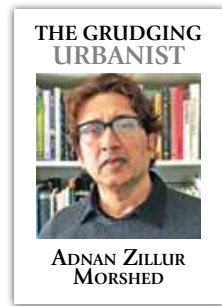


Who is really responsible for the coronavirus pandemic?



THE GRUDGING URBANIST
ADNAN ZILLUR MORSHED

AS the novel coronavirus known as Covid-19 spreads rapidly across the world, we now face another dimension of the “globalisation and its discontents” argument. A pandemic-induced paranoia could be globalised very quickly, with a host of haunting repercussions. Cultural norms—such as shaking hands and hugging as a form of greeting—are changing, since they are now considered a conduit for human-to-human transmission of the coronavirus. Over a dozen countries have closed their schools amid the global public health emergency, according to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation. As a result, over 300 million children around the world are stuck at home. The empty airports in New York, London, and other metropolises around the world have become anti-icons of our world, which is suddenly finding itself unprepared to contain a plague. Holy sites like the Kaaba in Mecca and the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem are suddenly empty, provoking many to express discomfort at having to mull over the mysterious intersection of faith and science.

The world appears to be on a mission to sanitise itself. The efforts to contain Covid-19 is impacting the neoliberal economic order, which requires an unimpeded flow of capital and labour across the globe. Quarantines, both literally and figuratively, are an anti-neoliberal idea. The threat of the epidemic is also provoking different types of xenophobic, nationalist thought: minorities are spreading the disease through their filthy lifestyles; refugees are bringing in deadly viruses; closing the border is the answer; etc.

When the coronavirus was first reported in Wuhan, China, the general explanation

was that this unknown virus originated from an exotic animal, sold at a “wet market” in Wuhan. The animal source of the virus still remains contested, but the original host is believed to be bats. Although not sold at the densely-packed Wuhan market, bats may have infected chickens, and other domestic fowls sold there.

The inflated question about *which* creature originally harboured the coronavirus and transferred it to humans, and the subsequent panic about its global outbreak, blurs a more fundamental question: *what* caused the transfer of the coronavirus from animals to humans? The answer lies in *what* than *which*. Scientists agree that microbes have lived in animal bodies harmlessly for millions of years. So why, in modern times, do we have so many animal-to-human pathogen transmissions?

The answer is the Anthropocene, a geological epoch in which human activity is changing the planet’s climatic and environmental DNA in a profound way. In the age of the Anthropocene, modern industrial societies have fundamentally disrupted the planet’s ecology based on the coexistence of all species, thereby creating imbalanced environmental conditions ripe for unpredictable pathogen mobility from animals to humans. Deadly coronaviruses are frequently migrating from animal bodies to human bodies because of the ways humanity—in the name of economic growth, development, and progress—has been mutating the natural environment, deforesting the planet, and diminishing wildlife habitats. Dislodged animals, reptiles, and birds are forced to encroach into traditional human territories, perpetuating their dormant pathologies among humans.

In short, predatory capitalism, with its uber-market-centric worldview and perpetual hunger for natural resources, has created disruptive ecological conditions for uncertain human-animal encounters. Until and unless predatory capitalism is reined in, we can



A government-sponsored development project in Chattogram’s Mirsharai area led to deforestation but also promises of job creation for locals—a trade-off that Bangladesh is often faced with. This photo was taken in March 2019.

PHOTO: RAJIB RATHAN

expect to see more and more coronaviruses afflicting humanity.

First identified in 2003, SARS coronavirus was thought to have spread from bats to cats, first infecting humans in Guangdong province of southern China in 2002. While the origin of MERS coronavirus, first identified in Saudi Arabia in 2012, remains unknown, virological studies suggest that humans became infected by MERS after its transmission from dromedary or single-humped camels. By domesticating more and more animals to serve commercial, industrial and household purposes, we face increased vulnerability to new coronaviruses. Furthermore, a burgeoning global population

means people will have to look for more protein sources beyond the conventional poultry list. The Wuhan market is one example.

The author of *Pandemic: Tracking Contagion from Cholera to Ebola and Beyond* (2016), science journalist Sonia Shah wrote: “Since 1940, hundreds of microbial pathogens have either emerged or reemerged into new territory where they’ve never been seen before. They include HIV, Ebola in West Africa, Zika in the Americas, and a bevy of novel coronaviruses. The majority of them—60 percent—originate in the bodies of animals. Some come from pets and livestock. Most of them—more than two-

thirds—originate in wildlife.” But wildlife is not necessarily the problem. The problem is the way societies dislocate wildlife by legalising deforestation, encroaching into wetlands, cutting hills, allowing unchecked urbanisation, dumping industrial effluents into rivers, and, ultimately, disrupting ecological cycles. It is then expected that wild species, driven away from their natural habitats in the wilderness, would come into intimate contact with human settlements, in the process transforming harmless animal microbes into lethal human pathogens.

Scientists have examined how Ebola outbreaks, with potential origins in several species of bats, were results of deforestation in Central and West Africa. Where can the bats go when their habitats are destroyed, along with the forest? They would take shelter in trees right in the middle of residential neighbourhoods near the forest, or in farms where fruits could be poisoned by bat saliva, creating fertile situations for bat-to-human microbe spillover. Now imagine what one person, infected by a bad orange, could do to a high-density human settlement. This is one reason why in a populous country like Bangladesh, environmental stewardship and settlement planning should be an existential imperative. Wellbeing should take precedence over development.

As I desperately shopped for hand sanitisers, I thought of how Albert Camus’ *The Plague*, published in 1947, can still be instructive in enlightening us about the corrosive effects of turbo-capitalism, hyper-materialism, and humanity’s dereliction in the natural world through an allegorical reading of the plague of 2020. This pestilence may very well signify an ailment of people’s respiratory system as well as their environmental morality.

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A day in the life of a woman in this city

Navigating through rising sexual harassment

RUBAB NAYEEM KHAN

FOR a girl or a woman living in Dhaka city, the possibility of being sexually harassed is a reality she has lived with from a very early age. Our archaic laws and the cryptic wording of penal codes—where Section 509 of the Penal Code 1860 defines sexual harassment as “gesture or act intended to insult the modesty of a woman, utters any word, makes any sound or gesture, or exhibits any object, intending that such word or sound shall be heard, or that such gesture or object shall be seen, by such woman”—does not make it any easier for sexual harassment to be identifiable; since these aren’t the only words that cause more chaos than calm for women.

The law further trivialises the crime by providing consequences such as “simple imprisonment for a term which may extend to one year, or with fine, or with both.” And although Section 10 from the Prevention of Women and Children Repression Act 2000 mentions “criminalising the act of someone who touches a woman or child (with any part of their body or an object)—it also uses the term “women’s modesty,” (*nairi shilota*) with regard to sexual harassment, thus promoting a gender bias in our legal framework and the victimising of complainants.

With men being raised to fight back when harassed or attacked, physically or verbally, the instinct to defend ourselves has not been taught to most women. Simply put, our society and the current legal framework only makes us normalise a crime like sexual harassment. And by that order, the monsters we had under our beds are now out in the open, giving us myriad suggestive propositions on the streets and buses.

In a 2018 report from *The Daily Star* on women’s safety outdoors, the number of victims of sexual harassment were mammoth. A survey showed that 94 percent of women were being harassed in different ways, resulting in uncomfortable situations that led 20.5 percent of them to avoid using public transportation. Being harassed for their clothes is also among other inconveniences that women have faced on a daily basis; this further caused them to dress more conservatively, just to keep stalkers at bay (45.4 percent), although even doing that does not necessarily ensure protection.

Be it physical harassment or verbal, the research also showed that 74 percent of women were victimised in their daily commute, and 26 percent while walking on the streets. Adding to their miseries, public vehicles such as buses, tempos, rickshaws and auto-rickshaws were red flagged as unsafe as well.

In connection to this ordeal, the BRAC research paper titled “Safe Road for Women: Reducing Sexual Harassment and Road Crash in Bangladesh” found

that the majority of perpetrators harassing women in the streets or in public transport are between the ages of 41 to 60; 66 percent of women have admitted to being harassed by men of this age group.

In my experience of being harassed, I noticed that the men were very confident in their acts. This experience tends to be quite common, as reflected in an opinion from 2018 in this newspaper—“the perpetrators appear to be convinced that they will bear no consequence for their unrelenting and atrocious acts.” And indeed, they don’t.

Such experiences, as mentioned in BRAC’s research, leave a long-term impact on the victim’s psyche. Looking back at one of the many instances of harassment I faced, I too can certainly vouch for this. Back in 2016, I was taking a CNG ride to Khilkhet. Those of us who use this mode

a female) and fled the scene instantly.

What I learned that day was: the *orna* only obligates women to cover, and fails to restrict the male gaze; I was almost certain that this probably wasn’t his first time. I shouldn’t be the one dwelling over shame and guilt, yet unfortunately, women are conditioned to almost always experience these feelings and take the blame onto themselves.

Over the years, I gradually understood that navigating the streets of Dhaka requires a thick skin and more humour in mind than hellfire, especially knowing that help from the law enforcing authorities is unlikely to be right around the corner. As I decided to deconstruct the societal expectations regarding what constitutes as modesty in terms of dressing, I began confronting the men who leer and taunt me on the streets.

This includes counter-questioning the

While offices and educational institutes have received guidelines from the judiciary on this issue, public spaces are still devoid of such rules. It is time to hold our lawmakers to account regarding the lack of effort in reducing sexual harassment.



ILLUSTRATION: KAZI TAHSIN AGAZ APURBO

of transport regularly are well aware of the notorious “mirror move” made by the drivers—sometimes focusing on our faces, and other times strategically focusing on our chests, no matter how well we wrapped ourselves up with an *orna* (scarf).

This particular driver however, had done neither. “Safe at last!” Or so I thought. Upon reaching Khilkhet, I heard him mumble something under his breath as I was stepping out. When I inquired, he asked a rather graphic question about my body, repeating himself twice. In a fit of rage, I held the caged doors of his vehicle and started shaking the CNG. But he had got what he wanted (the satisfaction of being able to verbally taunt

many men who question me on the lack of my *orna*, or expressing my irritation at those who stare and giggle as I walk by. On occasions, I also keep one of my hands behind my back in crowded places; just to grab those hands that “accidentally” touch my buttocks.

Safe to say, I’ve been able to stand my ground and come back in one piece.

But what works for me, doesn’t apply for those reeling from past experiences, or those who don’t know the city or the country well enough to tackle harassment.

Moreover, incidents like the 2015 Pohela Boishakh sexual harassment case reduces our faith in the law enforcers for not paying heed to the severity of

the situation. The nation is still baffled as to how, despite witnessing the sexual harassment of 20 women by 30 to 40 men in the TSC area, the police remained unstirred from their stations. In other instances, police themselves have contributed to harassment.

Sexual harassment has been talked about for decades. In 2011, a case was filed as “BNWLA vs government of Bangladesh and others”, where the High Court clarified that sexual harassment can take place in all private and public places, not just workplaces and education institutions. It goes to show that there is an acknowledgement from the judiciary and legal divisions. What is missing, however, is the urgency to implement policies to prevent and punish such harassment, especially in public spaces.

While offices and educational institutes have received guidelines from the judiciary on this issue, public spaces are still devoid of such rules. It is time to hold our lawmakers to account regarding the lack of effort in reducing sexual harassment. As days go by without provisions such as CCTV cameras (that work) in public spaces, messages in public transport conveying the need for decency and decorum, or necessary interventions from law enforcing authorities, we fail to make women feel safe and included, that too in public spaces.

Reforming a penal code from 1860 may not happen overnight, but what seems feasible at the moment is to take sexual harassment prevention policies that are applicable in the workplace or educational institutions and extend them into public places. Such policies must translate into laws, and they must be implemented and not just enacted. Potential perpetrators should be aware that such acts will be dealt with severely, and women must also be given the agency they need to fight against public apathy and police indifference.

Rubab Nayeem Khan is a member of the editorial team, *The Daily Star*.

ON THIS DAY IN HISTORY

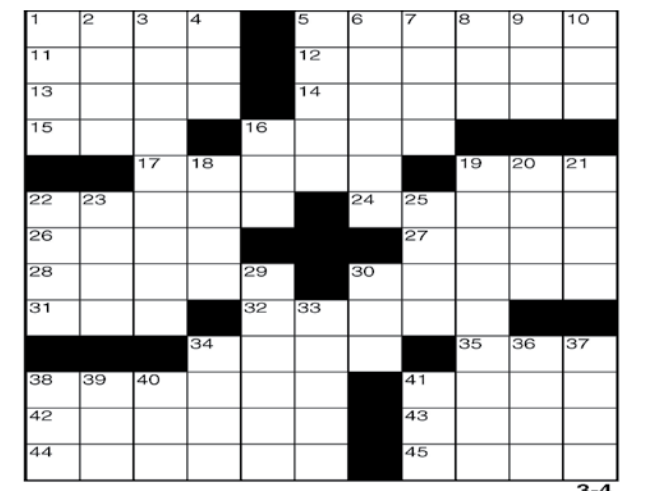
MARCH 10, 1933
OPENING OF THE NAZIS’ FIRST CONCENTRATION CAMP



On this day in 1933, soon after Adolf Hitler became chancellor, the first concentration camp in Germany opened at Dachau, where at least 32,000 people would die from disease, malnutrition, physical oppression, and execution.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

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| ACROSS | 35 Deli meat | 16 “For sure!” |
| 1 Renown | 38 Party snack | 18 Connector for a plow team |
| 5 Thickshelled clam | 41 Curbside call | 19 Mad Hatter’s friend |
| 11 Egg outline | 42 Wows | 20 Poet Pound |
| 12 Hard to control | 43 Metal sources | 21 Highlands girl |
| 13 Champagne popper | 44 Airheads | 22 Citi Field team |
| 14 High regard | 45 Sunset setting | 23 Open space |
| 15 Co. abbr. | | 25 Luke’s sister |
| 16 Longings | DOWN | 29 Bald spot cover |
| 17 African scavenger | 1 Ellipse points | 30 Be a snoop |
| 19 Singer Tillis | 2 Stratford’s river | 33 Printer’s need |
| 22 Some sharks | 3 Sousa nickname, with “the” | 34 Utah team |
| 24 City square | 4 Yellowstone grazer | 36 Trims drastically |
| 26 Composer Satie | 5 Hive head | 37 Rainbow maker |
| 27 Makes mistakes | 6 Open, in a way | 38 Scoundrel |
| 28 Doctrine | 7 Dance and music, e.g. | 39 Paris pal |
| 30 Print units | 8 Color | 40 D.C. baseballer |
| 31 Decline | 9 Flamenco cry | 41 Highway rescue |
| 32 Media icon from Chicago | 10 Trainer’s place | |
| 34 Trial group | | |



YESTERDAY’S ANSWERS

S U D S
A S I A N
F U L L O F B E A N S
E R A B U S P A S
R E T E L L V E T O
R E V E L I D E S
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WRITE FOR US. SEND US YOUR OPINION PIECES TO dsopinion@gmail.com.