

## Revive the Mosquito Control Department

Bring it under the two city corporations

AT a time when the residents of Dhaka are suffering from the unending menace of mosquitoes, the Mosquito Control Department, situated in Old Dhaka, is sitting idle with its limited authority to control the problem. A Daily Star report published on June 9 reveals that the office building of the department itself is a breeding ground for mosquitoes and being used mostly as a warehouse for storing insecticides.

When the department was established in 1948 to eradicate malaria, it had a strong workforce that carried out regular drives against mosquitoes and the breeding grounds. But currently, its 281-strong staff have little to do because the department is not empowered enough to carry out any activity on its own. Its main activity now is to distribute insecticides to all the zones under Dhaka South City Corporation and Dhaka North City Corporation, whose actions in controlling the problem have not been adequate.

And while the department is sitting idle with its limited impact, the residents of Dhaka are bearing the brunt. Cases of dengue and chikunguniya have risen alarmingly during the last few years, as our two city corporations have been ineffective in eradicating these life-threatening mosquitoes. According to the Department of Health, around 10,148 people were diagnosed with dengue in 2018, with 26 deaths reported.

In order to fight the menace in Dhaka, it is imperative that the government make the department effective again. It should get full authority to start the mosquito eradication campaign all over again, as it did in the past, quite successfully at that. It could be brought under the two city corporations so that the anti-mosquito drive is dovetailed and efforts economised. It is also important that the department be able to continue with its research activities relating to mosquito control.

## The sorry state of Bailey bridges

Neglected for decades!

WE are not really surprised to know that frequent collapses of Bailey bridges have been reported across the country. Truckers, overloading their vehicles, go into these decades-old bridges causing them to fall apart. Although there are signs warning drivers of the dangers of overloaded vehicles on the bridges, most of them do not pay heed to these notices, leading to accidents that take precious lives and disrupt communication.

What does puzzle us though is that this is a scenario that has been played out over and over again for years and yet no steps have been taken to fix it. Why this inexplicable lethargy regarding maintenance of these bridges? According to a report in this paper, the Roads and Highways Department (RHD), the authority in charge of the maintenance of such infrastructure, had done a preparatory survey in 2015 that found most Bailey bridges to be in unsafe condition; some of them had already collapsed. The lack of proper maintenance had left most of the bridges in precarious conditions, the survey reported. So what has the RHD been doing for the last four years? Why have these bridges not been repaired or replaced?

Another important oversight has been the practice of vehicle owners modifying their vehicles to accommodate more load than they are supposed to be carrying. These modifications are illegal yet these vehicles manage to pass all fitness tests from BRIA. How is this possible?

As far as maintenance issues are concerned, we hope that the RHD will take immediate steps to repair/replace the dilapidated Bailey bridges. According to an engineer of RHD, a database of bridges is being created to help set maintenance priorities. She has also been quoted in the report saying that all Bailey bridges would be replaced by concrete bridges. We sincerely hope that implementation of such improvement plans does not take forever. Bailey bridges are but temporary structures and should have been replaced long ago by permanent ones.

## BUDGET FY19-20

# An important answer to look for in the budget



ERESH OMAR JAMAL

THE OVERTON WINDOW  
OF the best instruments the government can use to serve those it works for—presumably the citizens—is the national budget. Unfortunately, if one was to ask ordinary citizens, independent analysts and experts to rate how successfully the government implemented and formulated recent budgets, it would not get an A+, not even close.

Budget implementation being a struggle is an old story. And while one can hope to hear a different tale this time, it is too early to concern ourselves with that—but not too early to draw up an improved budget which will be more inclusive in who it aims to benefit, compared to the previous years. As there has been no dearth of empirical (real-life) evidence and people to put them into context by now, highlighting in very obvious terms the faults in past budgets.

One of the biggest blunders made by the government in past budgets was its failure to address inequality—not only by not adopting measures to reduce inequality but also because budgetary allocations themselves worsened it. And this should not be taken lightly, particularly given how the “inequality” that I am referring to is deeply tied to a number of different things.

Take, for instance, the poor allocations to matters of social security such as healthcare.

A major shock that generally threatens to put middle-class families into lower income groups, or even poverty, is some form of critical illness. This is why it is essential for the government to provide good healthcare services at low cost, to keep the market competitive, and to prevent private healthcare cost from rising astronomically. But so far, practically nothing has been done to make healthcare more affordable. Over the last years, budgetary allocation for healthcare has been abysmal, so much so that in 2016 the government provided

just 4.3 percent of budgetary allocation to healthcare, which was the lowest since 2010-11, amidst increasing health concerns among the general populace due in large part to worsening environmental conditions. This figure has gone up in the last two years, but barely. And per capita government spending on healthcare is still embarrassingly low, at nearly half the USD 54 recommended by the World Health Organization.

This, despite the fact that four to five million people are being pushed into poverty every year because of healthcare expenditures (according to a 2015 study

policies in past years, we can see that her assertion is true, but in reverse.

For example, according to a *Prothom Alo* report, three of the most developed regions in the country—Dhaka, Chattogram and Gopalganj—are getting about 37 percent of the total development budget allocation. And whereas there could be valid arguments for why they get relatively higher allocations (even though perhaps not this high), what is absolutely shocking is that the most poverty-stricken districts of Kurigram, Rangpur, Dinajpur, Gaibandha and Lalmonirhat receive the least amount of development



by the health ministry). And those already in lower income groups, especially those outside the capital, barely have any quality healthcare options available to them—forcing them to seek treatment in Dhaka and bear absurdly high healthcare and lodging costs as a result.

This brings us to the issue of regional disparity. When we think of inequality, more often than not we think along class lines. However, some of the worst forms of inequality tend to exist along regional boundaries—like it does within Bangladesh.

According to Fahmida Khatun, Executive Director at the Centre for Policy Dialogue, public policy can play “the most important role” in reducing the “gap between the advanced and less advanced districts.” If we look at the nature of public

allocation according to the government’s own figures—Kurigram gets 0.8 percent, Rangpur 0.8 percent, Dinajpur 0.5 percent, Gaibandha 0.3 percent and Lalmonirhat 0.5 percent. This has only contributed to the rising disparity happening across regions.

Returning to social security, past budgets show us that the government has also neglected the education sector, similar to healthcare. Despite signing the Dakar Declaration years ago, which says the government would increase budgetary allocation to the sector to 6 percent of GDP, the government seems to have forgotten its obligation.

Budgetary allocation to education has been floating at around 2 percent, whereas, according to noted educationist Syed Manzoorul Islam, “investment in

the sector should be 25 percent of total budgetary outlay, or 6 percent of GDP.” As many eminent academics have pointed out, allocation to education should not be increased all at once because of the issue of absorption capacity. This makes the government’s refusal to increase allocation step-by-step every year by significant amounts—so that it doesn’t create a situation where allocation cannot be increased because the sector hasn’t developed the capacity to absorb it—all the more confusing. It’s especially so when we look at the fact that similar to healthcare, budgetary allocation to education in 2016 was the lowest since 2009-2010, at only 1.8 percent of gross domestic product.

While all this has been happening, the government injected a total of Tk 20,584 crore of taxpayers’ money into the state-run banks in the last 17 years for which it has nothing to show for—nothing good at least—as the wheel of endless bank bailouts in the face of increasing default loans continues to spin at an ever-faster rate. Why is this significant? Because it leaves the government no excuse to claim it didn’t have enough resources to invest in matters of social security, such as education and healthcare—since it wasted more than Tk 20,000 crore to appease banking and other special interests.

It further gives rise to another question: why the government’s budgetary policies have been designed not to help the majority of people, which automatically would have helped reduce inequality, but rather a select group of people, including many in the banking sector. Is it because these policies are not really working for the general populace but rather a handful of special interests?

Given that its past “mistakes” have become so obvious by now, and have been pointed out loud and clear by a number of people, we might get the answer to that question after all—by checking the next budget (and subsequent budgets after that) to see if the government has reversed its bad policies or if it has decided to continue with them, giving to the few by taking from the many.

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# Will Modi switch to a more inclusive brand of politics?



ZIAUS SHAMS CHOWDHURY

INDIA’S Prime Minister Narendra Modi enormously dominated the 2019 Lok Sabha electoral battlefield. His landslide victory emphatically affirmed his complete control of Indian politics, evident in the extent to which his adversaries were disgraced and ignored by voters. Rahul Gandhi and Mamata Banerjee were utterly humiliated in the election. So, they offered their resignation from their posts (which was subsequently refused by their parties).

Mr Modi, however, faced a considerable amount of criticism from the international media regarding his first five years in power and his campaign tone. For example, the *Time Magazine* called him “The Divider in Chief.” Many others condemned his pre-election rhetoric as the most vitriolic and divisive in the history of Indian politics.

But now, his critics have been gasping at the scale of his victory. In today’s unfathomably complex Indian politics, Mr Modi’s achievement is noteworthy. In the first three decades after independence, the Indian National Congress led first by Pandit Nehru and then by his daughter Indira Gandhi monopolised the political scene, and there were hardly any serious challengers. During those years, regional parties had not come into the national political fray. So, if one makes an objective appraisal of Mr Modi’s electoral success, there can be no two opinions about the fact that he has made history.

An Indian political scholar cerebrally pointed out in a piece, published by *The Telegraph*, that Modi has successfully stamped his personality on every good act of his government. He made the voters see every act of social welfare as a gift flowing from his generosity and concern for the people. From the perspective of the elections, the strategy worked wonders. In a way, his personality cult has engendered a paradigm shift in Indian politics.

One of his smart moves that significantly transformed the voters’ sentiments at a crucial moment was his “surgical” strike on Pakistan. Whatever may have been the reality of the strike, the decision led voters to see Modi as a strong leader who will not surrender to external threats, yet still manage to bring about a resolution.

Mr Modi has ensured that BJP is now the only political party with genuine footprints all over the country.



Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

PHOTO: REUTERS

In comparison, the Congress and smaller regional parties look starkly inconsequential. In this election, BJP dominated in states where it was practically unknown in 2014. The West Bengal is the most striking example. Just before the election, as the Congress and other parties were haggling among themselves to establish alliances, there appeared to be an illusion that the Lok Sabha polls could be something of a real fight. How hollow those assumptions turned out to be!

The foremost question now is how seriously one can take Mr Modi’s post-election hints, that he is contemplating a shift to a more inclusive and unifying form of governance. With the election now behind him, Modi said that he wants to win the hearts of those who did not support him this time.

Oftentimes, politicians say a lot of things they don’t earnestly mean. When a new situation emerges and new needs have to be addressed, political leaders tweak their rhetoric. The international media has expressed concerns about Mr Modi’s Hindutva leanings and episodes of bigotry from some BJP hawks, which might lead Modi to reconsider his political stance. The editorial board of Britain’s *The Guardian* newspaper talked about the Muslims being “lynched with apparent impunity.” The article in question says, “the landslide win for Mr Modi will see

India’s soul lost to dark politics.” *The Guardian* mentions that support in India for autocratic rule (55 percent) is higher than anywhere else including Putin’s Russia, as revealed by polling in 2017. In his constituent assembly speech, Mr BR Ambedkar had once said, “Bakhti in religion may be a road to salvation of the soul. But in politics, Bakhti hero worship is a sure road to degradation and eventual dictatorship.”

After Hindus, Muslims are the second largest religious population in India. According to the Census 2011, there are roughly 172 million Muslims, who constitute more than 14.2 percent of the entire population. If BJP under Mr Modi is to deliver on its promise to lift India from the world’s sixth biggest economy to the third position, a reasonable level of religious tolerance and social tranquillity must be attained.

Clearly, Mr Modi faces a situation wherein he needs to act carefully. His success in tackling today’s complex challenge of unifying the nation is uncertain and remains to be seen. However, the political world is transient, and policies that leaders follow can change depending on the needs of a particular moment. There are many historical examples that demonstrate this fact: Mr Jinnah’s much-acclaimed assertion in the Constitutional Assembly speech of August 11, 1948, reflecting

a secular vision for the new nation of Pakistan, and affirming separation of the state and religion—that all religious communities would be “equal citizens of one state”—had amazed political commentators. It was, however, deemed self-contradictory to his two-nation theory, which was the bedrock of his fight for a separate state for the Muslims of India, prior to Partition in 1947.

Now that Mr Modi is in a supremely invincible position, it is plausible that he may configure a new strategy in order to leave a constructive legacy in politics. And for all that to go smoothly, it is important that he prioritises addressing the current state of polarisation and intolerance among the general public in the country.

Previously, the international media had shredded BJP’s communal rancour towards the Muslims. Mr Modi must be aware that his previous divisive political rhetoric has negatively affected India’s image in the global map. When celebrating the outcome of the recent election, he indicated that he would work to win over those voting segments that might have been alienated before. One could infer from such statements that his government would try to reach out to India’s main minority group—the Muslims.

The hope that Mr Modi has raised will be put to test before long. Ziaus Shams Chowdhury is a former ambassador.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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### Who controls the private banks?

Experts and ordinary citizens alike have been sceptical about the impact of high interest rates that have prevailed since some time now. Bangladesh Bank too has expressed concerns about the raised interest rate spread and is said to be monitoring the situation closely.

Investment has been around 23 percent of the gross domestic product despite the nation having crossed the 8 percent benchmark in terms of growth. *The Daily Star* commented on the perpetual decline in the deposit growth—raising concerns about the stability of the banking sector. This low investment does not bear good news for the creation of new jobs in the country.

In order to encourage private spending, measures have been taken in order to reduce the interest rate spread. In January 2019, the weighted average interest rate spread was 4.15 as compared to the higher rate of 4.41 in 2018 for scheduled banks. Still, many banks, owing to relaxed regulations, maintain their average interest rate above the preferred and optimal rate. Banks are now trying to set interest rates, not conforming to the ones established by the central bank, but driven by their own profit maximising motives.

The government must undertake the difficult task of addressing these discrepancies in the banking sector. With the banks already suffering from weak administration, this will have to be dealt with very tactfully.

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by email