Can climate action become the new normal?

Bangladesh can lead the way in the post-pandemic world

Haseeb Md Irfanullah

DUE to the pandemic, we are doing a lot of otherwise-unusual things—be it maintaining physical distance in public places, schooling through TV or on web platforms, or if lucky enough, working from home. We are calling this lifestyle the "new normal".

But typically, how long does it take something to become a new normal? A couple of years, a few months? Or may be just a few weeks—at least, that is what is happening with the ongoing coronavirus crisis. Some things, however, do not become normal to us, even in decades. Let's take climate change as an example.

Since the 1980s, scientists have shown that climate is really changing and it is us, the humans, who are responsible for it. Since 2010, global temperatures have reached an all-time high; extreme weather events like torrential rainfall and hazards like forest fires have become more common; and catastrophes like cyclones and hurricanes started hitting our coasts more frequently, with greater strength. Climate experts repeatedly warned us—all of these are becoming a "new normal" due to climate change, and we must rapidly cut down our greenhouse gas emissions to avoid the worst. Regardless, all countries are still not acting against this "new normal" called climate change.

As we draw pictures of a post-pandemic world, leaders of thought, scientists and activists around the world are urging for a world quite different from the pre-pandemic one. They are advocating for a world that takes drastic actions against climate change by investing more in a low carbon-emitting economy. They are hoping that such a shift will become the "new normal" in the post-pandemic world.

Will this pandemic really bring us any new realisations? Will it rejuvenate our climate movement? What if this pandemic is just a temporary distraction from our normal, business-as-usual way of seeing climate change? What if it fails to push a "new normal" into our climate action?

As factories are closed, roads are empty and airplanes rest on the tarmac—this pandemic has so far managed to reduce global annual carbon emissions by an unprecedented eight percent, the Bloomberg reports. Interestingly, last November the UN Environment Programme (UNEP) suggested that we need to reduce a similar percentage (7.6) of global carbon emissions every year, if we want to keep the global temperature rise below 1.5 degrees Celsius by 2030—a target outlined in the Paris Agreement back in 2015.

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But, alarmingly, recent calculations have led scientists from the University of East Anglia, UK to expect a sharp rise of carbon emissions—returning to pre-pandemic emission levels in a matter of months—once countries open up after the pandemic. Moreover, as governments are allocating billions of dollars to save pandemic-stricken economies, already troubled oil and coal-based companies are in the queue to receive bailouts, while renewable energy industries face financial constraints. We see no new normal here.

Despite being one of the most climate vulnerable countries, Bangladesh has developed and implemented excellent climate change strategies and action plans, has innovated national climate funding mechanisms, and has incorporated climate action into national development. Bangladesh, therefore, should not fall for any "pandemic distractions". The country should harness its pre-pandemic climate achievements and have a climate-resilient post-pandemic development journey.

After a 66-day-long general shutdown, as Bangladesh opens up on a limited scale, it needs to do three things immediately, in the next few weeks, to be specific.

Eleven years ago, the then-newly elected government updated the Bangladesh Climate Change Strategy and Action Plan (BCCSAP, 2009). The beauty of BCCSAP is that it is not only a Bangladesh-driven document to fight climate change, but is also being implemented with our own money—a Tk 3,500 crore pot called the Bangladesh Climate Change Trust Fund (BCCTF).

Being a ten year plan, the BCCSAP was supposed to be reviewed and updated by 2018. Although the BCCTF has funded almost 700 projects, for some reasons, it was the German development partner GIZ that funded BCCSAP's revision under its Climate Finance Governance project. That GIZ project ended in 2018, but the revised BCCSAP, our key climate change document, is yet to be finalised. So the first urgent thing the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change should do is get the updated BCCSAP approved, make it public, and start using it to guide our climate action. To uphold Bangladesh's commitments and leadership in climate action, the importance of doing this immediately cannot be emphasised enough.

Second, since the 2015–2016 fiscal year, the government has been calculating how much money Bangladesh spends to tackle climate change. In the current year (2019–2020), our climate-relevant budget is 4.54 percent of our national budget or 0.8 percent of our GDP. This has more or less been the trend for the last four years.

It is now crucial that, in the 2020–2021 budget, Bangladesh maintains the five percent allocation to climate action despite the demands to tackle the ongoing coronavirus crisis and recovery. To have proper climate action, we gradually need to increase this allocation. But for 2020–2021, maintaining the previous funding is a realistic step forward.

Last week, the much-anticipated 26th Conference of Parties (COP26) to the UN climate change convention was rescheduled for November 1–12, 2021 in Glasgow, UK. This crucial annual event cannot be held this November due to the pandemic. It is now a serious challenge to keep the climate conversation going in the two years since the last COP25 was held in Madrid in December 2019. A good thing for Bangladesh is that it is now the chair of the important Climate Vulnerable Forum (CVF)—an assembly of the 48 most climate vulnerable countries—for 2020–2021. It puts Bangladesh in a position to actively facilitate and stir climate discussions over the next year and a half.

So, as the third immediate action, the government needs to bring together climate experts of the country and define our strategy towards COP26. How do we capitalise on our climate achievements to date? How do we effectively facilitate the CVF now and in the post-pandemic period? How do we work with the COP26 host, the UK, and its partner Italy? How do we showcase nature-based solutions—a key theme of the COP26—by gathering evidence from our rich investments in nature conservation over the past decades?

Bangladesh should make a mark and lead towards the COP26 of November 2021. Rejuvenating climate action in the Global South in the post-corona era—that is a legacy Bangladesh can be very proud of.

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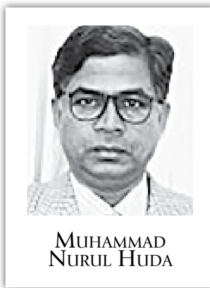
Was the Partition of 1947 inevitable?



Muhammad Nurul Huda

ON this day in 1947, the partition plan of the Indian subcontinent was made public and independence came on 14-15 August of that year. It is, however, curious to note that although 73 years have passed since then, "Partition" happens to be the most contested discursive territory of South Asian historiography. The volume of literature produced in this field is staggering.

Looking back, it would appear that while for many Indians freedom came with a sense of loss caused by Partition, to many Muslims in Pakistan, Partition meant freedom. For some Pakistani historians, Partition was a liberating experience, a logical culmination of a long historical process that was started in the 19th century by Sayyid Ahmed Khan and others, when the South Asian Muslims began to discover their national identity, which was articulated later in the complex subcontinental politics of the 1940s. According to prominent Pakistani lawyer and politician Aitzaz Ahsan, Partition was a "primordial divide"—"a divide that is 50 years young and 5,000 years old".

As opposed to the above contention, there are other historians who have questioned the inevitability and legitimacy of Partition. They are of the view that it was Jinnah and his Muslim League—which from 1940 began to advocate the "two nation theory"—who were ultimately responsible for the unfortunate but avoidable vivisection of the subcontinent. In their analysis, it was the "colonial government which created a Muslim community in its own image and allowed its war-time ally, the League, to transform a segmented population into a "nation" or "juridical entity"."

The proponents of the above view believe that the Partition script was penned by the British and in Muhammad Ali Jinnah, they found an excellent barrister who with dogged determination pursued the cause relentlessly, until a situation evolved where there was no return from the Partition stance.

The Pakistan movement, one has to note, had started embracing a wider public from a much earlier period. One cannot agree that the Pakistan movement lacked popular support, at least during the penultimate years of the Raj. Historian Ian Talbot has shown how in Punjab, the Muslim League took the Pakistan campaign "from the drawing room on to the streets" and how "hundreds of thousands of Muslims participated in demonstrations, processions and strikes, and finally battled in the communal riots in the name of Pakistan and thus legitimised the Muslim League's claims".

Historians Shila Sen and Taj Hashmi have argued that the "Pakistan movement was mass based and democratic", as it could successfully involve the East Bengali Muslim peasantry by offering them a utopian vision of a promised land. In the 1940s, there was a considerable politicisation along communal lines in Bengal. Historian Joya Chatterji has demonstrated how the Bengali *"bhadrolok"* launched a campaign for Partition and sought to involve the *"non-bhadrolok"* classes as well. The Dalit groups in the northern and eastern districts of Bengal responded to this call. The Pakistan movement, therefore, was hardly an elite affair during the last years of British rule.

From a historical perspective, one would find that the Muslims of India were the first to contest the Congress version of nationalism and almost from the beginning, many of them did not consider the Indian National Congress to be their representative. Muslim leaders like Sayyid Ahmed Khan clearly considered Congress to be the representative of the majority Hindus. The prospect of the introduction of representative government created the threat of a majority domination, which led to the formation of the All India Muslim League in 1906.

The formation of the Muslim League was clearly the beginning of a search for a distinctive political identity, with demands for the protection of their political rights as a minority community through the creation of separate electorate. The Morley-Minto reform of 1909 elevated Muslims to the status of an "All India political category" and thus positioned them as a "perpetual minority" in the Indian body politic. These structural imperatives of representative government henceforth began to influence the relationship between the Congress and the Muslim League.

One has to appreciate that the mainstream Indian nationalism under the stewardship of the Indian National Congress failed to maintain its separation from the blooming Hindu nationalism, and this was first contested by the Muslims. Against this background, one has to remember that the major premise of colonial cognition of Indian society was the theme of "differentiation", which was traced, mapped and enumerated through various official ethnographic studies and finally, since 1872, through decennial census reports. The Indian colonial census, unlike its British predecessor, made religion its fundamental ethnographic category for ordering and classifying demographic and developmental data.

The break-up of literacy and occupational statistics according to religion provided an apparently objective picture of the relative or comparative material and social conditions of each religious community. The result of this census taxonomy was the new concept of "religion as a community". Religion came to be identified with "an aggregate of individuals united by formal official definition" who became conscious of their comparative demographic, as well as socio-economic positions, vis-à-vis other communities.

It is relevant to note here that the colonial knowledge of a redefined religion was incorporated into every structure that the State created and every opportunity that it offered to colonial subjects—from educational facilities, public employment and representation in local self-governing bodies to entry into the expanded legislative councils. The point to note is that, despite the government's trumpeting of the secular character of this public space and their confining of religion to the private, the boundaries remained highly permeable, and it was within this context that the relationship between the religious groups were reconstituted in the late 19th century.

In practical terms, as Hindu mobilisation made progress, it also simultaneously sculpted and vilified its other, the Muslims. The latter too began to discover their community identity, informed by their common religion and an invented shared past. The aggressive Arya Samaj movement contributed to the counter-mobilisation of the Muslims in urban Punjab. In the countryside too, Islam penetrated rural politics in the 19th century through such intermediaries as *pirs* and the *ulama*.

In all the regions of India, Muslims suffered from a sense of relative deprivation in comparison with Hindus. Among the Bengal Muslims, a distinct Muslim identity had been developing at a mass level from the early 19th century through various Islamic reform movements. This distinct identity was developed through itinerant *mullahs*, the *Bahas* (religious meetings) and the *anjumans* or local associations. The Bengali Muslims started demanding special concessions on the basis of numerical superiority in the population of Bengal as a whole. In the early 20th century, a close collaboration between educated Muslims and the *mullahs* was developed through *mofussil anjumans*.

Extremist politics and Hindu revivalism at this time further facilitated Muslim mobilisation. The Hindu *jatras* or rural theatrical performances often indulged in vilifications of Muslim historical persona, which attracted the adverse attention of the *anjumans* and the *mullahs*. The social separation of the two communities was further politicised by the Swadeshi leaders freely using Hindu religious symbols and coercing Muslim peasants to observe the boycott of British goods. The Swadeshi movement was allowed to grow into a Hindu-Muslim question and put on the Muslims an unmistakable stamp of otherness. Consequently, the anti-Partition agitation appeared in Muslim minds as an anti-Muslim campaign.

A discerning observer would have to agree that if the Muslim League mobilised the masses around the ideological symbol of Pakistan, the Hindu Mahasabha also raised the slogan of Hindu *rashtra* and launched a mass mobilisation campaign. There is no doubt that the vicious communal riots taking place in many parts of India in 1946 and 1947 expedited Partition. Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru is reported to have confessed later about the "truth"—"we were tired men and we were getting on in year too… we saw the fires burning in the Punjab and heard every day of the killings. The plan for Partition offered a way out and we took it".

The proposal for the United Sovereign Bengal by HS Suhrawardy and Sarat Bose was rejected as the Congress and Hindu Mahasabha led a well-orchestrated campaign that picked up momentum since April 1947, advocating for the partition of Bengal and the construction of a Hindu homeland by retaining the Hindu majority areas in a separate province of West Bengal within the Indian union. According to Joya Chatterji, leaders of this movement tried to construct a "notional Hindu identity" and played upon the threat of perpetual domination by a Muslim majority in Bengal. Historian Asim Roy ads that "it was not the League but the Congress who chose, at the end of the day, to run a knife across Mother India's body".

Refugees from 1947 trying to get to their new homeland. PHOTO: **COLLECTED**

In a highly charged and incendiary scenario, Viceroy Lord Mountbatten announced his Partition plan on June 3, 1947. It thus appears that more than the machinations of the British divide and rule policy, the intransigence and refusal of the dominant majority to allay the fears of a perpetual minority ultimately led to the partition of India. Partition was avoidable only if Congress could agree to a constitutional arrangement envisaging a loose federal structure with strong autonomy for the provinces, along with Hindu-Muslim parity at the centre, as originally proposed by Muslim League.

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