

Should Bangladesh defer LDC graduation?

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BA NGLADESH has attained considerable development progress in the past three decades. This has led it to enter a dual-graduation phase—moving out from low-income country to lower middle-income country group (World Bank classification) in 2015, and meeting all three criteria for exiting from the least developed country (LDC) group (United Nations classification) in 2018. Bangladesh willingly embraced its graduation journey as it added landmarks to its development milestones. However, the Covid-19 pandemic is amplifying the country's pre-existing vulnerabilities, and adding new challenges to the progress of the economy and society.

Covid-19 has been unfolding in Bangladesh at an alarming rate. As of May 15, 2020, 20,065 infections and 298 deaths have been reported, which are the highest numbers among all 47 LDCs. As the country struggles to address the so-called dilemma between saving lives and securing livelihoods, it is obvious that the economy in the coming years will go into a slump, manifesting in loss of jobs, income and savings. These adverse impacts of the pandemic will fall disproportionately on the traditionally "left behind" citizens, slowing down attainment of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Thus, there are justified concerns whether the pandemic will jeopardise the smooth and sustainable transition of the largest LDC in the world. Should Bangladesh defer its LDC graduation, scheduled in 2024? The urgency of a response to this question is dictated by the upcoming triennial review of the United Nations Committee for Development Policy (UN-CDP), where Bangladesh's progress towards graduation will come up for scrutiny for the second time.

As is known, in order to graduate from the group, LDCs have to meet at least two of the following three criteria for two

consecutive triennial reviews: gross national income (GNI) per capita; human asset index (HAI), consisting of education and health indicators; and economic and environmental vulnerability index (EVI) based on a host of structural factors. Alternatively, a country can also graduate upon meeting the "income only" criteria by recording GNI per capita of USD 2,460. Bangladesh is likely to experience deterioration of all the indicators underwriting the three sets of graduation criteria in the coming years.

The GNI per capita of Bangladesh during the last review in 2018 was USD 1,274 (against the threshold of USD 1,230), which may be expected to stagnate, if not fall. Besides an upward estimation of the national income by 15 percent in 2015, three other factors which contributed towards attainment of the income threshold by Bangladesh were robust growth rate of gross domestic product (GDP), high inflow of remittances and stability of exchange rate. International financial institutions have already downgraded the forecast for GDP growth rate between 2-3 percent for the year 2019-20, and more pessimistically for the upcoming fiscal year. Remittance inflows (providing the differential growth between GNI and GDP) are already significantly down, and do not portend well because of the dampened oil price and return of our migrant workers. Due to the emerging weakness in the current account, not the least because of subsidence of apparel exports, the international exchange rate of the national currency may depreciate. All these three factors will be under pressure, and may report a downward trend in the coming years.

Regrettably, many of the six indicators of the human asset index of Bangladesh, three each from health and education components, will also decline due to the pandemic. The distress in our health sector has been chronic, with budget allocation for health being as low as less than one per cent of GDP. Although

maternal mortality and under-five mortality due to Covid-19 infections have been low, these indicators are expected to suffer in the coming months. Increased domestic violence against women are being reported. Pregnant women are opting for unattended deliveries and unsafe practices due to fear of being infected in hospitals. In addition, there is constrained access to antenatal and postnatal services, leading to severe consequences on women's health. Children under-five and newborns may be deprived of access to nutrition and emergency healthcare during the pandemic, which can lead to malnutrition and make them prone to stunted growth, infections and lethal illnesses.

In the education sector, gross secondary enrolment may fall as the poverty level increases, particularly in the rural areas, in the aftermath of the pandemic. Arguably, the gender parity index for gross enrolment at the secondary level will be most adversely affected as poverty escalates. Grassroots-level information indicates the possibility of higher dropout of female students as incidence of



IMAGE BY KAZI TAHSSIN AGAZ APURBO

early marriages is on the rise.

Two of the eight Economic and Environmental Vulnerability Index indicators, namely, instability of exports of goods and services and instability of agricultural production, could become important for Bangladesh in the post-pandemic phase. Slackened demand in the global market for both manufactures and services originating from the LDCs is going to affect Bangladesh's export and remittance earnings. More importantly, if the global economy enters into a protracted recession, prospects for these two sectors will remain unstable, if not uncertain, in the near future.

Regarding agricultural production, it is to be seen how the current *aus* and the upcoming *aman* harvests fare in the country. Paradoxically, during the review in February 2021, the impact of Covid-19 will

not be reflected in the available data for the assessment of graduation criteria of the LDCs. However, the UN-CDP has recently adopted a broader assessment framework as well as country-specific risk analysis, to make an informed decision. The candidate countries are entitled to put up their views in written form, and CDP may also seek their advice regarding the graduation process. It will be a country by country decision, including the one on Bangladesh.

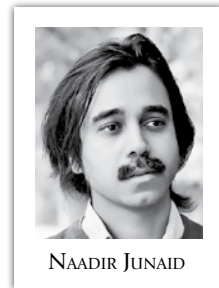
At the same time, a growing global sympathy for the LDCs is observed in view of the Covid-19 impact. The G20 has called for special support measures for these countries to help them counter the impact of the pandemic. If this trend gathers momentum, a systemic decision through a resolution at the United Nations may be taken to defer the graduation of all LDCs.

Nevertheless, Bangladesh will have to prepare its technical analysis soon. By staying in the group, Bangladesh may not only continue to enjoy the available preferences, but could also tap into new opportunities. On the other hand, by sticking to the graduation process, the country may use the Covid-induced situation as an opportunity to accelerate its preparation for graduation.

In the final analysis, deferring the graduation of Bangladesh from the LDC group will be a political decision to be taken by the government of the day. In part, it will be dictated by our emotions linked to the 50th anniversary celebrations of the country in 2021. It will also be associated with the development narrative we want to project—a victim of vagaries of nature or a resilient nation in the face of extreme adversities (or maybe both!). Regardless of the choice, Bangladesh will have to take a decision in this regard soon.

As the country struggles to address the so-called dilemma between saving lives and securing livelihoods, it is obvious that the economy in the coming years will go into a slump, manifesting in loss of jobs, income and savings.

Are we praising the right films?



NAADIR JUNAID

WHEN did we last watch a formally-innovative Bangladeshi film that made a conscious attempt to confront and denounce a long-standing social problem of our country? And when did we last witness

people's huge enthusiasm to watch a film that did away with alluring ingredients and attempted to raise people's sociopolitical consciousness? Taking a look at influential films of world cinema makes us understand that good films incorporate thought-provoking content as well as innovative form. A socially-relevant story cannot instill critical consciousness into viewers if it is accompanied by traditional filmic devices that provide shallow entertainment.

Hirak Raajar Deshe and *Bhoot er Bhabishshat*, two Bangla films of West Bengal, draw amply on humorous elements. Yet, instead of trivial entertainment, these films provide piercing political critiques. In *Hirak Raajar Deshe*, apparently amusing dialogues in the form of rhyming couplets contain Satyajit Ray's acid wit. They jolt the audience and make them understand the sheer injustice that torments people within the rule of a ruthless tyrant. In *Bhoot er Bhabishshat*, discussions on filmmaking in the film's narrative and frequent shifts from narrative events to the conversation between two people disturb the spectator's passive immersion into the film. Because of its innovative form, *Bhoot er Bhabishshat* does not provide the viewers with the pleasure they usually obtain from watching a conventional film.

Satyajit Ray once wrote: "For the truly serious, socially conscious filmmaker, there can be no prolonged withdrawal into fantasy. He must face the challenge of contemporary reality, examine the facts, probe them, sift them and select from them the material to be transformed into the stuff of cinema." Contemporary Bangladeshi films made outside the dominant film industry are not informed by the above statement of this

much-revered Bengali filmmaker. In the past, films made in our country such as *Shurjokanya*, *Rupali Shaikat e*, *Shurjo Dighal Baari*, *Matir Moina* and *Rumway* came to grips with serious social issues, such as subjugation of women in patriarchal societies, dictatorial rule, exploitation of the underprivileged, harmful effects of religious orthodoxy, the rise of Islamist extremism etc. Instead of highlighting flamboyance and flashiness, the directors deployed new and creative cinematic

characters' direct looks at the camera, internal monologue, voice-over narration, references to real events, use of symbols, imaginative use of sound and music etc to explore various social and cultural aspects of post-independence Bangladesh.

Throughout *Ghuddi*, well-thought-out dialogues convey political critiques as well as artistic subtlety. In one scene, the internal monologue of the protagonist who was a freedom fighter becomes a sharp observation



Still from *Hirak Raajar Deshe*.

techniques to deal with urgent problems. These films, unlike certain contemporary Bangladeshi alternative movies, did not change reality into spectacle.

In another Bangladeshi film *Ghuddi*, we see a romantic relationship between characters, songs, and lighthearted scenes. Despite the inclusion of such customary elements of commercial cinema, the director also uses complicated strategies such as frequent mentions of movies in the narrative,

of contemporary reality: "I have been searching for something from the shattered remains of 1971 to today's mansions symbolising honour, power and wealth. What have I been looking for? I also fought in the Liberation War. What is my identity? Am I free now?" In another sequence, the film provides trenchant political criticisms through the dialogues of a young man: "An old shirt and it is badly torn. In 1947, the British gave the shirt to my father. Father did not throw it

away. He became very happy only by mending it. In doing so, he betrayed us silently." The young man also says: "History was written untruthfully. They taught us a distorted history. And all this was done deliberately. You have still kept everyone in the trap of a false history."

It is unfortunate that we do not come across such profound and socially-meaningful dialogues, nor do we see attempts at formal experimentation, in alternative films made in our country nowadays. Many of our alternative films are characterised by the presence of glamorous male and female performers, romantic plots, events containing sexual overtones, superficial dialogues, puerile humour, and attempts to popularise various aspects of the capitalist society, thereby making us suspect that they are made to cater to the mass market as well. If these films address social problems, they only show the depravity of a small office employee, or a village headman, or a petty hoodlum. Often, their criticisms do not seem to have any connection with realism and practicality. Therefore, these films cannot trouble the powerful people guilty of social injustice and exploitation. Instead of counteracting the dominant ideology, they serve to sustain the status quo by glamorising today's consumerist lifestyle.

However, such films have often received raves in our society and the directors are lauded for making such productions. It seems neither the critics nor the audience notice the lack of innovation and significant social messages in these films. Referring to the film audience of West Bengal, in an interview Satyajit Ray once said: "We have a fairly backward audience here, I must say, in spite of the film society movement and all that. If you consider the large audience, it's a backward audience, unsophisticated audience exposed to the commercial Hindi cinema more than anything else." Ray's remarks seem to be an apt description of the large audience of our contemporary society as well. If artistically-innovative and socially-responsible films are not shown and discussed regularly, people will not understand the importance of cinema as a social weapon and an art form. They continue to equate cinema with clichéd

stories of romantic relationships and cheap entertainment.

Recently, I came across a video on Facebook depicting a play performed by little boys and girls. To my sheer surprise, I observed that the children were talking about attraction towards the opposite sex, physical beauty, having a boyfriend or a girlfriend etc in an obnoxious way. Never have I seen less than 10-year-old children talking about such topics so grossly in a play or in a film. This video clearly shows the very unpleasant influence of the tasteless television dramas and films, even on the children in our present-day society. In the 1980s, children were so enthusiastic to watch a film like *Emil er Goenda Bahini* where many youngsters performed. That film inspired children to show compassion for caged birds and animals, write imaginative essays in magazines, and confront a criminal. In contrast, today's children of our society are mimicking distasteful dialogues used frequently in many television dramas and films.

In the past, well-made western films starring iconic performers such as Alec Guinness, Clark Gable, Doris Day, Gregory Peck, Audrey Hepburn, Rock Hudson, Gina Lollobrigida, Omar Sharif, Sophia Loren and Anthony Quinn were shown in our country in the cinemas and in BTV. Film societies regularly organised events to screen important films made by European, Latin American, African and Asian filmmakers. Nowadays, the above-mentioned names do not sound familiar even to many university students in our country. Many people do not bother watching masterpieces such as Akira Kurosawa's *Rashomon* and Federico Fellini's *La Dolce Vita*, nor do they lament the lack of films like Tareque Masud's *Matir Moina* and Zahir Raihan's *Jiban Theke Neya* in our country nowadays. If films marked by banality and flamboyance continue to be eulogised, many people in our society will not understand the nature of a good film. We cannot expect to witness cultivated aesthetic taste and critical consciousness among many people if run-of-the-mill films continue to be produced and praised.

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ON THIS DAY IN HISTORY

WARSAW GHETTO UPRISING SUPPRESSED
May 16, 1943

On this day in 1943, Nazi troops quelled the monthlong Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, in which Polish Jews, led by Mordechai Anielewicz and the Jewish Fighting Organization, resisted deportation to the Treblinka extermination camp.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

- 1 Scientist Curie
- 6 Lock setting
- 11 Potential oak
- 12 Sports site
- 13 Evaluation criteria
- 15 Ready to go
- 16 Cocoa holder
- 17 Tennis court divider
- 18 Poet's concern
- 20 New Jersey player
- 23 Drive off
- 27 Turkey neighbor
- 28 Stalactite setting
- 29 "Stop being a wimp!"
- 31 Dip a KP chore
- 32 Absorb

DOWN

- 1 Atlas pages
- 2 Lot unit
- 3 Tooth part
- 4 Auditor's org.
- 5 Tooth part
- 6 Sponge
- 7 Curved path
- 8 Noble gas
- 9 Writer Rice
- 34 Finish
- 37 Jar part
- 38 Winter bug
- 41 Congressional votes
- 44 Consumed
- 45 River through
- 46 Spirited horse
- 47 Made mistakes
- 10 Ultimate
- 14 Cashew or pecan
- 18 Less
- 19 News summary
- 20 Poorly lit
- 21 Pitcher's stat
- 22 Mover's truck
- 24 Golf goal
- 25 Cain's mother
- 26 Was a pioneer
- 30 Belarus neighbor
- 31 Rainy day creation
- 33 Narrow brooch
- 34 Needle features
- 35 Orderly
- 36 Postmark part
- 38 Ump's call
- 39 Harp's kin
- 40 Formerly owned
- 42 Look upon
- 43 Negative link

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YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

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

BEETLE BAILEY

BY MORT WALKER

HEY, PLATO, WHAT'S NEW?
HOMO SAPIENS HAVE ONLY BEEN AROUND 200,000 YEARS
WHICH ISN'T LONG COMPARED TO THE AGE OF THE UNIVERSE...
DOES HE EVER SAY "NOT MUCH"?
NEVER

BABY BLUES

BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT

SO WHAT DID YOU AND DAERYL DO ON YOUR NIGHT OUT?
WE HAD THREE BLISSFUL HOURS OF FINE DINING!
MONICA SAID SHE SAW YOU GUYS ORDERING BURETTOS FROM A FOOD TRUCK.
THE HIGHER THE BABY-SITTER COST, THE LOOSER THE DEFINITION OF "FINE DINING."