

Hello from Humanity



BADIUZZAMAN BAY

OF MAGIC & MADNESS
WINTER lasted a little longer than usual this year. Having grown used to shorter, barely cold seasons in recent years, it was something of a surprise to see a winter extending well into March. But the end of the season didn't bring with it the expected joy and colour in our life, thanks to a pandemic that is now sweeping through the world, with chilling effects not just in the healthcare sector but across the social-political-economic spectrum. As writer-activist Anupam Debashis Roy would have liked to call it: Not All Springs End Winter. These are clearly unpredictable times. We have been saddled with a spring that we don't know what to do with, and a crisis that we don't know how to deal with. Times like these have a way of changing people. They change how we live and think—they put our humanity to the test.

As someone forever fascinated with how the human mind works, I was intrigued by how the mighty human race has been chastened by a tiny parasite in just a matter of a month. Since its outbreak in Wuhan, China, the coronavirus (COVID-19) has led to widespread panic and anxiety. News reports following a natural disaster tend to be dominated by stories of hoarding, looting or violence. This time was no exception. As countries scramble to fight the spread of the virus, there have been reports of panicky hoarders trying to shove entire supermarket shelves into their cart. Some countries reported a surge in incidents of looting disinfectants and other household essentials. There is a palpable sense



Abdul Khalek, 91, walks around the school that he helped build as students form lines behind him.

of impending doom everywhere. In many countries, the hysteria around the virus has led to increased prejudice and racism. One picture that went viral recently shows Saudi Aramco, the world's most valuable company, using a migrant worker as "a human hand sanitiser", who walked around with an actual dispenser for the Aramco staff to disinfect themselves. This is not just classicist or exploitative, it also shows how far down the rabbit hole we can go when confronted with a crisis.

Do disasters and crises bring out the worst in us? As tempting as it is to say yes, the truth—as Dutch author and historian Rutger Bregman explains in an article—is quite the opposite. Disasters and crises actually bring out the best in us, he posits, and "this simple fact is confirmed by more solid evidence than almost any other scientific insight." He adds: "The coronavirus isn't the only contagion—kindness, hope and charity are spreading too." One may

cite many anecdotes around the world showing how the coronavirus crisis has caused a surge in solidarity across communities, bringing people closer. Neighbours helping each other out. Young men taking the burden off older people. Doctors, cleaners and nurses in their thousands working around the clock. Scientists searching tirelessly for a cure. And whatever the extent of looting or hoarding or any such panic behaviour, as one sociologist notes, "it always pales in significance to the widespread altruism that leads to free and massive giving and sharing of goods and services."

The coronavirus is perhaps the biggest existential threat we faced in decades. But living in Bangladesh, where crisis is never in short supply, you grow used to seeing extreme events on a daily basis. For us, the coronavirus, apart from the valid health concerns, is no more a disruption in public life than the crimes and killings and corruption

and all the other insane stuff that keep us in a perpetual crisis mode. It's easy to be confused by this state of affairs, and the cynical portrayal of human nature that has taken centre stage in public discourses in recent decades.

But if you look closely, you see signs of defiant hope and love, tucked away behind the signs of despair. You see selfless acts of kindness and charity. People quietly enriching other people. Hearts healed, wounds nursed, lives built from the ground up. Help coming from the unlikely of sources. No recognition sought, none given. It is in these small everyday acts that humanity shines through.

Let me tell you two such stories, picked randomly from recent reports in *The Daily Star*, which have once again opened my eyes to the beautiful possibilities of being human.

Story 1: You're only as good as the last thing you did right, or wrong. For driver Mohammad Forkan Mia, who literally lives on borrowed time, this is the driving principle of his life as he tries to make his every action count. Nine years ago, Forkan had a near-death experience. He had a serious accident on the road, after which doctors declared him dead. But then he survived miraculously, just before his body was about to be buried. Since then, the 40-year-old has devoted his life to serving poor patients and road-accident victims by taking them to hospitals. The ride is, of course, free. Forkan even purchases medicine for them when he can. Since 2018, when he started to keep a register in his CNG-run auto rickshaw, he has provided free transportation to 89 poor patients and accident victims. If you happen to be in the "CNG stand" in Gazipur's Board Bazar area and see a three-wheeler covered with stickers that read "free for the poor, helpless and the physically challenged", know that you're about to

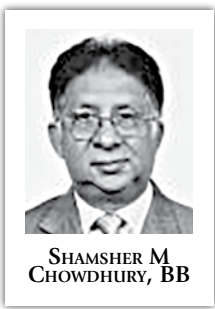
see humanity.

Story 2: Can a single good deed change the world? Ninety-one-year-old Abdul Khalek, a resident of Nalua Chandpur village in the Barura Upazila of Cumilla, can justifiably claim that his is indeed changing the world of many. With the money he earned by working at his tea stall, this poor, semi-literate man had bought a piece of land which, in 1997, he donated for establishing a school. Today, that school has blossomed into a beautiful melting pot of fun and learning for young students. In donating his land for education, Khalek set off a series of good deeds as the school project drew local young men who went door to door to collect students, built the schoolhouse with bamboo fences and sheets of tin donated by villagers and community leaders, and even initially taught at the school for free. Call it a chain reaction. Good deeds have that effect on people.

Woven through these tales of charity, kindness and resilience by ordinary people is an article of faith: that despite all the greed and selfishness and violence in the world today, humanity will live on. However bleak the situation is at any given point, don't lose hope because in the end, human beings are capable of responding to a crisis in a manner that benefits their community. That truth echoes back across the ages. It's also inevitable from an evolutionary point of view, says epidemiologist Thomas Glass. "Human beings survived ice ages, famine, attacks from rival groups, predation from animals, infection—and we didn't do it because we were strong or fast. We survived as a species because in the state of extreme calamity, we tend to be very resourceful and cooperative," he said.

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Saarc meets virtually to combat COVID-19



SHAMSHER M CHOWDHURY, BB

INDIAN Prime Minister Narendra Modi's proposal for consultations among the leaders of the Saarc member countries through a video conference to try and collectively meet the threat of COVID-19 was a most thoughtful and a timely initiative. It was also an unprecedented move, both in its form and in content. The prompt response to the proposal from all the Saarc leaders, notwithstanding Pakistan's slightly delayed nod, was also a reflection of the degree of seriousness with which South Asia is treating this pandemic, one that has brought the planet to a halt.

The video conference of March 15 was unprecedented because this was the first time that Saarc leaders used the medium of a video conference to talk amongst themselves and not wait for a full-scale summit meeting. Notably, until then South Asia, and by extension, Saarc, was the only regional grouping that had taken such a move. European Union member countries, known for their tradition of mutual consultation and coordination when faced with any serious issue, are now pointing fingers at each other as Europe grapples with the effects of COVID-19 in all spheres of its life. The Asean, another regional grouping to our east that has prided itself in being cohesive, has come up seriously short in adopting a coordinated response to the spread of the deadly virus.

All Saarc leaders, except Pakistan's Prime Minister Imran Khan, participated at the historic video

conference. They shared their respective experiences with the coronavirus and suggested possible steps to halt its spread. Why the Pakistani leader chose to stay away and instead designate an adviser, who presumably holds the rank of a minister, to represent him at the event is quite inexplicable. Frankly, it was a missed opportunity for Imran Khan to interact face to face, for the first time, with all other Saarc heads of states and governments, and that too on an issue that is non-political but one that impacts in varying degrees on all countries, not only in South Asia but in the whole world. Importantly, Pakistan is supposed to assume chairmanship of Saarc as the host of the next summit whenever it is convened. Prime Minister Imran Khan's presence at the video conference would have been an indication that his country was committed to move the Saarc process forward and give it a much-needed momentum.

The video conference was significant for yet another reason. Following a spate of terrorist attacks on Indian soil over the last couple of years, allegedly with Islamabad's support, India had put on hold all high-level bilateral dialogue with Pakistan saying, "Terror and talks cannot go together". New Delhi has held on to this stance for long. By calling for this video conference, however, and to try and adopt a coordinated move to deal with the menace of COVID-19, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi had clearly signalled his government's readiness to put bilateral differences aside for the sake of greater regional good. After all, this is what Saarc is all about. COVID-19 is bigger than any military threat; it respects no frontiers, it is not visible till it hits, it targets anyone in its path and the world is still defenceless



Prime Minister Narendra Modi addressing the video conference of Saarc nations to tackle coronavirus on Sunday.

against its potency. This is what makes Modi's initiative all the more welcome.

In spite of its many shortcomings and all the perceptible trust deficits that has plagued the region for long, the people of South Asia has always looked upon Saarc as a symbol of hope and institutionalised regional economic collaboration. Its political benefits also cannot be ignored. History shows that Saarc summit gatherings have, on more than one occasion, helped ease political tensions in the region. The Colombo Summit, for example, held shortly after India and Pakistan went nuclear, enabled leaders from the two countries to assure others that this part of the world was not about to go

up in nuclear smoke. Similarly, the Kathmandu Summit of 2002, coming on the heels of the bloody Kargil conflict, saw Pakistan's then military President Pervez Musharraf most dramatically and publicly extend his hand of peace to Atal Bihari Vajpayee, a gesture that the then Indian prime minister accepted with grace.

It would be pertinent to recall that long before the terror attacks in New York and Washington in September 2001, Saarc had already put in place a comprehensive Regional Convention on Suppression of Terrorism in 1987. An additional protocol to this agreement was signed at the Islamabad Summit in 2004 to bring it in sync

with relevant UN resolution on terror financing. Not that the documents contributed to ending the menace of terrorism, but then neither did any other global effort. The intent, though, was evident.

One hopes that the video conference of March 15 could herald in a renewed sense of urgency and a realisation that when faced with a grave challenge such as this, South Asia's political leaders are willing to rise above themselves and work together for the good of all. It would be safe to assume that the people of South Asia as a whole would have welcomed this move.

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ON THIS DAY IN HISTORY

March 19, 2003
IRAQ WAR BEGINS
 On this day in 2003, US President George W Bush ordered air strikes on Baghdad, thus launching the Iraq War to oust dictator Saddam Hussein, who was believed (wrongly) to be manufacturing weapons of mass destruction.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

- 1 Tricky puzzle
- 6 Bulb rating
- 11 Foreword
- 12 Paintball cry
- 13 Healer Barton
- 14 Note from the boss
- 15 Young fox
- 16 Unthrifty sort
- 18 Count start
- 19 Young fellow
- 20 Ornate vase
- 21 Very bright
- 23 Shows disuse
- 25 G-man
- 27 Snap
- 28 Check for bugs
- 30 Bangkok native

DOWN

- 1 Bully
- 2 One way to shop
- 3 Ann Patchett book
- 4 Mess up
- 5 Comedic tribute
- 6 Got smart
- 7 Grace finish
- 8 Ann Patchett book
- 9 Kitchen gadgets
- 10 Boat back
- 17 Hole number
- 22 Social page word
- 24 Remain unsued
- 26 Pours, as port
- 28 Origin
- 29 Lobster trap
- 31 Mame, for one
- 32 Ad section
- 33 Impetuous
- 35 Cassoulet base
- 38 Give for a time
- 42 Farm grazer

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BEETLE BAILEY by Mort Walker

BABY BLUES by Kirkman & Scott

YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

H	O	B	O	G	A	U	Z	E
A	R	A	B	W	A	R	R	E
H	A	L	L	A	M	E	N	S
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