

Draft bill to protect adivasi rights

A welcome move

WE welcome the move of the parliamentary caucus on indigenous affairs to place a bill in the upcoming session of the parliament proposing that a national commission be formed for the protection of indigenous rights. According to the proposal, the commission will work towards ensuring sustainable and pro-*adivasi* socio-economic development projects, protect the interests of the marginalised population, promote multiculturalism and build solidarity among the country's ethnic minorities. The proposal is timely, to say the least, given the vulnerable state of our indigenous population in the Chittagong Hill Tracts as well as in the plain lands. We also applaud the initiative of the caucus to reach out to different stakeholders, especially leaders of the *adivasi* communities, for their critical input before finalising the draft.

It is a sad, but irrefutable, reality that the condition of our *adivasis* is deteriorating -- incidents of eviction, land grabbing, human rights violations, violence against women and violence are pervasive. Pledges made in the Peace Accord 18 years ago are yet to be implemented, the CHT Land Dispute Commission remains ineffective, and there is no Land Commission for the plain land *adivasis* despite repeated appeals from the communities.

Under the circumstances, the formation of a proposed National Commission which has the best interests of the indigenous population at heart would go a long way towards safeguarding their rights. We hope that the Commission, when formed, would ensure that the needs and demands of the *adivasis* are not pushed to the margins, and that their individual identities and ethos are protected in the process of incorporating them into the mainstream.

Billboards or death traps?

Phase out the unauthorised ones first

THE picture of a billboard dislodged from the top of a building in Dhaka that was published in our paper yesterday must have shocked many. Last April, another such ramshackle structure collapsed on the vehicle of an MP, a police van, three minibuses and several rickshaws. Though there had been no fatalities, one cannot always be lucky. On March 5, 2010, one such giant hoarding atop a shopping mall had collapsed and killed two.

There is, however, no mystery as to why these horrid incidents kept repeating. Most of these billboards are shoddily built, caring little for its ability to withstand gale force or the seasonal storm. The situation turns acute during the monsoon. This is especially true for uni-pole billboards, which, supported by a single pillar, give in and crash on unsuspecting passersby. To make matters even worse, reportedly between 2,000 of 3,000 billboards in Dhaka North and South City Corporations have been erected without prior approval of the designated authorities. The Corporations, too, are undermanned; they have the workforce to dismantle only three illegal hoardings a day. As a result, wherever DNCC and DSCC officials bring down a billboard, unscrupulous businessman in connivance with the property owners reinstate the structure within a few days.

To begin with, a clear set of rules must be prescribed for the erection of billboard and their compliance ensured. The government also needs to review its guideline on advertisements. Town planners and other experts in the relevant field can be consulted.

The DNCC and DSCC should be logistically equipped in order to remove all poorly built billboards from the capital. Those responsible for these life threatening structures must be penalised.

WORLD HEPATITIS DAY Now is the time to act

STEPHEN LOCARNINI, DING-SHINN CHEN and
MAMUN-AL-MAHTAB

TODAY is a stark reminder of the mounting challenges posed by viral hepatitis -- particularly hepatitis B and C -- in Bangladesh.

Viral hepatitis affects more than fifteen million people in Bangladesh, and causes approximately twenty thousand deaths every year -- more than malaria, cholera or TB. Yet most people know little about viral hepatitis and those who do, regard it with stigma and do not necessarily realise that most cases of hepatitis B and C can be prevented, treated, and often even cured.

This year, the WHO included the newest hepatitis treatments in their Model List of Essential Medicines as a signal to governments that they should make them available to those who need them. However, many of these treatments are prohibitively expensive for a country like Bangladesh. Drugs, being developed by public-private partnerships involving the pharma companies, national governments, international donors and research institutes, are gradually being tried and tested in several countries. And one can only hope that this will be the case in Bangladesh as well.

Yet, as we learnt from HIV/AIDS, providing access to drugs is not enough. Our health care and public health systems need to scale up to stop the infection from being spread, and to ensure that people at risk get screened, and those infected receive appropriate treatment and follow up.

Unsafe injection practices are responsible for many of the new infections with hepatitis B or C viruses in Bangladesh. Avoiding re-use of syringes could reduce the number of people infected by hepatitis C by over 1.5 million, and those infected by hepatitis B by close to 280,000 (Hepatology International 2013).

This year, the Coalition to Eradicate Viral Hepatitis in Asia Pacific (CEVHAP), a multi-stakeholder partnership whose aim is to achieve the elimination of viral hepatitis across the region, had as its motto: 'Now is the time'. Now is the time to start putting into place concrete steps towards the elimination of viral hepatitis from our society.

The writers are professor, Victorian Infectious Diseases Reference Laboratory North Melbourne & Co-Chair, CEVHAP; professor National Taiwan University College of Medicine Taipei & Co-Chair, CEVHAP; and Associate Professor of Hepatology, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib Medical University.

Expectations from new monetary policy



Finance and Bangladesh Bank, heralding coordination between fiscal and monetary policies. So will the central bank be able to meet all expectations while formulating its new monetary policy?

Although the interest rate is not the single panacea for stimulating investment particularly in Bangladesh where other institutional impediments prevail, the investors will still expect a reduction in lending rates. On the other hand, the savers will ask for higher deposit rates. This situation will eventually prevent lending rates from falling. Both groups are essential to the banking system, but both sides cannot be satisfied at the same time. Whether an economy demands more savings or more investments at a particular point in time eventually shapes the mind of policymakers. Bangladesh Bank will not be an exception.

The classical saving investment equality collapsed during the Great Depression when Keynes came with the

idea of the saving-investment gap. A relatively open economy can invest more than its amount of saving by borrowing from outside at a lower interest rate from abroad than that at home. That has been the case for Bangladeshi investors and the central bank has encouraged this stance in the past.

Traders of the stock market are eager to see how the new monetary policy begins to unfold. Because of the inverse relationship between the interest rate and the stock index, the share buyers and sellers always expect an expansionary monetary policy and a low interest regime. The Dow Jones index in the New York Stock Exchange made a fortune from 8,000 to 18,000 between 2008 and 2015 mainly because the Fed funds rate was suppressed to near zero over the entire period. But the central bank will always be watchful not to create any bubble in the stock market by suppressing the interest rate beyond necessity. High inflation and other institutional rigidities prevent interest rates from falling too low in developing economies -- a situation that warrants high rates of return to survive or thrive in the share market.

The government expects that the monetary authority will be more accommodative in money supply so achieving the targets of 7 percent growth and 6.2 percent inflation becomes convenient. If money growth is far above the accommodative level, say approximately 7 percent plus 6.2 percent assuming constant money velocity, this easing will

brand monetary policy as expansionary. In contrast, if money growth falls below say 13 percent, that tightening will label monetary policy as contractionary or restrictive. It will soon be time to see whether Bangladesh Bank chooses either of the extremes or remains simply accommodative.

Time has come to review the right hand side of the output equation that comprises consumption, investment, government spending and net exports. Consumption represents 70 percent to 80 percent of the GDP, but consumers often remain neglected by both fiscal and monetary policies because they are not as organised as businessmen, especially in developing economies. No one checks whether the expectations are materialised. Consumers always expect prices to go down, but businessmen and particularly sellers and investors expect the opposite.

Since Bangladesh Bank has already made some footprints in its developmental role for the society, the beneficiaries will again look forward to receiving similar packages of empowerment for the future. Women entrepreneurs will expect further facilitation roles of the central bank for them, so will SME owners. Environmentally responsible productive ideas will expect the arrangement of funds from the biggest capital regulator of the country -- the central bank.

Unlike monetary policy of advanced economies, monetary policy of Bangladesh Bank has recently pursued

the theme of macro-developmental central banking that aims at building the supply side capacity as well as the demand side factors of the economy. For example, the central bank's loan for a solar plant builds the supply side capacity and thus long-term productivity in an environmentally responsible way. Once the supply side is adequately addressed, an economy's growth potential goes up. Then delivering demand side incentives such as consumer credit to buy television sets or cell phones becomes highly effective to raise income. The empowerment of rural people in this style has already proved productive and beneficial to the economy.

To satisfy all the expectations together in a single monetary policy is humanly impossible. The central bank will prioritise the expectations based on its ultimate objective and accountability to the economy. We need to wait and see how many of them the central bank can accommodate in devising its new monetary policy due in a couple of days.

The writer is chief economist of Bangladesh Bank.

CORRECTION

In Fahmida Khatun's article 'The rise of shadow education' published on July 27, 2015, the sentence should have read "the average income of a tutor is at least Tk 1 million per month. For a science teacher it can be as much as Tk 2.5 million, I am told," instead of Tk 1 lakh and 2.5 lakh, respectively. We regret the inadvertent error.

TAXING HIGHER EDUCATION Why it Hurts

ISHFAQ ILAHI CHOUDHURY

THE 7.5 percent VAT on the tuition fees of private universities was based on the hypothesis that rich and well-off parents send their wards to private universities. As universities already charge heavy tuition fees, a part of the tuition fees might as well go to the national exchequer, to probably support education of the poor and deprived. Let us examine if this hypothesis is true, or otherwise.

Contrary to popular belief, most private university students these days hail from middle and lower-middle class background and increasingly from low income groups too. Students who could not go to expensive top-rated schools or afford private coaching, stand little chance of passing in the highly competitive public university entrance examination. Keeping all other factors constant, a student from a well-to-do family, who went to a top school and could afford expensive coaching, has a far better chance to get admission in public universities compared to the ones who are deprived of these advantages due to their financial status. If we see the results of SSC and HSC examinations, we notice the domination of a few urban schools and colleges. Gone are the days when students from remote village schools would often top merit lists; it is now the monopoly of a few elites.

Under these circumstances, private universities emerged as alternatives for students who could not get into public universities, yet are deserving of higher education. We now have doctors and lawyers, engineers and architects, pharmacists and genetic engineers, sociologists and anthropologists who are graduates of private universities, pursuing their career in the public and private sector. In the field of banking and business, graduates from private universities are as competitive as anyone from public universities, and in many cases, they are doing even better. In fact, because of the strict and intensive academic regimen students have to go through in a private university, they fare better in a highly competitive and time-bound world of business and finance. Because private universities can give better individual attention to students, many go out to set up their own small enterprises, each creating new jobs and contributing to the national economy. Many students from private universities are now pursuing higher education abroad in top universities of the world. Some of them come back to join their alma mater as teachers.

I must, however, state that like public universities, private universities also have a wide variation of standards, and not all of them are doing well. There are serious shortcomings in some of the institutions; also, there are allegations of unethical conduct against some. It is the duty of the government, especially the University Grants Commission (UGC), to weed out those who fail to keep up the standard, though we are yet to see stern action against the defaulters.

Notwithstanding the limitations, private universities are increasingly becoming institutions of first choice for many students and guardians because of high academic standards, up-to-date curriculum, highly qualified faculty, strict adherence to the



academic calendar, and absence of political violence and enforcement of campus discipline. Campus safety is another reason that encourages guardians to send their wards, especially female wards, to private universities.

One of the reasons that hinder the growth of private universities is the lack of support and sympathy from the government. Unlike private schools, madrasahs and colleges, the government does not provide any financial assistance to private universities. The UGC oversees the functioning of the universities, but it does not provide any grant to private universities. The only source of earning for a private university is the tuition fees collected from students. From this earning, the university has to pay the teachers and staff, arrange for books and stationery, laboratory equipment and chemicals.

Despite being a non-profit organisation, a private university has to pay electricity, water and gas bills at a commercial rate. The university also pays 4-15 percent VAT on all goods and services that it avails. Above this, the university has to pay income tax at the rate of 15 percent on any operating surplus left at the end of the year. This surplus is the only fund available to the university to go for future expansion and development. Yet, the National Board of Revenue (NBR) terms this surplus as 'profit', knowing full well that a private university operates as a trust and no one can make a profit out of it. There are, of course, some violators to the Trust Act, but the UGC or the Ministry of Education failed to act tough against the violators.

It is often alleged that private universities charge exorbitant fees and are making profits. However, if we compare per capita expenditure on students in DU, BUET or DMC vis-à-vis those of top private universities of Dhaka, we shall see that the per capita cost in a private university is less than that of a public university. The huge difference in tuition fees is because public universities and medical colleges are supported up to 95-98

percent with grants from the UGC, whereas private universities depend, as stated above, entirely on the tuition fees from the students. Media reports on the high salary offered to private university teachers is also not completely accurate because, unlike public ones, private universities do not offer on-campus housing and other government benefits.

Creation of new knowledge is one of the primary reasons why a university exists. New knowledge is created through research and development (R&D). Despite financial limitations, some of the top private universities spend a higher percentage of their budget on R&D than institutions like Dhaka University, BUET and others.

I would, therefore, argue that the government should create an enabling environment for the growth of private universities in the country. As a first step, the government should immediately rescind the order of imposing VAT on tuition fees. The government should remove VAT payable by universities of goods and services purchased, and withdraw income tax on the operational surplus. Meanwhile, the government should ensure strict financial and administrative transparency as well as high academic standards from all universities -- public or private.

With the gradual rise of living standard, there is an increasing desire among parents to see a better future for their children. It is, therefore, quite common to see not so well-off parents sending their children to universities and it is also not unusual to see parents selling off their land or valuables to ensure that their children have access to good education that would ensure a brighter future. Given this scenario, can the government remain a bystander and not extend a helping hand to these parents?

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Is there no law in the country?

We are no less barbaric than the Mayans who killed people on the top of Chichen Itza by reaping their hearts and severing their heads. We are no less bestial than the Inca people who got immense pleasure by taking off the skins from the bodies of living human beings. We are as barbaric and insane as they were. Otherwise how could some of us commit such a barbarous and brutal act? No punishment is enough for the beasts who killed Rajon and videotaped this barbaric act. It seems that there is no law in our country.

Tozo, Bonnie
On e-mail



"When 'empowerment' rings hollow"

Nahela Nowshin deserves a lap of appreciation for the above titled article on women's empowerment. Fact remains that, nowadays, lots of noise (as you said, hollow) is made on the subject, signifying nothing. Education and economic independence of women only can solve their problem, but there's a long way to go before that, while the mindless violence goes on. We must stop the violence by imposing stringent and exemplary punishment to the criminals at a fast pace, and the media can play a significant role till appropriate punishment is meted out.

Mahmood Rashid
On e-mail