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## Stopping the sea

**We are all tired of hearing dire predictions, especially about Bangladesh, which has become a major techno-media business of selling shock. For example, saying that one-third of Bangladesh will be wiped out is actually no more shocking than saying half of Bangladesh will drown.**

AFSAN CHOWDHURY

**M**AN-made climate change didn't begin last summer. Its apocalyptic journey started with the first smoke belching chimneys of the industrial revolution in the UK several centuries ago. Climatologists say that it's the UK which has contributed most greenhouse gases into the atmosphere and not the popular villain, the US with its shorter industrial history.

So we are at the final lap, if one will, of a long history of nature

ravaging, first out of ignorance, then denial, and finally at this latest stage, of deliberate selfishness. It has taken several hundred years not only to pile up the gases but also set up the socio-economic infrastructure and mindset that resists effective solution to what many think rings the bells of an impending global disaster. A few years to find solutions is probably an impossible task.

Having said that, let's also confirm that we are all tired of hearing dire predictions, especially about Bangladesh, which has become a major techno-media business of

selling shock. For example, saying that one-third of Bangladesh will be wiped out is actually no more shocking than saying half of Bangladesh will drown.

Whether IPCC says that such catastrophes will generate 20 million refugees or dissenting experts suggest that the number will be closer to fifty million doesn't have an impact because the audience has shut their ears to serial bad news of the climate variety. Our senses are numbed so we can't register the disaster that is already upon us and therefore also can't act. But suppose

we did want to act, what would we do? I am afraid that is where the real bad news is -- because not much time has been spent thinking about that topic.

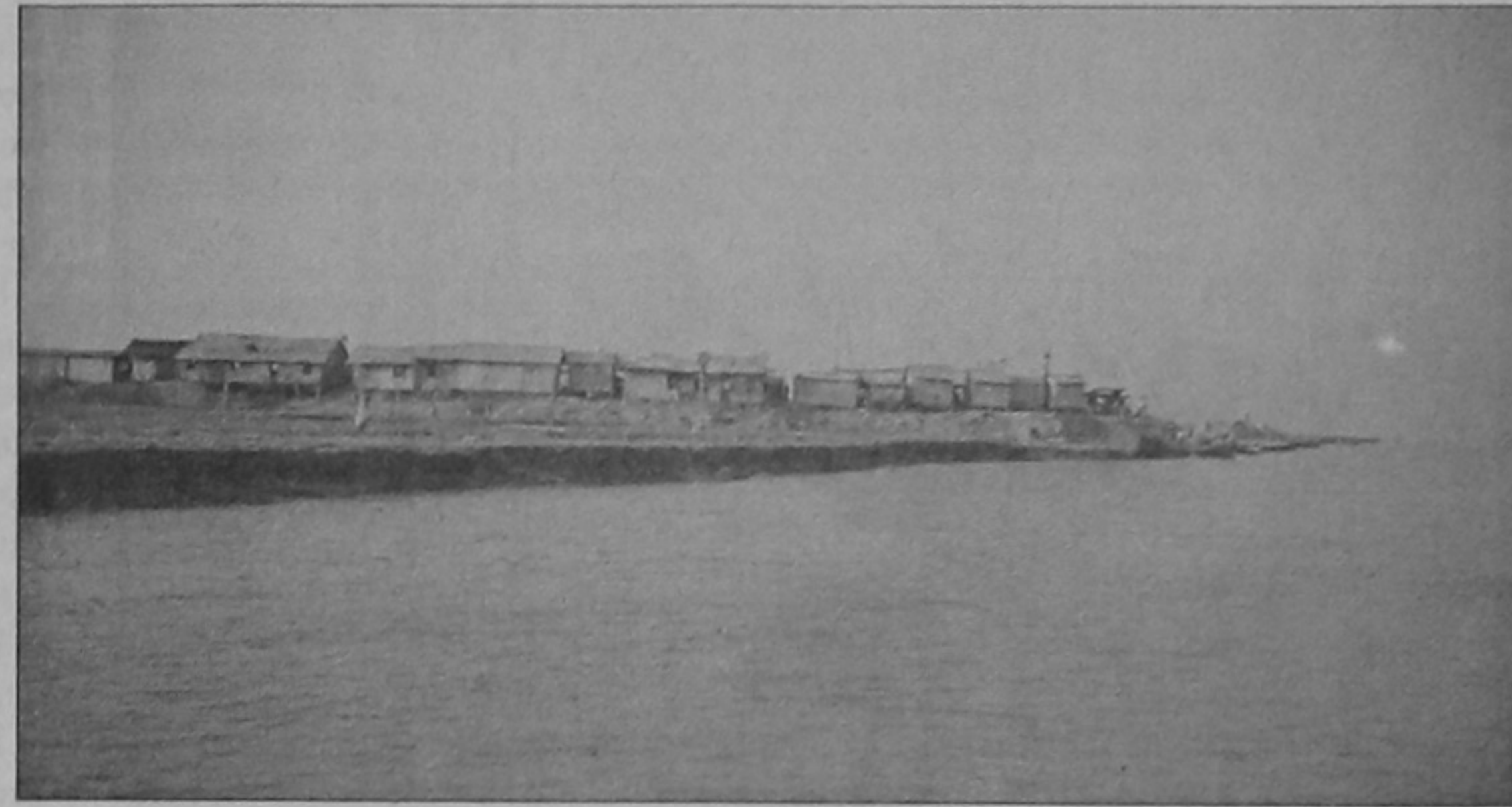
Some reports have been prepared and discussed at seminars and all that, but as anyone will notice, climate change is one of the lesser priority topics -- and apart from demanding more foreign aid, little has been done. We are in effect waiting for the same West to tell us what we are supposed to do. And we can't make them give us resources either, although it was decided at the 2007 UN Bali summit that several funds would be placed at the disposal of the highly affected countries.

**Global warming is only one problem among many** We know that global warming and sea level rise are only part of the problem because we live in a highly environment degraded area that is

Bangladesh. Mention of just a few disasters will suffice. We have floods, river erosion, salinity, drought, soil depletion, arsenic contamination of water, deforestation -- and this is just for starters. A potentially massive disaster is vulnerability to large-scale earthquakes.

None of these are global warming related, but what will happen is that all of these will be heightened and each, coupled with climate change, will be capable of choking us to death. So to talk of sea level rise in Bangladesh is actually to describe the crisis in somewhat "Western crisis" terms, because even if the sea didn't rise at all, we would still drown in our massive environmental problems.

When one talks of solutions, some think of building dams to stop the rising sea, but it seems that warming and water shortage, largely as a result of the



drying of the Himalayas caused by ice melts, will cut food production by large proportions,

perhaps as much as 30% -- and could be more destructive than rising waters. It will be the largest

ever assassination of livelihoods.

Afsan Chowdhury is a journalist writing for Bangladeshi and South Asian publications.

## From Jahangirnagar to Dhaka

**Dhaka is located close to two ancient capitals of Bengal, Vikramapur and Sonargaon. So, it was only natural that this place was pivotal to the defense of these two capitals and, as a result, grew into a cantonment town as well as a business centre.**



FARUQUE HASAN

**T**HIS year marks Dhaka's 400th anniversary as a capital city. However, Dhaka's history as a town or an urban settlement goes back much further, and it is very difficult to say exactly how old Dhaka city is.

King Srugupta of north

Bangladesh laid down the foundation of the illustrious Gupta Empire (320-550AD). Harisen, the poet-laureate of Emperor Shamudragupta, who was the grandson of Srugupta, mentioned Dabaka in Allahabad Prashasti, in his eulogy for the Emperor, written in the 4th century A.D. The Dabaka mentioned in that

inscription refers to today's Dhaka.

King Ballal Sen, the second ruler of the Sen Dynasty (1159-1179) built the Dhakeswari temple in Dhaka more than 800 years ago. No trace of that temple remains, but the four Siva temples erected by Raja Man Singh, the commander-in-chief of Emperor Akbar, at the site of that temple in the wake of 17th century still stands. Man Singh stayed in Dhaka from 1602-04 when he was fighting against Isa Khan, the leader of the Bara Bhuiyan -- the independent petty kings of Bangladesh.

The oldest brick structure that still exists in Dhaka is the one-dome Binot Bibi Mosque at Narinda, built in 1457. Though the mosque survived the onslaught of time and climate for about 550 years, it is now unfortunately being demolished. We are destroying the oldest structure in Dhaka to build a bigger mosque and a madrasa on the site.

The second-oldest brick structure in Dhaka city is the Mirpur Majar mosque, also one-domed, built in 1487.

Dhaka is located close to two ancient capitals of Bengal, Vikramapur and Sonargaon. So, it was only natural that this place was pivotal to the defense of these two

capitals and, as a result, grew into a cantonment town as well as a business centre.

Tavernier visited Dhaka in 1666, and wrote: "Dhaka is a great town ... The length of this town is about two leagues." Captain Bowrey, who came to Dhaka about twelve years after Tavernier, wrote: "The city of Dhaka is very large and spacious." As a capital, Dhaka started flourishing in trade and commerce, which attracted many foreign traders.

At the partition of Bengal in 1905, Dhaka was made the capital of the newly formed province of East Bengal and Assam. But it was short-lived. In 1912 King George V at Delhi Darbar annulled the partition of Bengal, and Kolkata became the capital of united Bengal; at the same time the capital of the British-India Empire was transferred from Kolkata to Delhi.

The British left the Indian subcontinent in 1947, and Dhaka became the capital of East Bengal -- the eastern wing of Pakistan. In 1956, East Bengal was known as East Pakistan, and later, with the emergence of Bangladesh as an independent country in 1971, Dhaka has become the capital of the country.

Faruque Hasan is a Forum contributor.

## Everybody should care if Bangladesh drowns

**Eight centuries after water carried Bengali traders to the perimeters of the Indian Ocean, and four centuries after water again brought pioneers from upper-riparian reaches, water will again prompt Bangladeshis to set sail.**

A. HANNAN ISMAIL

**H**AVE boat, will travel Bangladeshis have long been known as a mobile people. In fact, you could say that it is in our blood. And yet this wanderlust owes much more to another liquid substance: water.

An earthquake-induced shift of the Jamuna river system made eastern Bengal both navigable and cultivable from the late sixteenth century. This change in waterways brought settlers from the west of the subcontinent: pioneers who introduced agricultural practices and, non-liturgical Islamic rituals that intermingled with local religious customs. Some of these newcomers became semi-mythologised as pirs (holy men). The songs of Lalou, meandering across the late nineteenth century like so many of Bengal's rivers, celebrated the admixture of faith and farming that became their legacy.

That other big chunk of water, the Bay of Bengal, enabled mari-

time inhabitants of an earlier Bengal to explore and trade with Indochina and Java, and export variants of Buddhism and Hinduism to those parts of the world. All of this happened long before the Portuguese, the Dutch, the French and then the British commandeered the waterways. Water too carried agricultural labourers from greater Noakhali and Chittagong on seasonal treks to the tilling fields of Burma. Such excursions are why the old-timers of "Singapore" (Singapore) sometimes referred to people of south Asian descent as "Bangals."

**Here today, gone tomorrow**

The eastern part of historical Bengal is an active delta. Geological and hydro-morphological forces wash vast quantities of silt down from the Himalayas and this settles to become alluvial sediment. This stuff has built up over the last 6,000 years or so to form a territory that

is, for the time being at least, home to about 150 million people. Seen through the telescope of time, Bangladesh is a geological infant. The gradients of the Himalayas and its piedmonts, combined with the monsoons, have made this plain land possible. Conversely, no Himalayas means no big rivers; no Padma, no Jamuna and no Meghna: ergo no Bangladesh.

Given enough time, all this will come to an end. Man-made climate change will only accelerate us to towards this conclusion. Thermal expansion of the Bay of Bengal, tectonic events stimulated by changes in temperature, increasingly erratic runoff from the estuaries, topsoil erosion

where most of the bio-diversity lives and dies, more intense pulses of rainfall and a potential collapse of the monsoon cycle itself, saline penetration, aridity in the western part of the country, and so on. We have pressed fast-forward to the inevitable, as documented so evocatively in Afsan Chowdhury's film *Does Anybody Care if Bangladesh Drowns?*

Eight centuries after water carried Bengali traders to the perimeters of the Indian Ocean, and four centuries after water again brought pioneers from upper-riparian reaches, water will again prompt Bangladeshis to set sail.

A. Hannan Ismail lives in Zambia.



## Unstoppable urbanisation

**Cities are currently home to more than half of the world's population, and over the next 30 years most of the two-billion-plus increase in global population is expected to occur in urban areas in the developing world.**

MD. MASUD PARVES RANA

**N**OT even wars, natural disasters, or public policies have slowed the pace of urbanisation. During the late 19th century, rapid growth of population occurred in industrial countries -- the urban revolution. The same revolution is now taking place in the developing countries, expanding technological opportunities on one hand, and damaging sustainability

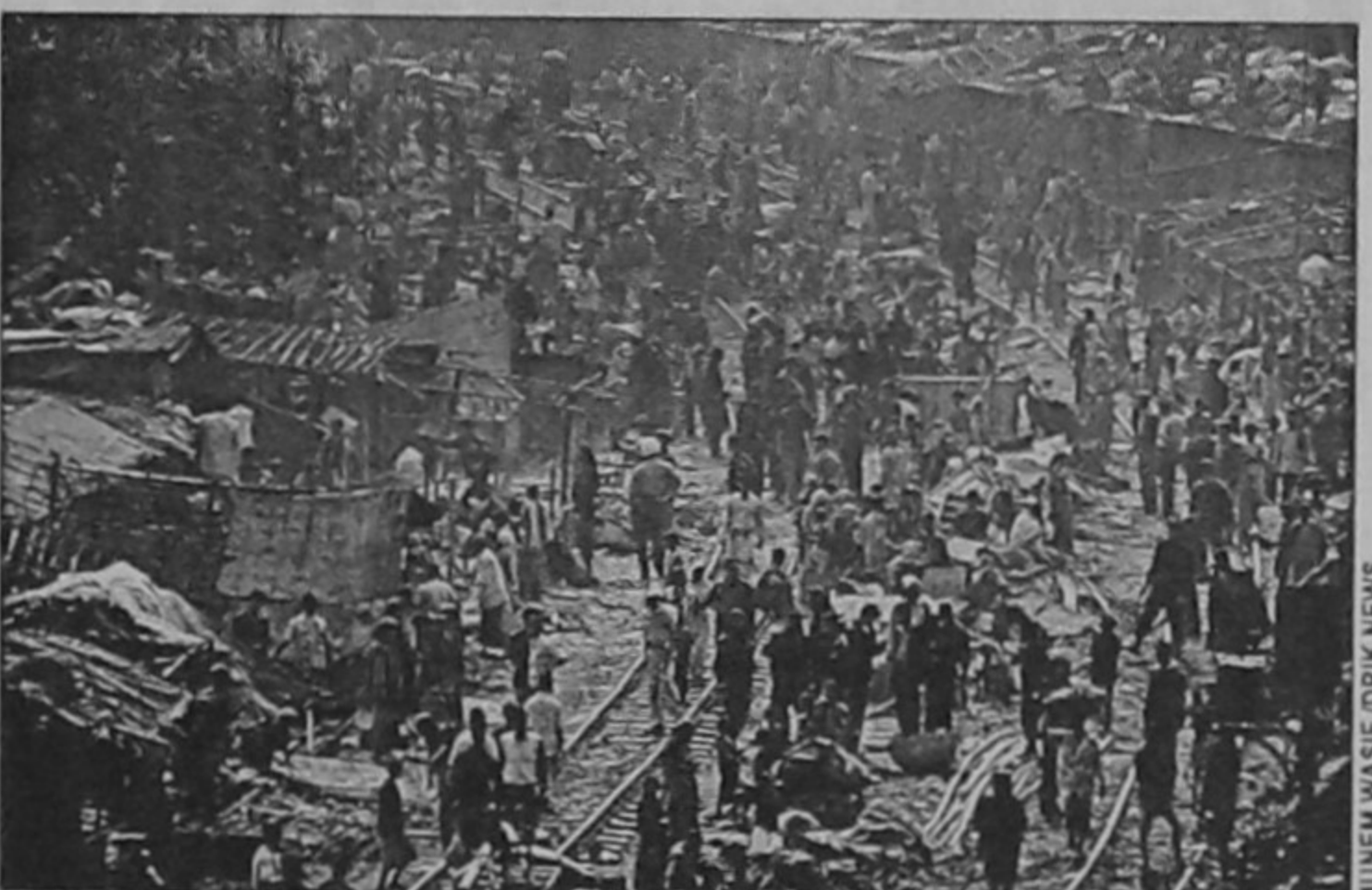
and liveability on the other.

The people are concentrated in and around major cities of the world. It is estimated that 90% of urban population growth will be in less developed continents, i.e. in Asia, Africa and Latin America. It is also estimated that by 2015, more than half of the population of the developing world will live in cities, and 80% of the world's largest cities will be in this region.

**World urban population**

Cities are currently home to more than half of the world's population, and over the next 30 years most of the two-billion-plus increase in global population is expected to occur in urban areas in the developing world.

By 2020, a majority of the population of less developed countries will live in urban areas. In 1800 only 3% of the world's population lived in cities. By the 20th century's close, that share rose to 47%. The UN



forecasts that today's urban population of 3.2 billion will rise to nearly 5

billion by 2030, when three out of five people will live in cities. The

increase will be most dramatic in the poorest and least-urbanised continents, Asia and Africa. Surveys and projections indicate that all urban growth over the next 25 years will be in developing countries.

More developed countries show a saturation in urbanisation but less developed countries' urban populations increased from 18% to 40% between 1950 and 2000 respectively, and will be more than tripled between 1950 and 2030, going from 18% to 56%.

Asia and Africa will face tremendous urban pressure in the next few decades, and in 2030 urban population will be just over 50%. Particularly, the big cities will be in

trouble because of ever-increasing population and growing numbers of urban poor.

**Urban population in megacities**

A megacity is usually defined as a recognised metropolitan area with a total population in excess of 10 million people. The UN raised the population threshold to designate urban agglomerations as megacities to 10 million in 1990 and estimates that there are 19 megacities in the world at the beginning of the 21st century. According to City Population (2007), there are 26 megacities in the world. Dhaka is ranked 20th

with 12.6 million people.

By 2015, 12 cities will have a population of more than 15 million each. According to UN projections, seven cities of Asia will be included in the list of the highest populated cities in the world. By 2025, according to the Far Eastern Economic Review, Asia alone will have at least 10 hypercities, those with 20 million people or more, including Jakarta (24.9 million), Dhaka (25 million), Karachi (26.5 million), Shanghai (27 million), and Mumbai (with a staggering 33 million).

Md. Masud Parves Rana is PhD Candidate, Department of Geography, National University of Singapore, and Assistant Professor, Rajshahi University.

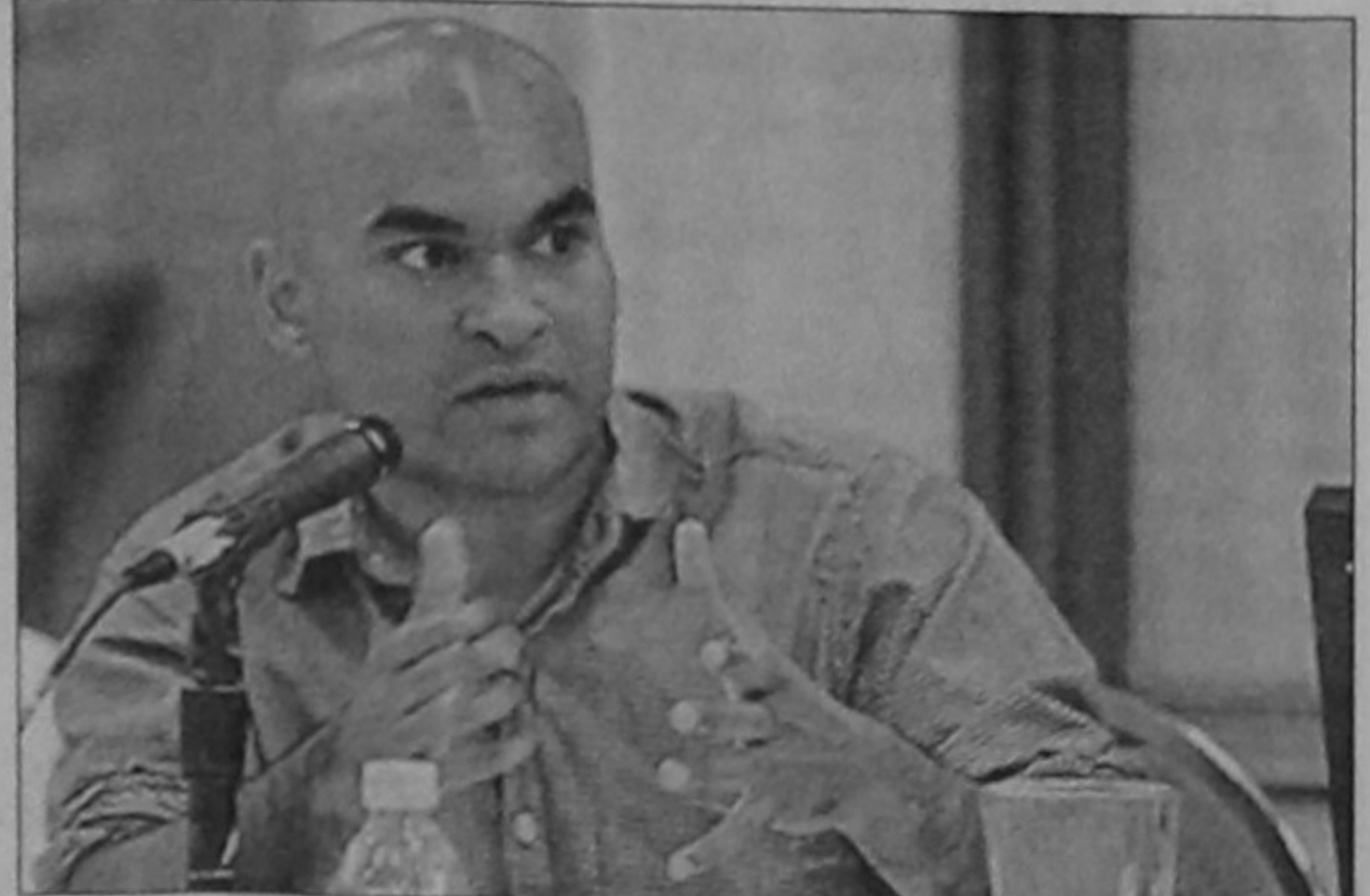
## New star rising

**So, who is Reihan Salam? If you don't know of him yet, you will. Salam is an American-born son of Bangladeshi immigrants, Harvard graduate, prominent political blogger and journalist, and now co-author of a serious and fast-selling political manifesto Grand New Party.**

RAZIB KHAN

**W**ITNESSING Reihan Salam speak off-the-cuff feels like some intensely demanding, habit-forming new spectator sport. While he's in full rapid-fire, animated flow, the rapt listener remains completely engrossed, delighted by his insights, analysis, and wide-ranging references, wowed by his effortless formulations and disarmed by his wry asides.

Sadly, when Salam's flow ceases, typically abruptly and with a self-effacing apology for only covering one of his dozen intended talking points, the exposition of others threatens to



leave the listener cold. Your mind wanders in the yawning pauses of another speaker's slow thought process and you wonder how people can take so long to formulate an idea.

In that same time, Salam would have reeled off five perfectly printed, erudition-packed sentences, managed to mock his teenage self, veered dangerously close to an Elvis Costello impression, and from the looks of things, politely snuck a glance at the latest titles in his hyper-active email inbox.

So, who is Reihan Salam? If you don't know of him yet, you will. Salam is an American-born son of Bangladeshi immigrants, Harvard graduate, prominent political blogger and journalist, and now co-author of a serious and fast-selling political manifesto Grand New Party.

Arguably the most prominent American of Bangladeshi origin today, Reihan Salam's story begins in the New York borough of

Brooklyn in 1979. He has stated on his popular weblog The American Scene that when his parents arrived in New York City in 1976 the Bangladeshi community consisted primarily of men associated with the shipping industry. In fact the census records fewer than 1,000 Bangladeshis in the city in 1980.

Salam's father, Mr. Sarwar Salam, an accountant, recalls that his son's proclivities were clear at an early age. The younger Salam was not particularly interested in sport. Rather, he would read Newsweek, National Geographic, and Time cover to cover. Despite his son's bookish inclinations, Mr. Salam sketches an otherwise relatively conventional childhood. Salam rode his bicycle around the neighbourhood, was ferried back and forth from the comic store by his parents, and his elder sisters pitched in babysitting their much younger sibling.

Dr. Jesse Shapiro, now an economics professor at the University of

Chicago, was Salam's classmate at both the elite Stuyvesant secondary school and Harvard University. At Stuyvesant, where Salam was president of the debate team, Shapiro recalled an episode which hinted at both Salam's rhetorical forthrightness and intellectual depth.

The former US Secretary of Labour, Robert Reich, had been invited to address the student body. After his remarks, young Salam rose to ask a question, making a precise reference to an argument in one of Reich's books. Reich was shocked that such a young man was so familiar with his work, but Salam matter-of-factly responded that he was a fan and had read all Reich's major writings. Dr. Shapiro, who earned his Ph.D. in economics from Harvard, doesn't recall Salam's question, explaining that it was far too advanced for him to comprehend.

Razib Khan is a UNZ Foundation Fellow.

**FORUM**  
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