

A tribute to Jamilur Reza Choudhury

A man who built Bangladesh with a passion

KHALID SHAMS

PROFESSOR Jamilur Reza Choudhury, fondly called JRC by his friends, was a soft spoken but a strongly passionate man. As a distinguished civil engineer, his passion was to build a modern Bangladesh. All his expertise, energy and work were dedicated to this single purpose. There was hardly any major or mega civil construction project in the country with which he was not associated. He had the highest professional credentials as a civil and structural engineer. As part of his doctoral thesis he devised a simplified method for analysis of shear walls in tall buildings which has been used all over the world. It is even included in text books on the subject in different countries.

If he wanted, JRC could have lived and worked in the west and acquired fame like Dr FR Khan. Instead, he devoted himself to teaching and working in his own country. But unlike many other academics, he went far beyond the confines of his classroom, ventured into the real world of development—not only the physical structures made of steel and concrete, but more importantly the development of human resources, the young people of Bangladesh. So after Buet, he spent the rest of his life building private universities, i.e. the Brac

University and the University of Asia Pacific.

He was undoubtedly a great human being. Already the human qualities of JRC, his humility, warmth of his personality, his friendly unassuming behaviour, have been highlighted. Having known him and his family since our high school days, I have seen how modest and unostentatious was his living. I have frequented his family bungalow on Elephant Road which contained musty old furniture and shelves filled with books—reflecting the lifestyle of a typical emerging middle class family with academic inclinations. I believe only recently the property has been given to a developer.

What struck me most was Jamil's highly strategic vision for future development of a country that won its independence after a devastating Liberation War. It was a poor country, much derided globally as a basket case. The low lying delta that merged with the Bay of Bengal was vulnerable to frequent cyclones and storm surges. Probably half a million people had perished in the cyclone of November, 1970. The immediate task was to prevent such colossal loss of lives in future. JRC envisioned a ring of multipurpose cyclone shelters all along the 750 km of coastline of the bay. It was almost an impossible mission. JRC led a team of



Professor Jamilur Reza Choudhury

experts that planned and implemented a highly successful multi-purpose cyclone shelter programme overseeing construction of 2,500 multi-storied buildings. Various evaluation studies including a very recent one by Kyoto university estimated that these shelters have saved probably hundreds of thousands of lives in recent years.

JRC was also trail-blazer with introduction of new information based communication technologies, which provide the platform for today's "Digital Bangladesh". He was the director of the newly set up Computer Centre in Buet during the period 1982-92. It later on became the Institute of Information and Communications Technology, a real

powerhouse of training, churning out the first generation of computer engineers in Bangladesh. Its graduates were at the forefront of an ICT based industry and trade, both at home and abroad.

I was at that time involved with research on regional development policies at the Asian and Pacific Development Centre in Kuala Lumpur. In 1986 Jamil assisted me in introducing a research project on development of new IT applications—now facilitated by emergence of desktop personal computers—for decentralised rural development. We had scholars like Nitin Patel and Mohan Kaul from India, Samaranyake from Sri Lanka who prepared policy recommendations for using PCs to utilise rural data bases for local and regional development. Jamil, in spite of his quiet unobtrusive ways became a veritable whirlwind, the primary motivating force, the change-maker in the IT sector of our country. He ultimately ended up as the chairman of the task force for developing export of software and data processing as well as convenor of the committee which formulated the national IT policy.

His involvement in different sectors of our national development seemed boundless. He was a bee-hive of energy. A Prometheus unbound. His capacity to motivate and energise others, especially the young, was amazing.

His personal and professional integrity in a country where corruption is rife, was unparalleled. I was impressed by his unique ability to coordinate, to harmonise, to synthesise even highly divergent views. This is also exemplified by his capacity to work simultaneously with both government and non-government organisations like Brac, Grameen Bank, as well as international development institutions. He did this without ever compromising his professional integrity.

Right now we face the unprecedented crisis of Covid-19 and an epic challenge for reconstruction of a devastated economy. We very much needed JRC and his expertise, his bold vision and capacity to coordinate and inspire others to work as a team, in accomplishing this task.

We often complain that Bangladesh does not have a person who could become a role model for our youth. I would like to assert that JRC was a patriot and a great role model for our new generation of young professionals. I certainly grieve at his death. At the same time, I also celebrate, like so many of his friends, colleagues and admirers, the great accomplishments of his life. His name will be emblazoned in our development history as one of the great builders of Bangladesh.

Khalid Shams is a former civil servant and a friend of JRC.

The 'Extraction' Attraction



SHAMSAD MORTUZA

MY Face-book newsfeed has been experiencing a little tremor ever since the Dhaka-based action movie *Extraction* started streaming on Netflix on April

24. Surprisingly, the ground shaking "thor-thor" is not due to the much hyped presence of Chris Hemsworth and his marvellous reputation as an avenger; instead, social media is abuzz with Dhaka being misrepresented by Hollywood.

Not too often do we get to hear Bangladesh and Hollywood in the same sentence. There was a time when the popular BTV variety show *Jodi Kichu Mome Na Koren* featured a Hollywood based reporter to give media updates in the pre-internet era. There have been documentaries—such as *The Human Scale* (2012) dealing with the problematic expansion of megacity or *The True Cost* (2015) exploring the condition in which clothes are made for the fashion world—that shed light on Dhaka. Dhaka is mentioned in passing in TV shows such as "How I Met Your Mother" where Ranjit the taxi driver is said to be from Bangladesh. Evan Treborn in *The Butterfly Effect* (2004) worries about waking up in a "dirt farm" in Bangladesh. In *Friends with Benefits* (2011) we hear of Bangladesh in a sarcastic list of countries that tops America in work ethics. *Zoolander* (2011) mentions Bangladesh in the context of child labour. In Spielberg's *Munich* employs the comment: "enough food to feed Bangladesh". And in one episode of *Simpsons*, Krusty the clown finds an old record from Bangladesh and is kicked out of the house for playing it! I am sure there are a few odd references here and there that I have missed. Suffice it to say, the presence of Bangladesh in Hollywood films is far from flattering.

The fact that *Extraction* has gained traction in Bangladesh to become number one Netflix choice is no wonder. Never mind that it is a mindless action

movie with endless spewing of bullets running through a ridiculous storyline.

The plot involves [skip if you plan to watch the movie] an Indian drug lord who is in jail. His son stays with his security chief Saju in Mumbai in a massive palatial house. The boy Ovi is kidnapped by a rival drug kingpin from Bangladesh. Asif is a dandy young man who runs a racketeer of drug-peddlers reminding one of the scantily dressed characters with invectives aplenty from *Shamdog Millionaire*.

Saju hires an Australian extractor Rake, a psychological wreck who suffers from the trauma of losing his son to cancer and ends up killing someone with a garden rake to live up to his name. Tyler undertakes this mission impossible to Dhaka with a death wish. Within 16 hours, the entire rescue team takes position in a launch in the Buriganga River, while he alone goes to pay the ransom to free Ovi. Killing spree, high speed car chase, road blockades, and door to door search in narrow alleys ensued as Rake rescues Ovi.

Meanwhile, Saju secretly comes to Dhaka on a chartered plane from Mumbai with an intention of double-crossing the rescue mission. He kills Tyler's rescue party. Don't ask why Saju, who could kill an entire international mercenary gang, bothered to hire secondary forces to deal with some street ruffians? Don't be distracted by the mindless plot—keep watching, and you may even end up being proud of Ananta Jalil.

Tyler and Ovi thus end up being chased by Asif's gang, Asif's pet police (a combination of DMP, RB elite and the army) and Saju. For the first time ever in the history of mankind, we get an insight into Dhaka's box culverts, "the world's worst sewage" through which the duo escaped and was later picked up by a western handler and taken to a safe house. Ovi had to kill the handler to save Tyler from his greedy friend. They are again on the streets in search of the pickup point. After hundreds of cars, CNC wheelers being destroyed, bodies being dropped, rocket launchers being hurled, a helicopter being smashed over Demra bridge, the hero and his foil being dead (Tyler will be dead unless a sequel is required), the boy is saved by Tyler's back

up team. The final action on the bridge is conveniently watched by Asif from his palace with simple binoculars, while his lackey colonel goes in and out of action to coordinate the chase.

The movie has been hailed for its close encounter combats and the daring "oner". Sam Hargrave, the debutant director famed for his stunts in Marvel movies, straps himself on the bonnet of a car to film a long-form "one-shot" spanning 12 minutes to cover a car chase, a foot chase, another car chase, gun battles, knife battles, hand-to-hand combat, and plenty of explosions. Evidently, the "oner" failed to impress our sulky viewers who were in no mood to stomach the negative portrayal of Dhaka.



A still from the movie 'Extraction'.

Some have commented on the yellow filter that has been used to present Dhaka as a sickly, exotic location. Others have been disturbed by the configuration of Dhaka as a failed state where a drug lord can employ a senior army officer to brew a cocktail of armed forces and spray them over the intruders who to be killed like mosquitoes by a wanton boy. There is no meeting of the Defence Ministry or call from the political leadership: a bunch of heavily armoured uniformed men engage in a wild goose chase while being killed by the dozens in the process. Since when are our national security decisions involving foreigners taken inside a criminal's den? Valid question.

Well, mindless action genres set in Bangkok, Lagos, Somalia, Taiwan, Vietnam, Mexico, Brazil and the like need these poverty-stricken slums to catch the imagination of the west. We, the people of The Third World, offer an ugly canvas against which the conflicted hero's moral dilemma can be portrayed. I do not think we have objected to such stereotyping of other countries and races earlier. So what makes us become so sensitive now?

This reminds me of a particular scene from *Rush Hour* in which Jackie Chan greets a black man as "What's up my nigga" and gets attacked. He was trying to be "kool" like his black partner Chris Tucker. I guess it's alright for us to ritually disown our own city, discredit it,

that we can ask is why a film on Dhaka is devoid of Bangladeshi actors. The Dakaiya accents attempted by the Indian actors were gibberish to say the least. Even the way Chris Hemsworth demanded, "proman dao" was better Bangla than any one of those Indian actors. The Hindi songs and cabaret dance too were also out of joint.

We understand the film had a local partner, but their involvement is very hazy. The credit-line shows few locals in the technical team. Indeed we need to ask why the film was not shot in Dhaka except for the footages needed for chroma key compositing. The involvement of our local actors, agencies would have made it a much more credible production. We need more efficient translators, creative writers, bi-lingual actors, film critics so that the west takes us seriously. The anthology *Sincerely Yours, Dhaka* (2018) on Netflix and some other non-mainstream movies are slowly generating a trickle of cultural capital that we need for future ventures.

There is no point in being angry at an angry movie. Let us take a step back: think of better ways of branding Dhaka. I think Turkey can be a good role model. Turkish Airlines has used Ridley Scott to make *The Journey*, which is now being used as a promotional video for Istanbul. Then there are some wonderful Turkish movies and serials on Netflix that show the modern and urban sides of the country. If we think that the only way we can represent Bangladesh before the western world is by presenting our villages and poverty at the Cannes film festival, then the west will also not think of us as anything more than an exotic location caught in a time-war. Finally, a note on the market. If we are mindful about what we consume and patronise, the market will yield a different representation. Mind it, it is our custom that has made *Extraction* the number one Netflix choice in Bangladesh. If we can prove to the world that we have a sensible market large enough to patronise Hollywood, surely there will be substantial change in the way we are represented.

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ON THIS DAY IN HISTORY



MARGARET THATCHER ELECTED PRIME MINISTER OF BRITAIN

May 3, 1979

On this day in 1979, Margaret Thatcher of the Conservative Party was elected British prime minister, becoming the first woman in Europe to hold that post and later the longest continuously serving British premier since 1827.

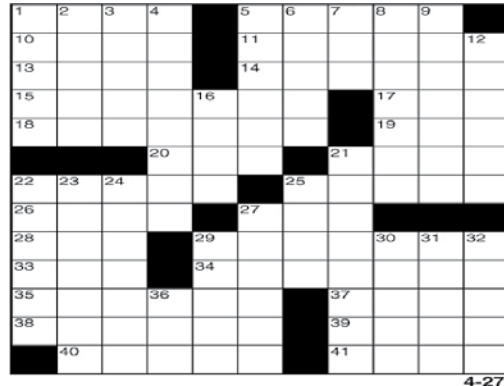
CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

- 1 Con man's con
- 5 Impassive one
- 10 Ship of 1492
- 11 Grazing area
- 13 Smell
- 14 Whole
- 15 Responds to a busy signal
- 17 Low digit
- 18 Sewing machine part
- 19 Waiter's reward
- 20 Veto vote
- 21 Lab runners
- 22 Coffee add-in
- 25 Daytona entrant
- 26 Farm fowl
- 27 Ventilate
- 28 Mayo ingredient
- 29 Orchestra

MUSICIANS

- 33 Simple card game
- 34 "Top Hat" star
- 35 Go by
- 37 Large family
- 38 Prepare for eating, as shrimp
- 39 "-- by you?"
- 40 Rationalistic believer
- 41 Cruise stop
- 7 Granola bit
- 8 Foolish
- 9 Ornamental molding
- 12 Three-hanky film
- 16 First person
- 21 Strolling Mexican musician
- 22 Enjoyed some gum
- 23 Entertained lavishly
- 24 Etch
- 25 Mob revolt
- 27 Not present
- 29 Caravan stop
- 30 Farm sights
- 31 Fish with a net
- 32 Good judgment
- 36 Architect I.M.



TUESDAY'S ANSWERS

A S T R A Y S L O P
L A H O R E P A N E
A D E P T S I O N A
R I T E S P E T A L
M E A D D E S I R E
I C E R A I D
M A N O A M A N O
T A N E L S E
A L I G N S R E S T
M A M A S B O R E R
E R A S D E B A T E
R I L E E D I S O N
S A S A S C E N D



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