

## Three years after Holey Artisan attack

### It would be wise not to slacken our guard

IT is three years to the day that the country suffered the worst terrorist attack since August 21, 2004. It was a tsunami of sorts that affected the collective national psyche apart from its impact on the expatriate community and on some of our very close friends and development partners. We remember with deep sorrow the victims of a ruthless group which was breaching every tenet of the religion they were claiming to profess and the teachings they were trying to propagate. We also recall the efforts of the first responders and other security forces who suffered casualties. And we recall with admiration the bravery and sacrifice of a young man, Faraz, who preferred death to the ignominy of forfeiting his principles.

We are happy to note that since that very fateful day of July 1, 2016, we had not seen any activity of the extremists, and that goes entirely to the credit of the law-enforcing agencies for having ensured that. However, we feel it is important to remind ourselves that such a phenomenon that stuck us with all its venom will not be entirely defeated unless the conditions that cause its germination in the first place are mitigated. We take comfort from the assurances of the head of our security agencies when we are told that the threat is not big. But that is no reason to be euphoric.

The fact that the IS has been deprived of their base and a solid ground to operate from, is all the more reason to firm up our guard. They will seek sanctuaries in other countries, particularly where the ground is fertile for absorbing them. Without appearing to be alarmist, we have to say that Bangladesh has been on the radar of international extremists. And only a constant alertness and awareness of the public would allow us to thwart effectively the phenomenon of militancy in the country.

## Main accused of Rifat's murder yet to be arrested

### Political connection must not stand in the way of law

IN a previous editorial, we wrote that the criminals who viciously murdered Rifat Sharif in broad daylight and in front of his wife would not have done so, had they not believed for some reason that they could get away with it. And surely enough, we now have our answer. The answer is that the killers were connected in a whole host of ways to local AL leaders who are now pointing fingers at each other for patronising these goons. It is through connections with these leaders that these elements gained power in Barguna, so much so that one of the main accused, Sabbir Hossain Nayan, despite being apprehended with drugs previously, was roaming around freely which gave him the opportunity to murder Rifat.

Nayan is close to a local lawmaker. On the other hand, Rifat Farajee and Risan Farajee, who are also suspects in the case, are nephews of the chairman of Barguna district council. While the two factions have tried to distance themselves from all three suspects after the murder, reports suggest that the only reason why this gang—known as 007—managed to amass such power and influence in the area was because of the backing they were given by the local leaders.

Under the circumstances, we cannot help but question whether these murderers are still being shielded from the process of law because of their political connections. Otherwise, why is it that they are still at large when their identities are well-established?

The entire situation is indicative of the prevailing state of the rule of law—where criminals are groomed by influential quarters and elevated to a point where they believe they can get away with doing whatever they want. And indeed, in many cases they literally do.

We hope this time it will prove to be different, and those who so brutally murdered Rifat in front of his helplessly protesting wife are exemplarily punished.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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PHOTO: LEE SMITH/REUTERS

## Holding our breath!

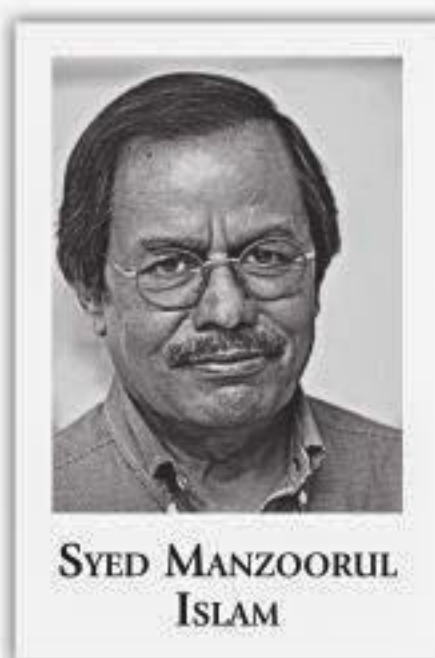
Right now, the people of the country are amidst the World Cup Cricket frenzy. People look to sports for excitement and it is a good distraction from the negative incidents that continue to take place in the country.

But even in cricket, hope has begun to dwindle. The whole country was rooting for Afghanistan to win against Pakistan because it would have meant higher chances for Bangladesh to reach the semi-finals, but unfortunately, Afghanistan lost by a narrow margin to Pakistan, now making our possibility of going through to the semis even slimmer.

We can now only hope that in the next two matches against India and Pakistan, our team will perform outstandingly. Win or lose, we hope their performance on the field makes us all proud. Our best wishes are with them.

Nur Jahan, Chattogram

# Education budget FY2019-20: The missing links



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about the market, taxation and specific economic goals. In the context of countries like ours, the budget is also expected to address issues of equity and social justice, unemployment, poverty reduction and redistribution of income along with achieving fiscal discipline.

A layman may or may not know the etymology of the word "budget" which comes from the Old French word *bougette*, meaning "little bag", equivalent to the briefcase our finance minister carries into the parliament out of which the budget comes—but surely feels the pinch as his shopping bag becomes smaller and smaller every year. This explains why, before the budget is presented in the parliament in the month of June, low- and middle-income families begin to worry about price hikes of essential goods. And in keeping with this genuine worry, our media focuses primarily on the goods and services that would be costlier or slightly cheaper, as if the whole business of the budget boils down to setting the price of consumer goods. The other overriding concern appears to be the sector-wise budget allocations, particularly in education, health and agriculture, and a comparison with allocations in previous years. Some other sectors, such as communication, public administration and public order, receive some attention (the notable exception being defence, about which there is hardly any discussion anywhere) but only marginally and as a matter of routine.

It is encouraging to see education taking the centre stage in public and media discussion because without ensuring global competence for our students, we cannot expect them to survive in the fiercely competitive world of education and work.

This year's (FY2019-20) budget, which was presented in the parliament about a couple of weeks ago, is the biggest—but not necessarily the most ambitious—so far, and has been described by the government and ruling party functionaries as "pro-people". Top trade bodies also find it growth-enhancing and investment-friendly. The budget indeed has made more money available to the government's mega projects and development schemes. But the statistics that embellish the financial plan overshadow the core values that go into

the making of budget philosophy. The term "philosophy" may appear to be at odds with the hardnosed preoccupation a budget requires, but no one can deny the importance of the budget reflecting the values a nation and its culture cherish. Thus integrity, accountability, transparency and diversity are integral to budget philosophy, along with a commitment to excellence, quality and creative solutions.

This year's budget has been seen by civil society organisations and economic and policy think tanks as friendly towards the rich and the unprincipled while being harsh to low- and middle-income people. How can one, for example, justify the provision of turning black money white? Why should taxes on national savings instruments—whose interest provides some relief to a large number of low- and middle-income families—be doubled? Who can explain the leniency shown to

make various pressure groups happy. But the philosophy, which also outlines sector-wise vision and action, should have been pursued, if not in its entirety, at least in key investment areas. Education, health and social welfare (collectively put under the rubric of "human resource development") are some of the areas where budget allocation should not be considered purely in financial terms, but as a form of social investment which brings manifold returns, both tangible and intangible, in the long run.

Our expenditures in health and education (as a percentage of GDP) are the lowest in South Asia, demonstrated in Unesco Institute for Statistics' comparative picture of recent (2017-8) budget provisions in education in South Asia (as a percentage of GDP): Afghanistan at 3.9 percent; Bangladesh at 2.1; Bhutan at 7.1; India at 3.8; Maldives at 4.3; and Pakistan at 2.8. It is true that

The below-par allocation to education is further pruned by the 80-85 percent budget implementation, poor budget management and corruption.

In countries like ours, budgetary provision for human resource development needs to follow an equalisation model which stipulates that the poor are provided more so that the opportunity gap between them and the privileged class is narrowed each year through incremental investments in areas that are vital for improving quality of life. This year's budget does promise some action on this front but if the actions are not supported by necessary funding, the gap will, in fact, widen. Human resource development would have seen a great deal of quality improvement if the budget operated from a philosophical base in addition to a fiscal one. In education, for example, this would have, among others, led to: (i) implementation of important government education documents such as the National Education Policy 2010; (ii) quality intake of teachers and their continuous improvement through training; (iii) raises in teachers' salary, especially at the primary and secondary levels; (iv) quality enhancement in teaching, learning and research; (v) region-wise allocation ensuring equal opportunities to students from hard-to-reach regions; (vi) inclusivity of marginalised communities; (vii) better schools, better curricula, quality textbooks; and (viii) an end to coaching centre and rote-learning-based, certificate-oriented education.

Education should not be a mere line item in a budget; rather it should be the most important area of collective, national investment. Sustained and incremental investment in education alone can ensure the nation's competitiveness at a time when the Fourth Industrial Revolution is upon us, whose growth will be exponential and which will demand cutting-edge technologies for excelling in every sphere of human activity—from agriculture to construction to aviation. Education alone can provide us the required level of competence to reap the benefits of the revolution, which, experts say, has already begun. But along with providing the highest level of knowledge and skills, education should also be inclusive, universal and humane. These ideals cannot be realised in a piecemeal fashion: only a holistic approach may ensure their translation into action. If these are embedded in every document of the state, such as the yearly budget, and work plans are prepared and implemented accordingly, the results will be nothing but spectacular.

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PHOTO: ANDREW BIRAJ/REUTERS

loan defaulters?

A friend of mine, also an economist, told me that the budget indeed has a philosophy, a Keynesian one, where deficits are desirable, permanent deficits more so. But the budget appears to ignore many promises that were made in the Awami League's election manifesto before the last general election. Didn't the manifesto declare, in no uncertain terms, that no black money would be allowed to be whitened? The minimum tax ceiling hasn't been raised in this year's budget despite prices of essential commodities increasing more than 10 percent over the year. This also goes against the spirit of the manifesto which proposed widening the tax net without hurting the lower tax bracket people. Bangladesh fares poorly (worst in South Asia) in terms of the tax/GDP ratio as many affluent tax dodgers still remain outside the tax regime.

Budget philosophy may have given way to the politics of budgeting, which helps

in monetary terms, the size of this year's education budget is bigger than last year's, but considered as a percentage of GDP, the allocation seems to have remained the same as last year's. One puzzling aspect of this year's education budget is the inclusion of technology in the line item. While some aspects of technology such as digital resources used by educational institutions may be part of the education budget, what about the money set aside for the Rooppur Nuclear Power Plant project?

The Centre for Policy Dialogue in its assessment of the FY2019-20 budget has shown how government expenditure on education has declined from 12 percent of the national budget in FY2009 to 11.7 percent in FY2020. The government's own 7th Five Year Plan envisaged spending 2.8 percent of GDP in education by the end of the plan period while Unesco proposes the figure to be six percent which is globally accepted as a desirable benchmark.

## NRC: A test for Modi's 'sabka viswas' vision



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draft document of the 1951 document that is being updated on an order of the Supreme Court to weed out illegal immigrants from the state. The exclusion of the latest names from the NRC was announced by the Assam coordinator of the NRC, thereby swelling the number of those kept out of the document to more than 41 lakh. The final NRC draft published on July 30 last year excluded 40,07,707 persons out of which a little over 3.6 million filed claims against their exclusion. And the latest exclusion of 102,462 people was the result of the scrutiny of those claims.

According to the state coordinator for NRC, those in the new exclusion list, which came a little over a month before the Apex Court-set deadline for publication of the final NRC, will be informed individually through letters to be delivered at their residential addresses along with the reason of exclusion after which they can file claims against the dropping of their names and the hearings of their claims will start on July 5.

The coordinator cited the reasons for the exclusion in three categories. One, those who are declared "foreigner", doubtful voter or persons with cases pending at Foreigners' Tribunals, a quasi-judicial body, or their descendants, as applicable, discovered after publication of the final draft NRC in July last year. Two, persons who were found to be ineligible while appearing as witness in hearings held for disposal of claims and objections. There is a third category of people who were found to be ineligible during the process of verification carried out by the Local Registrars of Citizens under provisions of Clause 4(3), post publication of the final NRC draft. As per the clause, the local registrar, before the final publication of NRC, may take up verification of such persons. And

according to NRC officials, the latest exclusion is the result of the continuing process of re-verification of the names in the final NRC draft. There is no official word on the breakup of the people as per their religious identities in the latest list of one lakh people excluded.

The Supreme Court, which is monitoring the process of updating the NRC, had ordered that those declared foreigners and their descendants are to be kept out of the NRC while the names of doubtful voters and persons who have cases pending in Foreigners' Tribunals are to be kept on hold till their cases are

who could be left out of the final NRC in July this year? NRC officials do not rule out fresh exclusion or inclusion in the final NRC. In the case of exclusion, these would be among the two lakh persons who were included among the 2.89 crore names in the final draft NRC published in July 2018 but against whom "objections" were filed by other people later. If these people cannot prove their citizenship with proper documents, they run the risk of being left out of the final NRC to come out on July 31 this year. But this is not the end of the road for those excluded. They can move the Foreigners' Tribunal which

them can get Indian citizenship under the Citizenship Amendment Bill proposed to be moved by Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government.

It is interesting to note that while the NRC aims at keeping out "illegal immigrants" in Assam irrespective of their religion, the Citizenship Amendment Bill seeks to give citizenship to "persecuted" religious minorities from Bangladesh, Pakistan and Afghanistan. The difficulty is that the Bill is dead. After being passed by the Lok Sabha during the first five-year term of the Modi government, the previous Bill could not be tabled in the Rajya Sabha where ruling Bharatiya Janata Party lacked majority. The BJP has promised to introduce a fresh Citizenship Amendment Bill in the new Lok Sabha even though as of today, the party lacks the arithmetic to guarantee its approval in the upper house of parliament. However, the saffron party has a comfortable majority in the Lok Sabha to ensure the Bill's passage there.

One thing is clear: the NRC and the Citizenship Amendment Bill bring out the identity politics in Assam by being juxtaposed with each other. It remains to be seen if this will be in sync with Modi's addition of "sabka viswas"—which refers to his party's efforts to secure the trust of religious minorities—to his earlier call of "sabka saath sabka vikas." By bringing in "sabka viswas", Modi has set the bar much higher for a test of his inclusive vision of India and he has to keep this in mind while taking forward the NRC project to reaffirm the Hindutva politics.

Finally, there remain two key questions: what will be the status of those left out of the final NRC in July this year? And how does the government plan to deal with them? Many who do not find their names in the final draft of NRC have their names in the voters' list in Assam and have voted in the recent parliamentary election. But will they lose their voting rights if they are out of the final NRC? Will they, irrespective of their religion, be able to claim Indian citizenship in any state other than Assam? Earlier a view had emerged that these people should have their basic rights protected and be given work permits but their political rights be taken away.

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People wait to check their names on the first draft of the National Register of Citizens in Kamrup district of Assam on January 1 last year.

PHOTO: KULENDU KALITA/AFP

decided by the tribunals, irrespective of them clearing the NRC verification processes. The absence of a common database means thousands of declared foreigners, doubtful voters and persons who have cases pending found their names in the final draft NRC. The exercise of addition or deletion of names in the NRC is not new. For instance, when the first draft of the NRC was made public on December 31, 2017, it had 1.90 crore names but the final draft that came out in July 2018 deleted the names of 1.5 lakh out of the 1.90 crore.

So, what is the total number of people

has to take a decision within 120 days, as per an order of the home ministry issued in May this year. The legal course for those aggrieved by the Foreigners' Tribunal does not end there as they can move the High Court and the Supreme Court for redress.

In the case of inclusion, if claims for inclusion of names in the NRC are backed by requisite papers, the number of 41 lakh kept out of the document would come down. However, if objections to inclusion of names are held valid, they can further push up the number of those excluded. The final number of those kept out of the NRC may also vary if some of