On March 1948, Mohammad Ali Jinnah declared there, "Urdu and only Urdu shall be the state language of Pakistan". History unfolded at this Udyan many times more.

Unfortunately the Udyan has not received its due recognition and attention; development work has been delayed and neglected. There is no formal gate. There are no pavements within the park. Garbage is dumped at several places. The park is not well-maintained and cleaners and gardeners are hardly visible. There are hundreds of cartwheel vendors selling fried, crispy items, cold drinks and fruits within the Udyan and the entire park resembles an open food court. In the evening, it is a haven for drug abuse, drug peddling, prostitution and other types of anti-social activities. At the Shabbagh end, three storied billboards destroy the aesthetic beauty of this beautiful Udyan. Banners and festoons are hung freely at every possible corner.

Suhrawardy Udyan is our pride and one of the few remaining open spaces in the capital. The entire Udyan should be free from crime and unsavoury elements with adequate security provided for those who visit this place. The vendors should be immediately relocated. Historic events moreover, should be properly highlighted on marble epitaphs. A high level task body should be entrusted to look after the development and maintenance of the Udyan. Finally, I would like to draw the kind attention of our honourable PM and the Ministry of Liberation War to ensure the early completion of development works and beautification of the Udyan.

Dr. Shamim Ahmed
On e-mail

March 7: An eye witness account

ZIAUDDIN CHOUDHURY

THE speech by Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib given at the Race Course (now Suhrawardy Uddyan) forty-four years ago on March 7 galvanised the nation toward a freedom movement that culminated in victory nine months later. But the victory was not achieved before shedding a river of blood, and the sacrifices of tens of thousands of families. I was privileged to be a part of that historic scene as one in the audience of a million who had gathered at the meeting, albeit thousands of feet away. Getting any closer was not possible. Some personal reflections of this momentous day will not be out of place here.

I had returned to Dhaka from Chittagong the day before (March 6) from a settlement training camp. The settlement training in Chittagong that was to last six weeks was hastily brought to a close by the government because of political unrest, which had already set in following Bangabandhu's earlier call for civil disobedience. We were ordered to go to our respective duty stations—in my case, Munshiganj.

Bangabandhu's meeting on March 7 was already a subject of all kinds of speculation much before it was delivered. People waited in great anticipation for the next steps in the movement to achieve his demands. Never before had a Bangali leader attained such fame and attention as Sheikh Mujib did during that tumultuous period. He had become the rallying point for every segment of the Bangali society; he was the champion of every Bangali cause. Everyone was eager to hear what Sheikh Mujib would say on March 7. There was even speculation that he might declare independence unilaterally that day. But there were serious apprehensions that the Pakistan army, which had refrained so long from taking any action, would unleash its wrath on the agitators.

Regardless of apprehensions, the turnout at the Suhrawardy Uddyan on March 7 was spectacular. People descended on the meeting ground from early morning in huge numbers, using all kinds of transportation, under all kinds of banners. I had not originally planned on attending the meeting as I was supposed to leave for Munshiganj that day. However, the friends with whom I was staying in Dhaka advised me to leave after hearing the speech. But attending the meeting



became an adventure by itself. Although it was scheduled to start in the afternoon, the grounds were already full by noon, and crowds had occupied the main streets leading to the meeting ground. It was impossible to approach the vicinity of the meeting in a car as the meeting time neared. After several futile attempts at negotiating our way, we decided to park near the Curzon Hall and walk from there. However, leaving the car unattended in those uncertain times was also

risky. We decided to park the car, and listen to the speech from near the Curzon Hall. There were loudspeakers everywhere; therefore, hearing Bangabandhu would not be a problem. All we had to endure was a hot sun.

As we watched from our vantage point, thousands of people were milling into the streets and pouring in from everywhere, carrying posters and banners and raising slogans in support of Bangabandhu and his demands. I would never see such a

gathering of people again. The most striking aspect was the discipline with which the crowds gathered and behaved. There was no unruliness, no vandalism, and no show of force.

Bangabandhu gave his historic speech well after the scheduled time. It lasted about twenty minutes. We could not see him from where we were; but we heard his every word, which still reverberate in my ears. His speech stopped short of declaring independence. Pay no taxes, he declared. Close all government offices sine die; and stop all commerce with West Pakistan, he further added. His pronouncements made him the sole authority over East Pakistan. He gave an ultimatum to Pakistan, either listen to us or leave us alone. And the people listened, interrupting his speech with sky-rending slogans, jumped in joy, and gave him their total and unconditional support. This was an historic day and moment. It would later become the watershed event leading to the birth of Bangladesh.

The streets of Dhaka became virtual grounds of jubilant processions after the meeting. The returning crowds rent the streets with slogans, but never resorted to any vandalism. (In fact, looking back I wonder how a people of same breed could turn so violent only a few decades later.) The police were friendly with the crowds; in fact they also blended in with them, so much so that the traffic cops forgot their duty. It took us more than an hour to reach home in Dhanmandi by car—a distance of only two miles from the meeting grounds—dodging all the street processions.

For many people in the streets, and even in the parlours of well-to-do neighbourhoods of Dhaka, not only the day but also the future belonged to Sheikh Mujib. He was on the way to victory, and the whole Bangali nation was behind him. But the Bangali victory was never to be easy, as we all would learn only seventeen days later. The army stayed in the barracks on March 7, only to make preparations for its final assault on March 25.

I left for Munshiganj the next day. Even though the offices were closed I was to stay in the station of duty; even Bangabandhu had required that from all of us. The rest is history.

The writer is a political analyst and commentator.

Fortune of the few, forget the rest



AS the country battles with layers of snow in the biting cold, its economy brings some positive news. The latest employment statistics of the US Labour Department show that the unemployment rate in the USA has declined to 5.5%, lowest since mid-2008. Total number of jobs created in February 2015 was 295,000, higher than previous months. Though the growth numbers are not so promising and declined to 2.2% in the fourth quarter from 5% in the third quarter of 2014, job growth has given some boost to the optimism that the economy could probably gain momentum towards recovering from the recession. But again, there is low unemployment rate also because many have stopped their job search out of frustration and are not counted in the labour force.

The other worry is that wages are not catching up with the pace of employment growth and continue to remain dismally low. Wages rose by only 0.1% in February and by 2% this year compared to last year. One of the reasons for such low wages is that labour supply is higher than the market demand and unemployed people are ready to go back to work even at a lower pay. Thus, a meaningful gain through employment increase is yet to be realised. It is expected that as the economy begins to thrive further and the job market becomes more vibrant and stabilised, wages will be pushed upward. This however, will not solve yet another feature of the growth pattern of the economy. This is the economic inequality, a problem the country is grappling with for decades. As the country progressed, its

income and wealth have concentrated in fewer hands. Recent studies show that income of the top 1% has doubled during the last five decades while that of the 90% staggered. More revealing is that the richest 0.1% have a wealth equivalent to the poorest 99%; only 160,700 families belong to this top 0.1% who own net assets above \$20 million.

Inequality is also a global challenge. The average standard of living of people across the world is rising at a faster pace at present than ever before; so is the difference in living standards among people within each country, resulting in a wider gap between the rich and the poor. The OECD observes 'from the mid-1980s

concentration of resources is witnessed and valid. Global leaders in Davos recognised inequality as the most defining challenge of the era. During 1990-2010, the rate of extreme poverty in developing countries had come down from 43% to 21%, a remarkable cut by 1 percentage every year. However, the effort towards reducing inequality has been neither adequate nor successful. The currently negotiated Sustainable Development Goals of the United Nations set a target to eradicate extreme poverty for all people everywhere, currently measured as people living on less than \$1.25 a day by 2030 (SDG no. 1.1). However, the problem does not end

There is no trade off between the effort towards having growth and reducing inequality. Such realisation has prompted global policymakers to set another target to "progressively achieve and sustain income growth of the bottom 40% of the population at a rate higher than the national average by 2030".

to the late 2000s, inequality increased in 15 out of 19 countries for which long-run data are available.' The Oxfam report on inequality published on the eve of the World Economic Forum this year in Davos came up with some depressing numbers. It says that in 2014 the fortune of only 85 billionaires in the world was equal to the total wealth of the bottom half of the population. The report goes on to caution that if the current trend continues, by next year, the combined wealth of the richest 1% will be more than that of the rest 99% of the world population.

There have been criticisms of the data set and the methodology of the Oxfam study. But the concern over increasing

there. Poverty is not a function of growth alone. While higher growth plays a major role in poverty reduction, equal growth gives a further boost to the effort. Inequality may be an outcome of growth, but views such as attempt to reduce inequality may reduce the vibrancy of the economy have no theoretical and empirical footings. There is no trade off between the effort towards having growth and reducing inequality. Such realisation has prompted global policymakers to set another target to "progressively achieve and sustain income growth of the bottom 40% of the population at a rate higher than the national average by 2030" (SDG no 10.1). An ambitious and noble target indeed!

COMMENTS

"Khaleda wants to be in prison: PM"

(March 5, 2015)

Aasfiswarar

We all are already in the prison. The whole country is like a big prison where we can get killed or disappear any day.

"Khaleda 'fugitive'" (March 5, 2015)

M Sirajullah

We congratulate the judge for going ahead with the trial of a fugitive in her absence. The rule of law should be upheld.

Milton

It seems that the country is being run at the whims of the ruling party; they can term anyone, anytime, as fugitives.

"Can Mamata really deliver?"

(March 2, 2015)

Durjoy

I followed David Lange and later Helen Clarke and other Kiwi PMs of such calibre for years. The Kiwis somehow manage to stand up to whoever gets in the way of their national interest, and they do so with finesse. And then there are Finland, Monaco, Belgium, and even Ireland who learnt the art of living with giant neighbours. So all we need is level headedness.

"Sudden attacks raise alarm"

(March 3, 2015)

M. Ashraf

Another dismal failure of the police and the government to protect us. Why are the public being hurt and killed?

"HC questions legality of calling blockade" (March 3, 2015)

Mokhtar Hussain (Khokon)

Bangladesh needs a new political approach and a new and forward thinking political group who will dedicate their time to build the country.