

Why VAT on Albumin?

Don't put VAT on life saving drugs

WE are taken aback to learn that 15 percent VAT has been proposed on albumin which is considered to be a life saving drug for patients suffering from serious kidney and liver problems. The drug is considered to be a plasma (blood) substitute, which basically helps increase the volume of blood in blood vessels. Albumin is already subject to AIT (4 percent) and advance trade VAT (5 percent) making it a very expensive drug for patients. So, we agree with patients that a further 15 percent VAT on this medication will drive up the price to such an exorbitant level that it will have serious ramifications for patients who have no substitute to fall back upon.

In an age when cancer cases are going up by record numbers and where albumin is administered to patients before a blood transfusion is administered to newborns suffering from haemolytic disease (which destroys red blood cells in the body), it is imperative that the ministry of finance seriously rethink before slapping the proposed uniform VAT on such a drug. In most countries of the world, life saving drugs are kept off the VAT list because unless this is done, we can look forward to smuggling of the drug from neighbouring India which has no such levy on the drug. This will on the one hand be a loss for the government as it loses revenue since the smuggled medication will be cheaper than the ones imported. But more importantly, the move will place a huge financial burden on patients who are already stretched thin on counting the cost of medi-care in the country. We urge authorities to look into the matter and keep life saving drugs off the uniform VAT rate of 15 percent in the interest of public healthcare.

Ensuring rights of female migrant workers

Capacity building and ministerial efforts needed

ACCORDING to the Ministry of Expatriates' Welfare and Overseas Employment, around 1.18 lakh women went abroad seeking employment in 2016. This constituted 16 percent of the total labour migration last year. Yet, as experts in a discussion organised by the Bangladesh Women Migrant Workers' Association on Wednesday pointed out, these women are largely ill-equipped to navigate the unfamiliar terrain they are faced with in foreign lands.

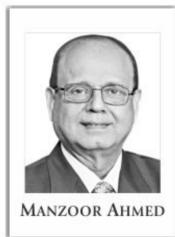
That Bangladeshi migrant workers, especially women, face hardships and human rights abuses is undisputed. From being victims of extortion by unscrupulous agents, and of physical or sexual violence by employers' abroad, they are often left without a helpline. Experts at the discussion rightly pointed towards the need for capacity building and orientation for them. Training in relevant skills, basic language proficiency, and a general awareness of the process and rights could go a long way in curbing the extent to which these women are swindled or harmed.

But, we must point out that besides capacity building for female job seekers, the ministry must step up its efforts. The ministry has already started a helpline for these workers. But we still hear of cases where workers are not allowed mobile phones by their employers. Given that we have memorandums of understanding with the labour-receiving countries, our ministry and consulates there must work towards ensuring compliance. If there are repeated human rights violations, then the host country should be involved in the process and exemplary punishment should be ensured for the violators.

There have been suggestions of legalising the middlemen in recruitment to make them accountable and ensuring that all workers have phones. Capacity building and ministry efforts must be given priority. These women, through remittances, help build our economy. It is shameful and a failure on our part if we cannot ensure their safety.

THE EDUCATION BUDGET

A 'smoke and mirrors' exercise



MANZOOR AHMED

"SMOKE and mirrors" is an idiom based on illusions created by magicians, where they make objects appear or disappear by extending or retracting mirrors amid a distracting

burst of smoke. According to the Merriam Webster dictionary, it is something that seems good but is not real or effective and is done especially to take attention away from something else that is embarrassing or unpleasant.

The spin given to the 2017 budget presented by Finance Minister AMA Muhith to the Parliament on June 1 is that education will get an unprecedented boost. An allocation of Tk 50,432 crore for education in the budget for 2017-18 fiscal amounts to 12.6 percent of the total budget size of Tk 4,00,226 crore, announced the Finance Minister.

Of the total allocation for the sector, Tk 23,141 crore has been allocated for the Ministry of Education, Tk 22,022 crore for the Ministry of Primary and Mass Education, and Tk 5,269 crore for the Technical and Madrasah Education Division, which has been shown separately this year.

The media, and the general public, may be buying the spin. *The Daily Star* editorial, under the heading A Big Budget, commented "We welcome the enhanced allocation in the major areas including education... Allocation for education has gone up by 14 percent... with emphasis on heavy infrastructure investment with the aim to improve capacity and quality. The emphasis on qualitative improvement in teaching methods is noticeable" (June 2, 2017).

But, what is proposed in the budget and what is actually disbursed and spent are not the same. As the following table about education budgets and actual expenditures shows, the real public education expenditure may not live up to the optimistic spin.

Sub-sectors	2017-18 Proposed	2016-17 Revised	2016-17 Original	Average of FY 12-FY15 Actual
Primary and Mass Education	5.50	5.61	6.51	5.92
Secondary and Higher	5.78	6.84	7.88	7.69
Tech-Vocational & Madrasa	1.30	--	--	--
Total	12.58	12.45	14.39	13.61

Table 1. Education Budgets as Percentage of Total Government Budgets

Note: Tech-Voc. and Madrasa allocations were under Sec. and Higher Education in earlier years. Source: Ministry of Finance,

Budget Speech 2017-18, Table 4.

It can be seen that the average actual public spending for education was close to 14 percent of the total government budget in the four years from FY2012 to 2015. The revised budget, considering spending possibility for the current year, is almost 1.5 percentage point less than the actual for the past four years as a share of the total government spending. The new proposed budget is proportionately of the same order as the revised budget for the current year, though in absolute amount it has grown, since the new budget is larger than last year's.

The budget speech refers to the education sector in a short paragraph

improve learning results. Computers and multimedia can be helpful only if there are teachers who can help students to use them, if they are maintained and kept operational, and if there is power supply and working internet connectivity. These remain practical problems in most schools.

Does the new budget break any new ground and provide the resources for a quality leap in the education system? Not likely, since the proportionate increase barely keeps up with the costs and numbers of students – there has been no marked change in per student public spending. This spending is one of the lowest in the world and is reflected in the low GDP share and government

are unlikely.

New thinking is needed to attract and retain bright young people in school teaching, which is not just a matter of a higher salary. Area-based planning for each upazila and urban areas are needed to ensure sufficient institutions of acceptable quality aiming for universal primary and secondary education as befits an aspiring middle income country.

A good beginning for structural changes would be to have one ministry for school education so that rational plans can be made for quality school education for all children. The present management structure and turf battle between two Ministries have hamstrung



ILLUSTRATION: RICCI HOFFARTH/ST. LOUIS PUBLIC RADIO

where mention is made of computer labs in some 3,550 institutions and multimedia classrooms (meaning provision of a projector and a laptop computer) in 23,331 secondary and primary classrooms, and construction of buildings and classrooms in 500 colleges, 3,000 schools and 1,000 madrasas. Some 3.8 million students of grade 6 and above will receive stipends. Teachers will have enhanced benefits.

These are necessary and customary items which should figure in the education budget. But, the key questions are whether the allocated funds are actually used and how they are used to

budget share – much below the international benchmark of 4 to 6 percent of GDP and 20 percent of the national budget.

Does the budget envision increasing learning time in primary schools which is less than half of the international standard of a thousand hours per year? Is there an assurance of qualified and trained teachers for essential subjects such as math, science and even languages in every secondary school? As long as the budget is planned to provide for some increase within the existing structure and pattern of expenditure, without major reforms, quality changes

even the extending of compulsory education to grade 8.

These are, however, not issues that the Finance Minister and his annual budget can resolve. The ideas and policy shifts have to come from the line education authorities, supported and encouraged by political decision-makers. The lack of capacity or unwillingness to think out-of-the box in this respect keeps the education system and the education budget trapped in a smoke and mirrors show, creating an illusion of change.

The writer is Professor Emeritus at BRAC University.

Everything you don't know is a lie



ZOHEB MASHUR

LOOK. Listen. I get it, OK? The world is a scary and complicated place. To properly navigate it you have to learn all sorts of stuff, and not just the stuff they teach you in school. I mean, sure, it's important to know that South America is a continent and maybe someday the fate of the universe will hinge on your ability to recall Jibananda Das' exact birthday, but there's all sorts of stuff like empathy and critical thinking that you basically have to learn the hard way. Through experience, trial and error and often personal trauma. It's a lot of work and you'll never, ever, get it right and you'll spend a lifetime slowly trying to become a fuller, smarter, better human being.

Luckily you don't have to! Using the powers of malicious stupidity you can avoid all of these confusing, upsetting thoughts and events that force you to criticise and develop yourself. All you have to do is convince yourself that everything that challenges your views is a lie.

It's great. Really makes you wonder why we don't do it all the time.

There's a much-publicised and on-going rape case implicating several young men at an affluent part of the city, challenging your assumptions on sexual responsibility, consent and the rights of women to, you know, actually live their lives the way they want? Wow, OK, that's a lot of work, so how about it's all a lie and the women made it up or something? Yeah, that's a lot easier. Now you don't have to do anything at all.

A statue in the Supreme Court depicting a universal symbol of justice? Someone said it's all part of a conspiracy to spread idolatry in Bangladesh through the vehicle of the long-dead Greek religion, so that must be... actually, hang on, this is much stranger and more complicated than the

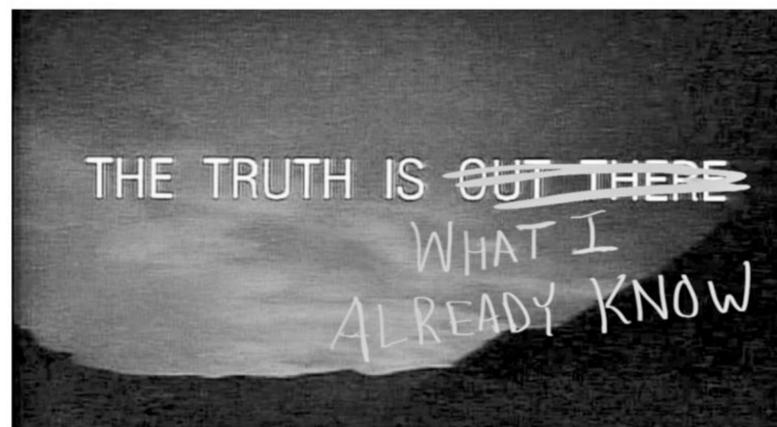
truth, are you sure you're doing this right? Try this angle: everyone wants the statue removed and only a few corrupt secularists want it up there... because secularists are very fond of religious idols, which is what this version of the story calls Lady Justice? Hmm. I think this example might have some serious structural problems, I'm sorry I wasted your time with it. Let's move on.

Aha! Here's a good one. All those photos you saw of *adivasis* being displaced from their homes in the southeast? Fake news! You don't have to think about the disenfranchisement of our fellow countrymen, you don't have to wonder

aren't necessarily the greatest things on Earth and maybe people who look and talk like you are doing some very bad things to people who don't. It's complicated, it's upsetting. It's unnecessary. Let's just pretend it's a hoax instead. Now your ethnonationalism is secure. What other cultures?

Why would anyone go through the trouble of lying to you like this? Look, these are journalists, right? They're basically all paid for by aliens to spread sedition. It's just the first step towards destabilising the world's governments ahead of the full and final invasion from Mars. You can't just trust

Using the powers of malicious stupidity you can avoid all of these confusing, upsetting thoughts and events that force you to criticise and develop yourself. All you have to do is convince yourself that everything that challenges your views is a lie.



CREDIT: ZOHEB MASHUR

about the effects of continuously conflating the Bangladeshi identity with the Bengali one, thereby slowly erasing the idea that non-Bengalis are supposedly full and active citizens of the country, you don't have to worry about other people losing their lives and livelihoods, and you certainly don't need to examine the socioeconomic forces driving people to demand more and more land, often at the expense of our society's most vulnerable. To do all of that you need to actually do some reading first and you also have to acknowledge that you and your people

someone whose actual job it is to find out what's going on and then explain it to you! That would mean women and minorities have rights or something, and who in their right minds would believe such a thing?

In conclusion: This might be a troubling challenge to your views and sense of self but it's OK. I'm a lying secularist feminist journalist so you shouldn't trust a word I or my alien lizard masters say.

The writer is an artist who graduated in Economics from BRAC University, and is a columnist for SHOUT Magazine, *The Daily Star*. Email: zoheb.mashur@gmail.com

LETTERS

TO THE EDITOR

letters@thedailystar.net

Excise tax on bank accounts

Excise tax is an indirect tax imposed on the manufacture, sale or use of certain types of goods and products. What goods and products am I manufacturing, selling or using by having a bank account?

Shahjahan Hafiz
Gulshan

Solar based irrigation

The Daily Star, on the World Environment day on June 5, published news about the use of solar-based irrigation system that is hopefully increasing in our country. Every year, farmers have to bear extra costs for diesel oil to continue their irrigation process. In contrast, they have to spend less money on solar based energy system.

Our country is highly dependent on agriculture. We shouldn't underestimate the value of farmers, and the rewards that they deserve. The government should provide solar equipment to farmers at affordable prices, and low interest loans for their purchase.

Belayet Hossain
Islamic Studies, University of Dhaka