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Planning ministry frustrated with the state of development projects!

But will it take steps to rectify the problems hindering timely implementation?

We share the planning ministry's frustration over repeated modifications in projects, long delays, increased costs, failure to conduct proper feasibility tests and flouting of rules and regulations of high-ups, among other long-standing problems that hinder the efficient implementation of development schemes. At a meeting of secretaries from all ministries and divisions, concerns were also raised about people directing as many as eight or nine projects at a time, even though there are rules stating that one person cannot be the director for multiple projects. Directors are absent from project sites and officials design the project without testing its feasibility, as a result of which costs increase and there is lag in implementation. Even the Planning Minister MA Mannan admitted that rules get "ignored on some occasions" while Cabinet Secretary Khandker Anwarul Islam reminded the secretaries that there are provisions for punishment if rules and regulations are not followed.

Cost escalations, modification of components and time extensions of development projects have, unfortunately, become a norm, and while we appreciate the planning ministry's candour and concern in this regard, we can't help but wonder what steps, if any, it has taken over the years to ensure that rules and project deadlines are followed and that corruption is put in check from the design to the implementation phases. Despite repeated instances of corruption, inefficiency and a lack of foresight on the part of those directing and designing the projects, no one has been held responsible for the exponential increase in costs or the unacceptable delays in implementation, for which ordinary citizens, i.e. taxpayers, have to suffer. We were encouraged by the planning minister last year when he announced that no project would be revised more than twice and that implementation agencies would have to explain any delay, but it remains unclear if, and to what extent, that announcement was realised.

A working paper by the planning ministry stated that it approved 18 amended projects worth Tk 51,113 crore under nine ministries in June and July this year, but that on average, the cost of these projects increased by 34.86 percent—in some cases, the cost increased by 100 percent. This is unacceptable. We urge the concerned ministries, particularly the planning ministry, to take urgent and exacting steps to rectify the long-standing issues impeding the timely and cost-effective implementation of development projects.

70 pc students bearing the brunt of the pandemic

A more inclusive response crucial to rescue the youth

The uncertainty over public exams is weighing heavy on students as well as their families. Educational institutions all over the world are extending their closures to ensure safety of students but in the process are pushing them towards further insecurity. According to a study by the International Labour Organization (ILO), over 70 percent of the youths who study or combine study with work have been negatively impacted by the disruption in education brought about by Covid-19. It has diminished the employment prospects for the younger generation, pushing them further into depression and shock. The study also reveals that young women and young workers are being hit the hardest by the ongoing crisis.

The situation is even worse for youths living in lower-income countries—only 18 percent could afford to study online compared to 65 percent in high-income countries—as their access to internet and other resources to attend online classes is inadequate. Due to the transition from regular classes to online classes, 65 percent of young people reported having learned less since the beginning of the pandemic, while 38 percent are uncertain of their future careers. It seems that the crisis will create more obstacles in the labour market as one in six youths have already stopped working, and 42 percent of those who have continued to work have suffered from reduced incomes. A survey found that 50 percent of the youth are suffering from anxiety or depression, while an additional 17 percent are probably affected by it.

Poor access to online education and the shortage of IT support, along with the lack of study space at home, are problems across many households in our country and urgent steps must be taken to protect our youth from the mental and physical sufferings caused by the socio-economic fallout. The concerned ministries must immediately set up targeted policy responses to prevent further damage, ensuring the inclusion of the youth in these policy decisions. The government and private sector must work together in this regard to address the impending education and employment crisis and come up with concrete recommendations. This may also be a good time to revise the whole education system and make it more dynamic and inclusive so that the loss in education can be made up.

He gave to Mis'ry all he had, a tear



Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. In the UN Assembly in 1974, Bangabandhu said, "only an environment of peace would enable us to... mobilise and concentrate all our energies and resources in combating the scourges of poverty, hunger, disease, illiteracy and unemployment." Bangabandhu seems to be in total harmony with Mandela, who elsewhere said, "as long as poverty, injustice and gross inequality persist in our world, no one can rest in peace." What brings these two leaders together is not only their shared attitude towards peace but also their prison experience including their empathy towards their people.

With everyone joining the Sustainable Development Goals bandwagon, the categories such as hunger, poverty, peace, illiteracy have been reduced to quantifiable figures and development jargon. For Bangabandhu and Mandela, these were life lessons. Going through their personal jottings, shards from diaries, personal snippets, it is easy to see how their prison experiences influenced their understanding of the terms we often take for granted. Bangabandhu's *Prison Diaries* and Mandela's *Conversation with Myself* proffer moving accounts of their raw and unmediated thoughts. With outpouring numbers of books and publications, these two great figures have been subjected to a "culture industry". It is often tempting to get carried away with the larger than life aspects of these giant figures. But it is the simple things that they did and the tears they shed for common misery that make them human, and make them one of us.

While reading the *Prison Diaries*, I was struck by Bangabandhu's attention to the simple things in life. On his death anniversary, I shall reflect on some of the prison anecdotes that he recorded in five of his notebooks written between 1958 and 1969. These notes *Karagarer Rojnamcha*, have been folded into one volume as *Prison Diaries* (2018). Bangabandhu spent almost a quarter of his 55 years of life in prison. He became aware of the many jails that exist within a jail. In the first notebook, Bangabandhu writes, "I have been there as a political prisoner, as a prisoner sentenced to hard

labour as well as an under-trial prisoner. I can feel the state of the prisoners in my bones. I won't go into detail about the things that happened to me, rather I shall describe what others do while in jail." I find this to be the most selfless statement of the book. True to his claim, seldom does he linger on his personal pain and trauma, yet he takes time to give sympathetic ears to the stories of other inmates. For instance, while describing different segments (*dafa*) of jail, he describes the *Shaitaner Kol* (Devil's Engine) where inmates are engaged in producing blankets from cotton. After a day's work in the factory, the prison-workers would look like "devils" covered in clouds of cotton dust. He learns the



Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, 1973, Dhaka.

meaning of the prison lingo from a convict and records it verbatim in his notebook. Yet when he was forced to work in a cotton factory in Faridpur Jail, where he was not given division as a political prisoner, he simply reported: "I was assigned work after being brought to Faridpur Jail. I had to cut cotton threads since I was no longer a political prisoner but a convict serving out his sentence. After I had served three months thus, my sentence of hard labour was done. I became a purely political prisoner once more." Notice the lack of hardship in his account.

This is the very man who listens to others with childlike simplicity. He stands by the water reservoir where the mentally challenged inmates are given a forced bath; he makes sure that the use

of convicts in place of bullocks in an oil-seed crusher is topped; he listens to the sweeping chants of the cleaners loaded with insults for the police superiors, or he tries to make sense of the prison lingo. He wonders how could the phrase "case table" (where prisoner's case history is recorded or evaluated) turn into "casetakol". He reflects on the sage looking religious man preaching verses from the holy book who has come to jail convicted of raping a minor. He talks about the doctors who take bribe to place prisoners on a special diet or send to medical centres. He tells us of the sodomy that goes on inside the prison, and how two inmates fought over one juvenile prisoner. He talks about his desire to kiss

because he allowed an admirer to pass on a sweet while he was being transported from one jail to another. *Prison Diaries* tells us how he found comfort in listening to the stories of others.

Towards the end of his first notebook, he details the life of a thief, Ludu of Lutfur Rahman Lane. When Bangabandhu met him inside the jail, he was already the longest-serving prisoner there. The story of Ludu's life is rather ordinary, but it is the extraordinary attention with which Bangabandhu notes down the details that intrigued me the most. Ludu came from a well-to-do family, but his luck changed when his father remarried. Ludu had to learn to take care of his mother at an early age and eventually entered the world of crime. Drinking, pickpocketing, mugging, raiding, burglary—you name it. He even carved a cavity inside his throat ("khokaru") to hide away stolen goods. He climbed up the crime ladder by paying corrupt police officials a portion of his booty.

Bangabandhu knew that such a detailed account of a thief may confuse his readers. He explains, "You may wonder why I took an interest in the life of a simple thief. His life, for me, is a true reflection of our society. Only by musing seriously about the lives of people within our society can we arrive at an understanding of the malaise afflicting it; only then might we be able to work out how some individuals around us end up as pickpockets or dacoits."

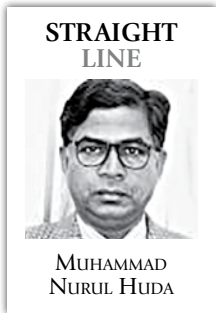
This for me is the essential Bangabandhu. A man who is ready to listen. A man who is willing to give voice to the voiceless. A man who knows how circumstances can construct one's destiny. The man who authored the destiny of our nation and made Bangladesh its *magnum opus* was successful because he paid attention to every word (read, ward) of his text. Ludu is a case study. His case could have been different if he had not had to face hunger while growing up.

Great leaders such as Bangabandhu and Mandela know from their experiences that people are essentially peace-loving. Injustice, inequalities, hunger morph them into things that they are not. They sought peace by ending the cause of human misery, and they factored in people as they believed all lives matter.

It is the simplicity and humility that makes a great leader great; that makes a man a friend. In the case of Bangabandhu—he gave his country all he had, a symbolic tear, his sympathies. In return, we have found a friend in him: *Banga Bandhu*, a friend of Bangladesh.

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Understanding the greatness of Bangabandhu



personified Bengali nationalism, just as Gamal Abdul Nasser personified Arab nationalism. His charisma was all-pervasive and he became a household name in every village of Bangladesh. He succeeded in articulating the basic emotions which put him at his pinnacle. History singled him out to lead Bengal's struggle to complete emancipation.

The greatness of Bangabandhu can be adequately and realistically understood and appreciated if we correctly grasp the then socio-political situation of East Pakistan, the plight of Bangalis therein and how amidst huge adversity, the battle for complete emancipation had to be fought. It would be relevant to recall that the historic Lahore Resolution, in constitutional terms, demanded regional autonomy for the two Muslim majority, geographically and administratively delineated, areas.

The Lahore Resolution of 1940 had, in effect, sought regional autonomy and definitely not religious autonomy for the Muslims. This demand for autonomy remained the central driving force of the politics of the Bangalis throughout its incorporation in the Pakistan State. In that scenario, Bangabandhu was always at the forefront, forcefully advocating the cause of autonomy. He realised, quite correctly, that the commitment for regional self-rule, had been usurped by the central government of Pakistan. For him, in practical terms, it meant the exercise of central power by a non-Bangali dominated ruling elite drawn from the feudal classes of West Pakistan, allied with a military and bureaucratic elite where Bangalis were virtually excluded.

History bears witness to the fact that the denial of political power and also the demand for provincial autonomy was compounded by the assault on the cultural identity of the Bangalis, with the proclamation of Urdu as the only national language of Pakistan. Here also Bangabandhu was closely involved with the protest emanating from the student

and the cultural front. Additionally, one could see that the political domination and cultural subordination of the Bangalis was further compounded by the denial of democratic access to the economic opportunity being created by the Pakistan State.

Professor Rehman Sobhan comments that, "This denial of political right and economic opportunity to the Bangalis of Bangladesh provided the dynamic of the demand for democracy and self-rule for Bangladesh which constituted the central motivating force of Pakistan's politics for twenty four years of its existence as a unified State". Bangabandhu realised quite early that the ruling cabal was bent on establishing a Pakistani identity over a Bangali identity and that this



PHOTO: COLLECTED

coterie mischievously revived the notion of religious identity. To the Pakistani establishment, the assertion of a Bangali identity was un-Islamic as well as anti-Pakistani.

The highlighting of the separate political and economic aspirations of the Bangalis in Pakistan and their distinct cultural identity was no easy task. Major political struggle of the Bangalis, starting from the Language Movement of 1952 to the mass upsurge for democracy in 1969 were driven by the passionately held notion of separateness. For this separateness to grow into a sense of shared nationhood, it required a major political effort. The political stewardship for such venture was surely Bangabandhu's, who performed the catalytic act of political entrepreneurship

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It is also a fact of history that Bangabandhu played the politically critical role of institutionalising the growing sense of separateness between East and West Pakistan by presenting his historic Six Point Programme before the people of Pakistan in 1966. This programme brought into sharp focus the urgency of devolution of political power, policymaking and administrative authority as well as command over economic resources to the provinces. The Six Point demonstrated, for the first time, a formal recognition that political coexistence between East and West Pakistan, even within a democratic central government was no longer feasible.

Students of political science and history, in particular, need to understand that Bangabandhu realised the imperative of an overwhelming mandate from Bangalis to generate enough pressure on the military junta of Pakistan to devolve power to the Bangalis as per the Six Point Programme. He also believed that rejection of the universal demand of the Bangalis would jeopardise the very foundation of the Pakistan State. As events unfolded later, this assumption of Bangabandhu turned out to be prophetic.

Bangabandhu was extraordinarily brave and sagacious enough to seek a comprehensive popular mandate for his Six Point over the heads of his Bangali political rivals. This was necessary because in the preceding years all attempt to resist external political domination by Pakistani elite failed due to divisions amongst Bangali political leaders. Therefore, Bangabandhu's political campaign

from March 1969 emphasised on the separateness of our social, political and economic life. He successfully exhorted his Bangali audience to vote together to proclaim the right to live a separate life from West Pakistan.

To carry the message of Bangali nationalism into the consciousness of every household of Bangladesh, both rural and urban, was a huge task. Here also we witness the outstanding organisational skill of Bangabandhu. The most striking poster of the time titled "*Purbo Bangla shoshan keno?*" (Why Eastern Bengal is oppressed?) presented in simple language the statistics of disparity between East and West Pakistan. For the message to land on the doorstep of the voters, required large-scale party organisation and dedicated work. Bangabandhu's enviable organisational acumen facilitated the accomplishment of the monumental task.

In 1970, the massive electoral victory achieved due to Bangabandhu made complete regional autonomy a non-negotiable demand of the Bangalis. In early 1971, a resurgent Bangali people and a buoyant Bangabandhu convinced the obstinate military and scheming politicians that there was no scope to compromise on Six Point demand through inducement of power sharing at the centre. By this time, for Bangalis, the Six Point had turned into the only constitutional solution to the political crisis in Pakistan. The new found sense of nationalism had already started inspiring the demand for full political independence.

The uniqueness of Bangabandhu's leadership lay in the fact that national sovereignty was inculcated into the consciousness of the Bangali masses through a deliberate political process. Years of political mobilisation by Bangabandhu made the Bangalis conscious of their identity. The mass character of consciousness provided the underlying strength to the nationalist movement and the assertion of national sovereignty.

Bangabandhu's cruel assassination was an abominable conspiracy to marginalise the historic consciousness of the Bangalis. His assassination, quite clearly, was an assault on the inspirational sources of our nationhood. At present, when the nation mourns Bangabandhu's demise, it is time to gratefully remember and salute the great son of Bengal and at the same time renew our pledge to make sustained efforts to preserve our distinctive national identity.

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