

No Birds in the Sky

FOUNDER EDITOR
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The land of (dying) rivers

Yet another appeal to save them

THE once-sparkling water of the Buriganga is now a dark, smelly pit of liquid waste. Dark flows the Turag too, which is lined with factories that dump their waste, including plastic materials, polythene and dyes into its water. The waters of Dhaleshwari and Balu are so toxic that those who depend on them contract various kinds of skin and gastrointestinal diseases. The once-mighty Korotoa river is now a ghost of its former self, choking with pollution and a regulator that obstructs natural flow. No one can answer why this regulator—which has not been used even once in the past 15 years—was built, except to say that it was part of a Tk 2,665 crore project to improve the condition of the Korotoa. The Bangshi, too, is a dump, in addition to being a breeding ground for mosquitoes and other insects. The list, sadly, goes on.

More than a hundred rivers have already died since independence. The list of who is responsible for the slow but sure death of our rivers is also a long one—from big corporations to government institutions, everyone seems to have claimed their share of the pie. Industries seem to think it is their right to dump their waste into our rivers; local elites, businessmen and grabbers see no problem in claiming vast areas of waterbodies for their personal and commercial use; politicians and policymakers—whose vested interests lie elsewhere than in protecting the rivers—turn a blind eye towards these irregularities, even as they make promise after promise to save them from pollution and the grabbers.

The High Court issued a 17-point directive in 2019 to save the country's rivers and water bodies, and the Prime Minister herself has, on multiple occasions, directed the ministries to take necessary measures. Yet, our rivers continue to turn into drains. We have written many an editorial with numerous prescriptions of what the government ought to do, but have seen little reflection of our concerns in subsequent government action. What we need more than anything is political goodwill and a serious commitment to revive what remains of the once mighty rivers. Today, we provide no prescription but simply reiterate the appeal we made yesterday—Save Rivers, Save Sonar Bangla.

Combatting TB in Bangladesh

Early diagnosis is the key

IT is unfortunate that even after decades of efforts from the government and non-government organisations to combat tuberculosis (TB) in Bangladesh, a large number of TB patients still remain undiagnosed, mostly due to a lack of awareness among the patients as well as people in general. Although Bangladesh has made some significant progress in controlling the disease, the drug-resistant TB continues to be a public health crisis for us. Sadly, the modern screening facilities for TB are still not available at the upazila level. According to a report by *The Daily Star* in 2019, while 492 upazilas have government health complexes, only around 209 Gene Xpert machines—necessary for detecting TB on a molecular level and its drug resistance—have so far been set up at different medical facilities across the country.

Till today, TB remains the world's deadliest infectious killer. Each day, nearly 4,500 people lose their lives to TB and close to 30,000 people fall ill with this disease worldwide.

Since prevention is a major part of TB control, if the patients cannot be made aware of the disease and diagnosed early, containing the spread of the disease would not be possible. People should go for check-ups immediately when they notice the symptoms: long-term cough, chest pain and fever. Otherwise, the disease will get worse and spread among the people who are in close contact with the patients. Also, people's misconception about TB—that it is a respiratory disease—must be removed. All these need combined efforts from the government and the private organisations working in this area. Besides raising awareness about the disease, the government should also make the screening facilities and necessary medicines available at the upazila level.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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My thoughts on Ekushey Boi Mela

Every year I look forward to the coming of Ekushey Boi Mela, the world's longest book fair spanning an entire month. This is usually my favourite time of the year when I visit the stalls with friends, buy books and sometimes attend the open-air events hosted by Bangla Academy. The festive air of the fair, with visitors dressed in colourful attires and the sound of music and all kinds of announcements filling the air, is an additional attraction. But what I like most about it is the presence of children, who are drawn by the colourful storybooks put on display in the children's corner. A photo published in Friday's *Daily Star* has thus attracted my attention: it showed a young flower-seller, about ten years old, stopping by a stall decked with beautifully illustrated books.

The image stuck me as a potent symbol of a reader in the making. Despite his visible struggle in life which made him sell flowers for a living at such an early age, this boy seemed immersed in reading, totally unaware of what was going on around. It was a beautiful snapshot of juvenile curiosity. And it made me hopeful. We need more readers like him. We need adults to play a supportive role so that children develop a habit of reading, because a society where children read books—not just those prescribed in classroom—and enlighten themselves as they grow up can never stray off its cherished path.

Zahid Hassan, Mirpur



BLOWN' IN THE WIND

SHAMSAD MORTUZA

IN the 80s, one sarcastic comment—for reasons better not stated out of respect for the deceased—was aired every now and then: hurl a stone in Dhaka's air and you are sure to hit either a poet or a crow. On the surface, it was an innocent joke about the sheer number of creatures—those who fly with their wings and those others who dream to do so with their imagination.

A comment from a visitor recently reminded me of the saying, "Have you noticed that there is no bird in your city?" "Seriously, not even a house crow?" We looked out from my office lounge on the fourth floor overlooking Dhanmondi Lake. On any given day, I surely would have caught a glimpse of one or two. There wasn't any, as if the birds had decided to prove our guest scholar from Australia right.

Opposite to my home in Banani, there is a parakeet family that lives in the hollow of an air-conditioner pipe. It is a sheer delight for me to see the avian couple rearing their chicks or being visited by a bunch of relatives every morning. The welcome cacophony adds a soothing touch to our mundane madness.

I remember when we moved to a new apartment in Cantonment, we were awakened by a heavy breathing noise at night. For days, we thought the house was haunted or something. Only days after, we found that there was a pigeon nest in the sanitary pipe on the roof, causing an act of ventriloquism. The almost-human breathing of the birds got transmitted through the pipes, giving an impression that they were coming from elsewhere.

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JOSIAH OSGOOD

THE outcome of the US Senate's trial of Donald Trump, following his impeachment by the House of Representatives, was a foregone conclusion. But it nonetheless laid bare the president's win-at-all-costs approach to governing. The fact that Trump escaped punishment at the hands of the Senate and even saw a bump in his poll numbers suggests that his obsessive concern with image and ruthless treatment of enemies are effective strategies. They are reminiscent of a Roman emperor.

To see this, look no further than Gaius Suetonius Tranquillus's *Lives of the Caesars*, one of the most shocking accounts of bare-knuckled leadership ever written. Presenting the biographies of 12 Roman emperors, Suetonius shows how these men used their extraordinary power to indulge their own passions and peccadillos, no matter how weird or reckless. Suetonius, for his part, mostly deplores the emperors' transgressions—like Nero's singing during the Great Fire or Tiberius's all-night drinking parties. Yet, for all these figures' outrages, Suetonius also seems to appreciate their political instincts.

America's own caesar seems to have taken some of the "leadership" lessons highlighted by Suetonius on board. For starters, you should find a way to hide the fact that you are bald. Julius Caesar, a tall and muscular man who liked to flaunt his good looks, was distressed by nothing more in life than the premature loss of his hair, especially because it gave his opponents something for which to mock him. At first, Caesar relied on a comb-over, before finding a better solution: he convinced the Senate to grant him the right to wear a laurel crown on all occasions. The brutal Caligula took a more drastic approach as his bald spot grew: whenever he ran into a handsome man with a full head of hair, he ordered the offender shaved immediately.

And who hasn't had the experience of saving trapped sparrows from ceiling fans? We often get to hear the cuckoo cooing, see the dust-shower of common *mynas* (shalik) or an odd sighting of a kingfisher. Dhaka still has its birds, but urbanity is encroaching upon their habitat. Most of us take their presence for granted. But my foreign friend made me realise that there was a dearth of birds. And the other thing that he observed involved the level of noise pollution. As a linguist, Dr Ahmar Mahbbob of the University of Sydney maintained that exposure to such high levels of noise would affect the cognitive growth of

domestic fights, dog's barking, children's cry, drunkard's nuisance, and verbal invectives in a cassette recorder. He played the familiar noise all night long to put him to sleep. We too have become so used to such high level of noises that we fail to think of life beyond it. Our drivers honk meaninglessly, yet we remain nonchalant in our back seats.

Laws were passed to stop cars from using hooters or honking in VIP roads. Lawmakers have shown us that those laws are for mere mortals which can be imposed on a whim (as and when necessary). The lawmakers themselves can siren through the city with their

I had a meeting with a group of embassy officials who were a bit late. I blamed the rehearsed excuse: traffic jam, but their response was: forget the traffic, think of the air pollution. They pulled out the app that measured Dhaka's appalling air quality. And there I was thinking it to be fog, and my friends confirmed it was smog. No wonder so many of us are suffering from respiratory diseases.

As Dhakaites, we have grown used to many of its ills. It often takes a fresh pair of eyes to objectively reflect on the reality in which we live. I mention a host of foreigners because through their eyes we could see the dwindling number of birds



PHOTO: MOSFIQUR RAHMAN JOHAN

our children. In other words, children, especially between the ages of two and five, would find it difficult to learn languages and make intelligent verbal expressions.

A 2018 study of the Department of Environment found that the average sound level in the city's commercial areas was around 80-110dB. Experts believe that a routine exposure to 90dB for half an hour can cause hearing loss. Add to that the possibility of the release of stress hormone, diabetes, cardio-vascular disease and even death.

We live in a city where death is our fellow dweller. We can die in 50 different ways. Even if the noise is withdrawn, we will probably die of silence. Remember the 1987 movie *Pushpak*, featuring Kamal Hassan? A job-seeking graduate who used to live in the slum incidentally got to stay in a five-star hotel. The peacefulness of the hotel stopped the man from sleeping at night. He went back to his chaotic slum to record the hullabaloo involving

entourage, encouraging others to join the noise hike. Wasn't it our prophet who left sugar himself before advising a little boy to avoid excessive eating of sweets? We need leaders who will practice what they preach. Don't bother passing any law if you have no intention of following or implementing it yourself.

Once had a friend coming in from India. He was surprised by the battered look of our public buses. He said that he had seen such rickety buses only in the Caribbean. He was shocked by the steel bumpers in private vehicles. I couldn't tell him that our buses make special wooden and tin frames knowing very well that they would get involved in extreme car fights with passengers inside. I couldn't tell him that fencing our cars shows our feudal mindset of posing as the lord of the space that we occupy, even while we are on the public streets. Little do we care that these bumpers could be life-threatening to pedestrians or people on lighter vehicles!

or rising level of different pollutants. This is a realisation that I had while reading a book by an Indian journalist. I was in Grade 7 or 8. This journalist started his travelogue by mentioning our national mosque. He said, the cuboid shape of the mosque built after the Kaaba loses its sanctity by the heavy presence of commercial outlets around. Back then, for every little errand, we would go to Baitul Mukarram: replacing a watch belt, jewellery for wedding gifts, buying audio cassettes, books, comics or utensils. It took a non-Muslim foreigner to understand that our profane visits were compromising the sacredness of the place. On that day, I realised, even as a teenager, that sometimes you need to distance yourself from the truth to understand it.

It's about time we listened to our foreign friends and made Dhaka liveable.

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PROJECT ■ SYNDICATE

Donald Caesar

A second lesson is to plan your public appearances carefully. Having been fascinated by music and acting since childhood, Nero yearned to perform onstage himself. To ensure that he wasn't a flop, he trained as hard as any professional, avoiding the consumption of fruits that he thought might harm his voice. He even created a squad of more than 5,000 men to cheer him on in the theatre.

The tight-fisted Tiberius, on the other

offered a great opportunity for publicity you could control, similar to cable television appearances or advertisements today. Even Tiberius allowed statues to be put up in his honour, so long as he didn't have to pay for them; and some caesars went further. Caligula, for example, ordered the most famous statues of Greek gods to be brought to Rome with their heads removed so that he could attach his own. And Nero erected a statue of himself that was 120 feet tall.



President Donald Trump launches a post-impeachment victory lap by brandishing a newspaper with the giant headline "ACQUITTED", on February 6, 2020. PHOTO: AFP

hand, dreaded nothing more than public shows. Not only were they expensive to stage, but the crowds—like pesky journalists today—would sometimes ask him hard questions. Tiberius avoided the games as much as possible, until it occurred to him that he should move permanently to the isle of Capri, his own Mar-a-Lago in the Gulf of Naples.

Third, never pass up a chance to commission a statue of yourself. Statues

Fourth, promote your accomplishments. If you don't really have any, make some up. In Nero's own mind, his greatest accomplishment was his yearlong tour of Greece, where he competed in all the festivals, including the Olympics. Not surprisingly, he always took first place. He celebrated with the Roman equivalent of a State of the Union address: a triumphal parade, riding into Rome on a chariot once used by Augustus.

The floats bore all the crowns he had won, and he arranged for placards to announce the names of everyone he had defeated.

Caligula, by contrast, compensated for a failed military expedition to Germany by hiring local students to stage a fake attack on him and his troops. For his self-awarded triumph, he rounded up the tallest Gauls he could find, dyed their hair blonde, and taught them to grunt a few words in German so that he would have some impressive captives to display back in Rome.

The last lesson is to keep your friends close, but your enemies closer. All the caesars lived by the first half of this Corleone family code. Julius Caesar, for example, put his own household slaves in charge of the mint and state revenues. And Caligula even toyed with making his favourite horse consul of the republic. Tiberius was more cunning. After realising that the head of his security forces was plotting against him, he promoted the man to the consulship and dangled the hope of marriage into the imperial family—until it was safe to discard him. Trump has done something similar with numerous GOP figures.

In the end, these emperors' misdeeds caught up with them. Julius Caesar was stabbed to death in the Senate by irate colleagues, and Caligula was murdered by an officer whom he had taunted one too many times. Nero, after losing all support, took his own life with the help of his secretary. Only Tiberius seems to have died naturally. Or perhaps not: Suetonius cannot help reporting a rumour that Tiberius might have been poisoned by his successor, Caligula.

Trump survived impeachment. Will he make it through November's elections? And, looking further ahead, are there already new caesars in the making? These are questions that all Americans must now ask themselves.

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