

# Will the budget for FY2020 be any different?

## PM's Japan visit It will strengthen the mutual bonds even further

**W**E believe that the three-day visit of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina to Japan will further deepen the deep mutual bonds of friendship between the two countries. Having been one of the first countries to recognise the newly independent nation, Japan has been a trusted and all-weather friend of Bangladesh.

Japan has been one of the biggest partners in Bangladesh's development efforts, and its development assistance has been unstinting and unfailing. Japan has been, and is, involved in several important infrastructure projects. As a part of its continued assistance to Bangladesh, we are happy to note the latest assistance tranche in the form of the 40th ODA, signed during this visit, which is 35 percent higher than the previous year. The money will be used to finance four major infrastructure projects, the most vital of which, we feel, is the Matarbari Port development project which, once built, is likely to save billions of dollars in various ways. The development assistance agreement displays the deepening commitment of Japan to the all-round development of Bangladesh.

We would hope that the government of Japan would favourably consider the suggestions made by our prime minister to help value add to the quality of our labour so that we could develop a quality workforce that could meet the increasing demand of trained people, both for employment at home and abroad, particularly in view of the impending and inevitable fourth industrial revolution.

We believe firmly that in our efforts to cross the threshold from a developing to a developed country, we shall continue to have in Japan a facilitator in the manner that they have been so far.

## May the best team win! ICC Cricket World Cup 2019 kicks off

**T**HE moment we have all been waiting for is here. The ICC Cricket World Cup 2019 officially kicked off yesterday with England taking on South Africa at The Oval in London. The month-and-a-half-long cricket bonanza is surely going to be an exciting time for millions of lovers of the sport who wait for the tournament with bated breath for four long years.

The competitiveness of the teams and the game itself, the zeal of the players, and passionate fans all combine to give the prestigious World Cup its flavour of excitement and fun. This time England—which has ironically never won the World Cup—entered the competition as favourites and the number one side in the world (let's not forget that it also has home advantage). Another top favourite is of course Australia—the most successful team in World Cup history—which is about to set foot in the ICC event having won consecutive ODI series away from home. Then there is also a formidable India being led by Virat Kohli, the number one batsman in the ODI rankings.

Nonetheless, we remain hopeful about our national team. We hope that Bangladesh will put up a strong front in the World Cup, beginning with their first match against South Africa on June 2 in London. We are confident that the Bangladesh cricket team, fresh off its win in the 2019 Ireland Tri-Nation Series, comprising the Big Five—Mashrafe Bin Mortaza, Tamim Iqbal, Mushfiqur Rahim, Mahmudullah Riyad and Shakib Al Hasan—will prove its mettle on the pitch once again.

More than anything, however, we hope that the ICC Cricket World Cup 2019 will help break barriers both on and off the field and bring people together from all over the world.



Fahmida Khatun

**B**ANGLADESH'S national budget for FY2020 will be the first budget of the newly elected government that came to power following the election in December 2018. Hence many would

like to see how the budget is going to implement the promises made in the election manifesto of the ruling party. If taken seriously, election manifesto is a document which can act as the reference point of a political party to deliver on its commitments. The election manifesto of the ruling party is quite a comprehensive document that outlines the achievements of the last 10 years and elaborates the pledges to be delivered during the next five years. Some of the important deliverables will have to be achieved through budgetary allocations.

The issue of the size of the budget is not so relevant anymore. Quite naturally, the size will continue to increase in a growing economy with a large population. Still, the size hovers around 18 percent of our gross domestic product (GDP) on average. This is not large if compared with other emerging economies. Rather, the quality and inclusivity aspects of the budget are more important for Bangladesh at this point in time. The GDP growth for FY2019 is predicted to be 8.13 percent. Despite such a high growth, the economy is experiencing a number of challenges. Economic growth could not create enough jobs in the economy leaving some 11.6 percent of total youths unemployed. Inequality is evident in all respects, all forms—between rich and poor, between men and women, and between the eastern and western parts of the country. Private investment is stuck at around 23 percent of GDP. Exports and remittances have seen slow growth in FY2019. Thus formulating a budget is not an easy task in such circumstances.

One of the weak links of our national budget is its implementation. This is applicable both for Annual Development Plan (ADP) and revenue mobilisation.



The GDP growth for FY2019 is predicted to be 8.13 percent. Despite such a high growth, the economy is experiencing a number of challenges. PHOTO: STAR

The estimated budget is revised downwards in the mid-way. Then again the final numbers at the end of the fiscal year are even lower than the revised budget in most cases. This demonstrates the weak capacity of our budget implementation effort. As opposed to our family budget, the national budget develops expenditure plans first. Then the finance minister looks for resources to make those expenditures. One of the major sources of resource is domestic resource mobilisation, of which taxation is a key component. As the development expenditure is increasing, the government has to set high targets of revenue mobilisation to meet up expenses. However, neither our tax base is broad enough nor our tax collection mechanism is efficient enough to generate the targeted amount of taxation. As a result, for the last couple of years, there has been a huge shortfall of revenue mobilisation from the targets. Even with such deficit in revenue generation, the budget deficit remains below the target of five percent. Why is that? Because ADP

implementation also remains below the target. While this reflects our inability to fulfil commitments, the other aspect of the budget is no less important. And that is, the quality of budget implementation.

When it comes to the quality of expenditures, transparency and accountability are questionable in many cases. Large infrastructural projects are not completed timely. The delay costs dearly. Waste of resources and corruption are not unheard of. Many a time, poor quality infrastructures require an even larger amount for their maintenance. The other issue is to increase investment in social sectors. Such investment should not only be for construction of schools and clinics but also for ensuring quality of education and health services. Improving the quality of teachers through training, overseeing the curriculum and syllabus in schools and monitoring the healthcare services are only a few means for quality enhancement. Similarly, resource for social safety net programmes is essential to address poverty. Surprisingly, government pension is considered part of

the social safety net budget which makes the social safety budget larger than the actual amount flowing to the poor.

We would also like to see how the budget addresses the ongoing crisis in the financial sector. The banking sector is burdened with huge amounts of default loans. The government has been injecting resources to the losing banks, mostly owned by the state. Such regular recapitalisation has not resulted in improvement of the health of the problem-struck banks. It has rather created incentives even for the private commercial banks to misappropriate taxpayers' money. The recently published Financial Stability Report 2018 by the Bangladesh Bank points out that the net profit of the banking sector has decreased because of large amounts of default loans. This implies that banks' contribution to revenue generation will be lower. Rescheduled loans are becoming defaulted again and again. But banks continue to reschedule those default loans. How is it consistent with the election pledges of the ruling party?

Zero tolerance to corruption has been announced by the highest political authority of the current government. This is a laudable move. But this is not going to be a simple task given the nature of governance in the country at present. It will require strong and harsh measures. Institutional reform of the organisations in charge of monitoring corruption issues and taking measures against the corrupt are still unfinished. Budget can allocate more resources for digital governance and capacity development of officials. However, if the responsible bodies are not allowed to function without influence and fear, we will not be able to progress much on this count.

So the finance minister has a tall order in front of him. In terms of issues, the upcoming budget will have to deal with the same old ones. But it is time to change the approach. During its third term in leading the country, the ruling party will have to address the sources rather than the symptoms of the problems. Budgetary measures will be one of the tools to eliminate those.

Fahmida Khatun is the Executive Director of Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD).

# ONLINE SEXUAL HARASSMENT Exposing dark secrets in the digital corners of Bangladesh



Ramisa Rob

**A** 21-year-old woman grew up with an ambition of pursuing a career in law, but today, her future seems bleak. It all started two years ago, when she entered into a relationship with a 28-year-old

man. Raised in a conservative religious family, she refused to physically engage with her partner before marriage. Consequently, the man manipulated her religious convictions and swore on the Quran: "From this day onwards, we are husband and wife." Disguising coercion with spirituality, he took her to a hotel, demanding that they were now obligated to be intimate with each other. She followed his wishes, but resisted penetrative sex. Two weeks later, he convinced her to legalise their marriage in a Kazi office in Dhanmondi, without involving their families.

Moments before signing the papers, the man recanted, "you are not the one". Crestfallen to her core for the next few days, the woman visited a psychiatrist and was diagnosed with Major Depressive Disorder. Emotionally dependent on the man who abandoned her, the woman begged him to reconsider his decision. He told her that he would only remain in her life if she adhered to every single one of his orders, and if not, he threatened to circulate a video of their intimate encounter, which he had taken without her consent. The last time they met was in 2017, but he continues to force her into performing online sexual favours, as he claims that she is still his wife, owing to their religious oath. Shackled in endless agony, the woman attempted suicide.

This perilous nightmare is the lived reality of a human being. Most adults in this society are unaware that such vengeful games lurk in many corners of the digital community of Bangladesh—rather concerning in youth circles. Recently, a hailstorm of fury over online sexual harassment has been spreading around Facebook, triggered by a viral exposé of a perverse group chat with mostly male participants from grade X in English medium schools. The platform was used to barter sexually explicit images of around 32 girls of the same age, outside their consent.

Scrolling through a litany of videos, photos and allegations, I was unsettled to see that a few young women were also complicit in weaponizing female bodily

autonomies by intimidating their female peers with incendiary images. Yet, I was not particularly shocked. Sexism and misogyny mostly marginalise women, but are fostered by everyone—men, women, children, adolescents and adults. The rise in virtual harassment is arguably an extension of the normalised thrust for uneven power dynamics in real-life.

To counter the cyber-harassment pandemic, Nuzhat Minhaz, a student of Computing and Information Technologies at Rochester Institute of Technology, founded PrivaC—an organisation that aids victims of cyber-crimes by guiding and referring them to verified legal services and professional psychological counselling, along with any other relevant services that may be of

"Why does it matter? Their (expletive) photos are in everyone's phones anyway." Such heedless responses combined with the jarring frequency of online sexual harassment flagrantly reveal a misogynist herd mentality in social media today. And undoubtedly, the proliferation of the cyberspace has adversely activated a crude entitlement to depersonalise everything, which evidently makes it easier for the strong to attack the weak.

It also doesn't help that Bangladeshi society suffers from a perpetual famine of awareness on what constitutes inappropriate, or even criminalised behaviour. Online sexual harassment is, in fact, a heinous crime punishable under multiple laws—Information and Communications Technology Act (ICT)

punitive parenting in Bangladesh: a young victim of physical violence and sexual coercion who reached out to her family was physically abused by her parents—which provoked her to feel suicidal. Cruel treatment towards a sufferer from her own parents is like throwing sharpened daggers into an open wound. When I advised her to speak to the National Helpline for Violence and Children to orchestrate a mere dialogue with her family, she was frightened that her parents would retaliate more and felt even more helpless.

So, if it is "normal" for children to not be able to merely express their trauma to loved ones at home, then perhaps adults ought to reconsider what values they impart to the younger generations. From an outsider's standpoint, I could suggest some straightforward solutions: Parents must transparently communicate with their children, and educators must start teaching consent. But cyber-crimes mirror a multi-layered malady, and victim-blaming in this society is far more ingrained than intentional.

Many adults hide behind the idea that online sexual harassment is a signifier of teenage immaturity. The truth, however, is that adults can also be involved in such crimes. A nauseating case in this current social media wrangle includes a fairly well-known biology teacher of a private coaching centre, who exchanged perverted images of female students with a teenage male student. The latter profoundly apologised for his share of collusion and provided the screen recordings of their conversation where the teacher can be seen pervertedly asking for explicit images and videos, even of a student's mother.

When I interviewed the student group who exposed this teacher on Facebook, they disclosed that they had been trying to launch complaints against him for quite some time, but dropped the case when a gang in Gulshan had extended violent threats to purchase their silence—the stereotypical move in cover-up culture of one-upmanship.

It is difficult to consume such stories and admit that we are trapped in a brutal cultural moment today—one that has been prevalent for many years, uplifting a pernicious but normalised abuse of power. And through the glimpses of victim-blaming, we see a paradox: individuals, especially parents who marginalise sufferers, genuinely believe it is the right thing to do. So how can we navigate out of this vile crisis? The answers lie somewhere in introspection.

Ramisa Rob is currently pursuing her Masters in Law



benefit to families, relatives, and friends of victims, such as information and statistics. She was awarded JP Morgan Chase & Co's "Best Hack for Social Good" at Women in Computing Hackathon for creating a demo website for PrivaC, and has been actively helping victims ever since. Among several other cases including the aforementioned account, the founder informed me of a case that included the usage of a Google Drive folder, which was discovered in 2017.

This online archive, grossly titled "Gentlemen," was created and used by male students from the nation's well-reputed educational institutions to trade photos of each other's girlfriends, without their consent or knowledge. When faced with allegations, the perpetrators stated,

Act 2006, Pornography Control Act 2012 and also Women and Children Repression Prevention Act 2000 (amended in 2003). Yet, most victims who have approached PrivaC this past week were unaware that the acts that violated their trust were "legitimate crimes." When I personally approached victims to learn whether they were aware that they could lodge a complaint with the Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulatory Commission (BTRC) by calling their cyber-crime helpline, most of them had never even heard about it.

According to Minhaz, the victims, commonly females, also eschew legal solutions, as they worry their conservative parents will torment them. This apprehension is entrenched in pervasive

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

letters@thedailystar.net

### Hats off to the High Court

We greatly appreciate the High Court for directing agencies like RAB and BSTI to take action against the culprits who are behind food adulteration. Presently, authorities responsible for food safety along with RAB have been carrying out drives against food adulterators. It is shocking that food, cosmetics, medicine and what not are all being adulterated. We hope that these drives will continue after Ramadan and are extended to the upazila level. The general people of the country support such drives as they want to live a healthy life.

Shafkat Rahman  
BIAM Model School and College, Dhaka

### Pink dogs!

By now, we are all used to seeing pink-coloured dogs roaming the streets of Dhaka. The Centre for Disease Control and the Directorate General for Health Services have launched a nationwide mass dog vaccination campaign all over Dhaka and both North and South was brought under this initiative. According to the vaccination protocol, dogs should be vaccinated at least three years in a row to secure lifelong immunity. These dogs will be re-vaccinated under CDC's programme (second year of vaccination), which will only boost their immunity. They were highlighted with pink food colour, which is not harmful, to make sure that the same dog is not vaccinated twice. It's always good to see Bangladesh taking initiatives that we see in developed countries. People are becoming more compassionate towards animals and that's a good thing!

Mehrin Karim, By e-mail