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Murtaja Baseer’s legacy of creative activism

Farewell to a master painter!

WE are deeply saddened by the passing away of legendary artist, poet, litterateur and Language Movement veteran Murtaja Baseer. He was undergoing treatment at the ICU of a city hospital for severe respiratory problems and reduced oxygen consumption rate, along with other health complications. Doctors also confirmed that he was Covid-19 positive. The artist passed away in the hospital on the morning of August 15, creating an irreparable void in our art and culture arena.

Born in 1932 to Dr Muhammed Shahidullah and Marguba Khatun, Murtaja Baseer would regard himself as “an artist by chance”. In his six-decade-long career, Baseer was continuously experimenting and innovating, looking for new ideas to work with, which set him apart from many of his peers. *Wings of Butterfly*, *The Wall*, and *Epitaph for the Martyrs* are the kinds of work that depict the versatile genius of the maestro.

He became an active member of the student wing (Chhatra Federation) of the Communist Party in 1947, when he was a student of class nine. He zealously took part in the political campaigns of the Communist Party in 1950 and was later sent to jail for five months. Baseer was also at the forefront of the Language Movement in 1952. *Roktakto Ekushhey*, a painting by him on the incident of Ekushhey February is considered the first painting on our Language Movement.

The art maestro believed that his adherence to the communist ideology helped him paint on important social causes. While his series *The Wall* and *Wings of Butterfly*, created in the pre-liberation period, portrayed the socio-political turmoil that engulfed the nation at the time, the series *Epitaph for the Martyrs*, painted during the Liberation War, was dedicated to the martyrs of 1971. As a socially responsible artist, he tried to capture the struggles of the people around him. His friends and peers remember him as an artist uncompromising to his creations as well as a vibrant, charming and generous human being. His students remember him as a nurturing mentor who never imposed any ideas on them but helped them find their own concepts instead.

Murtaja Baseer occupies a unique place in the history of modern art of Bangladesh. He touched upon every significant chapter of the glorious history of our country through various art forms, including paintings, films and poetry. His creations will forever remain a source of inspiration for the present and aspiring artists of the future generations. May his soul rest in peace.

Compensate laid off temporary jute mill workers

Grave injustice done by tinkering with the law

SHUTTING down all 25 of the jute mills in the country in July, quite abruptly, was like cutting off the head to cure the headache. These were closed, we were told, because the BJMC had run up huge losses, which the state could no longer bear. While the wisdom of the decision is open to question, it can be said without fear of refutation that the closure has created another kind of problem for the state—the plight of the axed temporary workers. While the government, we are informed, has set aside Tk 500 crore for the permanent laid off workers, the temporary workers have been left high and dry, without a farthing to take home. Can the government afford to ignore them?

We ought to stress here that the word “temporary” used to refer to replacement workers is misplaced here. Even more unacceptable is the fact that the managements of these mills have cheated the so-called temporary workers by tinkering with the provisions that govern the rules of employment and pay and emoluments of temporary workers. Some of these “temporary” workers have been working for more than a decade, and whereas, a permanent worker, working for that long will have a hefty sum in his or her pocket after being laid-off, the poor temporary workers will find themselves, more than 8,000 of them, on the streets, literally panhandling.

It is a gross injustice when poor, and in most cases illiterate, people are cheated of their dues for the labour they have given all these years because the management has applied the rules in the most deceitful, unethical and immoral way. The temporary workers were terminated only a few days before the expiry of the three or six months’ probation period, as applicable, and re-employed, to avoid making them permanent.

We would call upon the government not to turn a blind eye to the plight of these temporary workers. If rules can be distorted for an insincere purpose, it can be adapted for honest and humane causes too. Give the temporary jute mill workers their dues.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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May peace prevail

Ever since the coronavirus pandemic struck the world, it has changed the course of our lives. Suddenly the world has become an unrecognisable place. Death and infection have become our daily reality. But even now, natural calamities, horrible accidents, political unrest, and heinous crimes are taking place just like before all across the world. At times I am frightened and overwhelmed by the thought of where the world is headed and what awaits us in the future.

I do not know when the Covid-19 situation will improve and humanity will be able to breathe a sigh of relief. Until that happens, I think all that we can do is behave responsibly and help those in need. We should all pray to the Almighty that He showers us with blessings and helps us get back to our normal lives that we all miss so dearly.

Nur Jahan, Chattogram

Bangladesh’s GDP growth number does not hold water



MACRO MIRROR

ALMOST a year ago, in this column, I wrote about the obsession of our policymakers’ with the growth of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) (“Our incomprehensible obsession with GDP”, May 19, 2019). I discussed in brief how GDP is estimated, and its inherent weaknesses which is why this indicator should not be taken so seriously.

Highly acclaimed economists have discarded this measure long ago as an indicator of economic prosperity. Among others, Nobel Laureate and Columbia University Professor Joseph Stiglitz has written time and again that the traditional way of measuring GDP is inaccurate and outdated. In the report “Mis-measuring Our Lives: Why GDP Doesn’t Add Up”, Stiglitz along with Nobel Laureate Professor Amartya Sen and Professor Jean-Paul Fitoussi talked about people becoming worse off even with higher average GDP.

Unfortunately, the fascination about GDP growth among our policymakers has led to yet another questionable number for the fiscal year 2019-20 (FY2020). Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS) has recently published the provisional data of the economy for FY2020. This shows the progress of various sectors and the GDP for the past fiscal year. The provisional GDP growth for FY2020 is estimated to be 5.24 percent. During a time when the whole world is facing the ravage of the ongoing Covid-19 and economies around the world have collapsed irrespective of their size and phases of development, Bangladesh’s growth number is not only astonishing but also misleading.

Growth during first three quarters

In his budget speech for FY2021 the finance minister announced that the GDP growth would be 5.2 percent in FY2020. This was a reduction from the originally projected 8.2 percent in view of the outbreak of coronavirus in the country. It was also projected that all major indicators would observe significant decline in FY2020 because of the negative impact of the corona pandemic.

Two months later, on August 10 2020, BBS came up with a set of national estimates. Newspaper reports indicate that these were based on data from July 2019 to March 2020. However, those have changed in BBS estimates now and some of those are even better than the previous FY2019. One of the key parameters of growth is investment as a share of GDP. In the budget speech of FY2021 in June this year, the growth of gross investment was revised downward to 20.8 percent from the originally projected 32.8 percent and

private investment was revised to 12.7 percent from the originally projected 24.2 percent. BBS data indicate that investment as a share of GDP has increased from 31.57 percent in FY2019 to 31.75 percent in FY2020. Private investment as a share of GDP has also risen from 23.54 percent in FY2019 to 23.63 percent in FY2020. Indicators related to private investment do not support this number. For example, till April 2020, private sector credit growth was only 8.8 percent. Import growth was negative (-) 8.8 percent and import of capital machineries went down to (-) 33.5 percent in April 2020. So where has this increased investment come from?

One may recall, even before the outbreak of coronavirus in Bangladesh most economic indicators were not doing well. There was large shortfall in revenue mobilisation, the pace of public investment projects was slow, bank borrowing by the government was high to meet up with budget deficit, financial

increased to some extent, total export declined by (-) 51.2 percent during April to June of FY2020. Import of capital machinery has declined drastically to (-) 33.8 percent as of June 2020.

The corona impact was not reflected also in the case of investment. While private investment has seen insignificant growth and has been hovering around 23 percent of GDP during the last few years, the increase of private investment during a pandemic period is somewhat puzzling. Entrepreneurs and bank officials have expressed concern about the decline in business and investments. As of June 2020, private sector credit growth was only 8.4 percent. Foreign direct investment (FDI) has declined by 42.5 percent in FY2020. Registration of investment projects with Bangladesh Investment Development Authority (BIDA) has declined by 55 percent during April-June 2020. Domestic resource mobilisation has declined by (-) 34.6 in April 2020.



PHOTO: ARKO DATTA/REUTERS

sector’s performance was not encouraging and both export and import growth was slowing down. This, no doubt would have implications for economic growth.

Impact of coronavirus pandemic ignored

Since the outbreak of coronavirus in March 2020, and because of the country-wide shutdown to contain the spread of the virus, the already stressed economic condition in Bangladesh has worsened. As domestic agricultural and industrial productions were interrupted, supply chains disrupted, businesses closed, and employment were lost, impoverishment among people has increased. Moreover, as Bangladesh is not detached from the global economy, it also faced the impact of coronavirus through reduced export, import and FDI. In the budget speech, both export and import were revised downward and projected to be (-) 10 percent in FY2020. Though recently export orders of the readymade garments have

However, the impact of coronavirus on the economy is not reflected in the provisional estimates of GDP. Without considering the performance of the last three months of FY2020, economic indicators and growth numbers are incomplete and doesn’t match reality.

Hence Bangladesh’s growth is way above many countries

The World Bank, in June 2020 had revised Bangladesh’s growth downward to 1.6 percent for FY2020. On the other hand, in June 2020, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) projected Bangladesh’s GDP growth to be 3.8 percent in 2020. The Centre for Policy Dialogue estimated Bangladesh’s GDP growth to be 2.5 percent in FY2020.

However, the impact of coronavirus on the economy is not reflected in the provisional estimates of GDP. As opposed to this, global economy has been projected to observe (-) 4.9 percent growth in 2020 by the IMF as of June 2020. For all major

economies, IMF’s projection is pessimistic. For example, the USA will see (-) 8 percent growth, Japan will observe (-) 5.8 percent growth, India will have (-) 4.5 percent growth, and China will achieve a positive growth of one percent. The World Bank forecasted India’s growth to be negative (-) 3.2 percent and China’s only one percent in 2020.

Thus, compared to the global and other countries’ growth forecasts, Bangladesh will do much better despite the negative impact of coronavirus. A number of reasons are attributable to this. First, Bangladesh has already had a high growth momentum during the last couple of years. Moreover, before and during the corona crisis, the Bangladesh economy has been supported by its strong domestic economy. Agricultural production has been good though its growth was slightly less in FY2020 compared to FY2019. Remittances saw strong increase in FY2020. The country could also make some savings due to low oil prices in the international market.

But work on improving the quality of life is inadequate

Bangladesh’s national statistics on economic indicators are problematic on three counts. First, many a times, several indicators are inconsistent with each other. Thus, the authenticity of data is questioned. Second, statistics have become politicised and are used as a political tool. As a result, the independence of the offices entrusted with data collection and reporting has been curtailed over time. Third, too much importance on GDP growth by the policymakers has taken their attention away from the real and urgent issue. That is, it is not GDP growth, but the quality of growth which should be focused on. There is no need to waste our valuable time on a faulty estimate which does not capture the inequality and inclusivity of economic growth. Per capita income of Bangladesh has increased from USD 1,909 in FY2019 to USD 2,064 in FY2020. This does not mean anything for anyone—rich or poor. The rich do not care about any change in this number as their income is a thousand times more than this. The poor also do not care as their income is far below and the average per capita income will never change their lives. What matters is how much is distributed among those who are furthest behind.

So, we need reliable data and better measure of economic advancement. Unfortunately, our GDP growth will not be able to show the extent of negative impacts of the historic coronavirus pandemic on a large section of the population. As a result, policies will also not be adequate to address the sufferings of people and recover from the challenges arising from the ongoing crisis.

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Trust lost between governments and citizens during Covid-19 pandemic?

RTI/FOI can help to retrieve it

SHAMSUL BARI AND RUHI NAZ

THE relationship between governments and the people has been badly affected by the Covid-19 pandemic in many countries. Except in a few countries, people found it difficult to believe the government’s information. They saw vast discrepancies between the reality and what they were told. Governments did not trust their citizens to “do the right thing”, and imposed measures rather than seeking cooperation. Ultimately, this lack of mutual trust made efforts to contain the virus more difficult.

How did we get here? When the pandemic began earlier in the year, all governments were confronted with an enemy utterly unknown to them. There was no knowledge as to how it will behave and what havoc it may cause. States had to gear up on a war footing. And in doing that, many fumbled.

Governments had to immediately devise ways and find means to contain the deadly enemy. They had to feed the public with information that would console and reassure them. People looked to governments for guidance and leadership. They wanted to know if they would be safe and healthy in their hands.

Some governments succeeded in carrying the people along, but the majority failed. As government measures to curb the menace failed to work, people began to lose faith in the information they received from public authorities. Populations began to ignore government strictures. Irate public authorities imposed strict surveillance measures. This further soured government-people relationship.

The buildup of such distrust under circumstances fostered by the crisis is not inevitable. Government measures to contain the pandemic may be categorised into three overlapping phases of activities—response, recovery and revival.

During the response phase, governments had to move fast, and bypass many established procedures which stood in the

way. Unfortunately, most governments did not care to explain their actions.

As the situation continued like this, peoples’ exasperation increased, and the information/trust gap widened. Governments ordered business to close, introduced lockdowns, controlled people’s movements, curtailed travel, reallocated economic activities to meet urgent medical needs and clamped down on critics and dissenters. They undertook procurement of medical supplies/equipment and engaged in a spending spree unprecedented in the history of most states. An inevitable result of all these frenzied activities was the emergence of cheats who engaged in profiteering. Governments did or could do little to tame public rage and fight corruption.

While tending to the immediate medical and health needs, governments had to start thinking about recovery needs. This required shifting of focus to economic activities and mitigating the broader impacts of the crisis. They had to consider returning public institutions to their normal mode. Businesses, industries, schools, offices, public transportation, restaurants, sports and other institution of public interest had to be reopened, while the virus continued its rampage. Public perceptions about these differed greatly. In many areas, governments had to move rather swiftly, shortcutting traditional controls, with unilateral executive actions. Such actions raised transparency and accountability concerns.

While most governments are still preoccupied with response and recovery, the reconstruction and rehabilitation process—the revival phase—cannot be left unattended for long. Governments are required to consider long-term improvements to public operations—to ensure preparedness to respond effectively to future health risks of such a magnitude. They will have to revisit the supply chains, reassess the preparedness and capacity of medical facilities, re-evaluate old rules and regulations, allow the spread of

technologies that have proven effective during the crisis, such as digitalisation.

The key to recovery of the lost trust will be the ability of governments to take the people along in the difficult tasks that lie ahead.

RTI/FOI Acts can help governments minimise citizen’s concerns about their actions. They can make proactive disclosures, as provided under the law, to inform people about measures taken. Many governments did that, some better than others. But more than that the law also provides for individual rights to obtain information that would go deeper and show whether government functionaries and bodies fulfilled their public responsibilities with diligence, honesty and integrity. Such information is often not susceptible to be proactively disclosed. And since individual use of the law became impossible in most countries because of the pandemic, citizens had no scope to obtain them. If governments are inclined to demonstrate their responsibility of transparency and accountability under the law, there are many ways of doing so. Unfortunately, such a sense of responsibility is lost on most public offices and officials.

Peoples’ need for information during the pandemic, as observed in most countries, has actually not been that great. They were limited primarily to areas where they felt uncertain if government decisions to deal with the crisis were based on scientific knowledge, expertise and guidance, with the interest of the people and the nation foremost in mind. Many were interested in information normally contained in minutes of meetings, such as the first meeting of the Task Force, who participated in them, their names and qualifications, the proportion of scientists among them, including social scientists. Others wanted to know who decided on lockdown measures and how, on basis of what scientific data. How economic relief was to be provided to the people? Who were the decision makers? Was the government providing incentives for rapid development of diagnostics,

medical equipment, vaccines? What specific measures were taken to stop corruption in the procurement of lifesaving medicine, equipment and other health needs? What measures were taken to stop abuse of government’s economic stimulus packages and ensure their fair distribution? Were cabinet ministers taking pay cuts as part of austerity measure of the government? And how the government intends to balance privacy needs with the advantages of digital disease surveillance and tracing.

Looking to the future and recovery, the government can use the RTI principles of transparency and accountability to update the public on its public health improvement plans, and its research and development goals, its investment in social science to prepare better for the trust deficit next time. There are countless questions government can anticipate and provide answers for, without having to be asked through individual RTI applications.

In times of large-scale calamities, like the Covid-19 pandemic, people’s fear increases exponentially; and their need to know what their governments are doing to meet the challenge increases commensurately. In such a situation, governments need to be more careful not only to anticipate people’s concerns but also be adept in answering/assuaging them. Public leaders must be prepared to communicate clearly, consistently, and constantly with the people. They must remember that citizens are prone to be more cooperative when they understand why they are being asked to do or not to do certain things. A “people-first” approach, supported by genuine data, can foster proper public behaviour and discourage those that are harmful. An important lesson that may be drawn from the Covid-19 experience is that without well-tuned government-people collaboration, large-scale catastrophes cannot be handled effectively.

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