

A presidential vow for the ruling party

We sincerely hope that this time AL has really changed and will not put the new president through the unfortunate ordeal that the respected former chief justice ultimately faced after becoming president at AL's request. When anybody talks about change, people judge them by acts and not mere words. Let's hope this time that change is for real and not only wishful thinking.

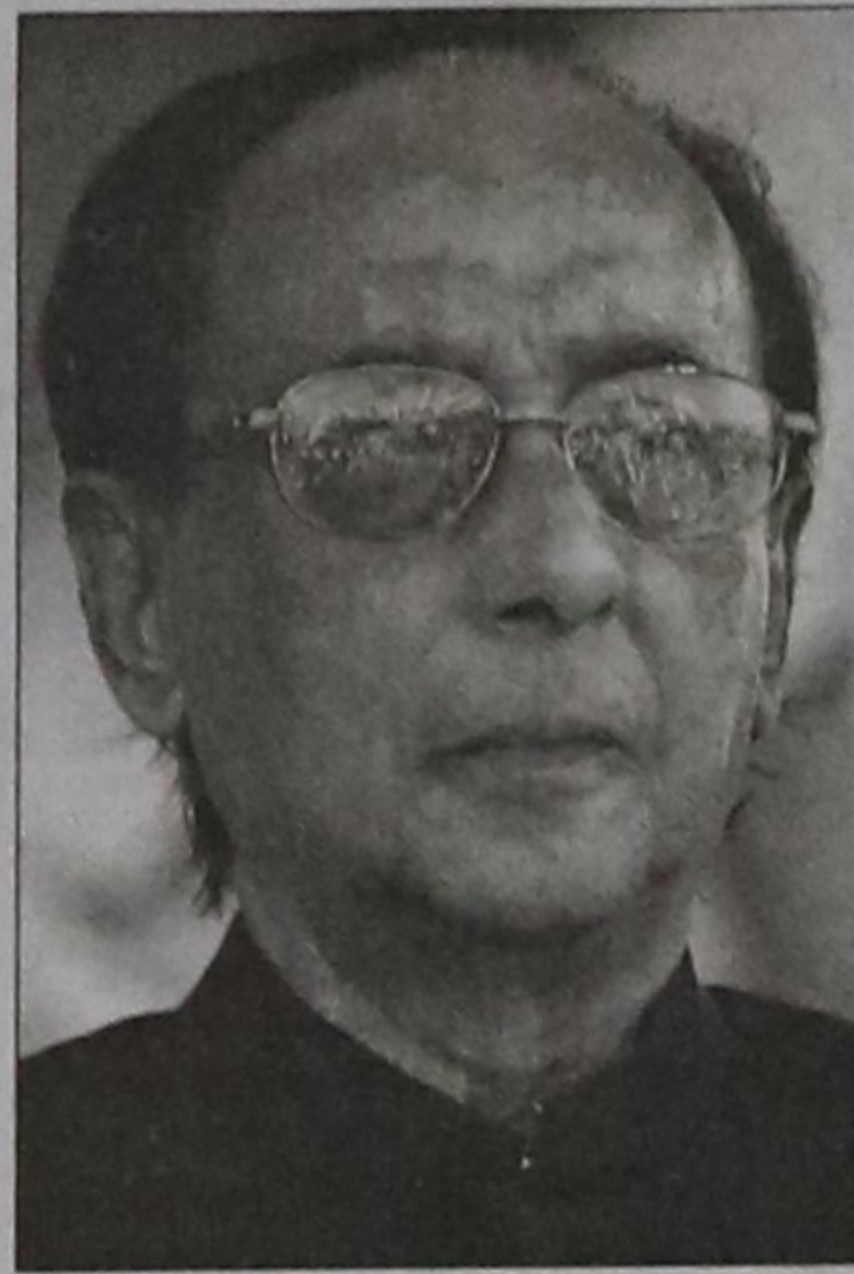
SYED MUNIR KHASRU

WITH assuming of office by the new president, we have completed full cycle of democratic transition that started with last year's elections. We, the Bangladeshis, have renewed our faith in democracy in spite of disappointments that have haunted us for more than one and half decade. The office of the presidency has been repeatedly belittled by partisan and reckless politics of successive ruling parties. Since AL has come to power with promise of change, for a change, let's propose the following presidential vow for the ruling party.

We, the party in power, acknowledge with gratitude the massive mandate the people of Bangladesh have given in our favour on

December 29, 2008. We have promised to bring in positive changes in the political culture of Bangladesh so that events like 1/11 never recur. One of the key factors resulting in 1/11 was the partisan and irresponsible role played by the then president who appeared to be hostage to the wishes of the immediate past ruling party who elected him. Had the then president and shadows behind him had their way, we would not be where we are today. We vow not to do to them what they tried to do to us.

The office of the presidency is more of prestige than of power. The prestige is that of the nation, as the president is the head of state. We pledge to uphold the dignity of this office and not to drag the president into partisan issues. We would support presidential acts that are meant for the overall well being of Bangladesh and not



President Zillur Rahman

any particular party or group. The new president led our party with wisdom during one of our most difficult times and managed to keep the party united. Because of his leadership during crisis, we could be successful in elections that followed when our prime minister returned and led the campaign. We understand that he is no longer a party man and he is the president of a country and not of a party.

No matter how much heart of the president is with us, his mind has to be just and fair so that everybody receives equitable treatment from his office. We promise not to create any obstruction in letting him discharge his duties responsibly and honestly. We will put country first and party second when it comes to our expectations from the office of the presidency.

We will not belittle either our party or the nation in front of the international community by bickering over trivial partisan issues like whose grave the president should or should not visit, whose name the president should or should not mention in his speeches, whose contribution he should or should not recognise. Most importantly, we will not judge presidential performance by standards of how well he has served party interests above national interests. Last time we earned praise when we elected a respectable man of integrity to the presidency. This was a man who played an important role in our transition to a parliamentary democracy and his nonpartisan words of wisdom during his presidency received due attention from the nation. We were credited for being able to rise above party interests and electing a revered man to this prestigious office.

We recognise that our newly elected president will play an important role during the next elections. We suffered most

when the immediate past president was discharging his duties under partisan influence. We remained anxious whether there would be free and fair elections under such an environment. We went through the pain of struggling between limited options whereby elections were inevitable and so was the distorted outcome had elections been held under such partisan administration. We vow not to inflict the same injustice to others that was meted upon us. We also have seen that such manipulative schemes do not work and one can end up in a messy situation like 1/11. Being the oldest political party of the country, which played a vital role in the independence of Bangladesh, we promise to respect people power over party ambitions. Hence, when time comes, we will encourage and support the president in his endeavors to hold the next parliamentary elections in a free and fair manner. We will try to win the next elections by our performance and not manipulation in the next five years.

The president has sacrificed utmost for our party, including losing his most loved one who gave her life for our party's cause. The last thing he deserves is for us to become a source of embarrassment and discomfort in his efforts to act as a president respected by all Bangladeshis. We will leave him alone when he needs to be left alone just as he has been coping

with emptiness of his life alone. He deserves this space which we promise to provide so that he can act guided by conscious and free from undue influence. May God help us all.

Oops, was I daydreaming in expecting that such a vow could ever be made by a ruling party in Bangladesh? Last time when there were elections with an AL-elected president in power, AL could not accept defeat gracefully. Verbal attack launched by AL party stalwarts towards this well respected and unassuming man was so acrimonious that he retired from public life in disgust and hurt.

In a country where there are few who can match his integrity and honesty, the nation lost access to the wisdom of a man who could have continued to be a voice of sanity in an insanely partisan culture. We sincerely hope that this time AL has really changed and will not put the new president through the unfortunate ordeal that the respected former chief justice ultimately faced after becoming president at AL's request. When anybody talks about change, people judge them by acts and not mere words. Let's hope this time that change is for real and not only wishful thinking.

The author is a Professor at the Institute of Business Administration (IBA), University of Dhaka.

Slumdog paradox

Slumdog may wound national pride, but the answer is more openness not less. As long as chronic poverty remains a central fact of Indian life, the spotlight that globalisation brings will shine on India's software success as well as on its slums.

SADANAND DHUME

THE unexpected international success of *Slumdog Millionaire* has pleased some Indians while provoking unusually strong protests from others. The critical and commercial success of the film, contrasted with sharp criticism and a lacklustre run in Indian theatres, captures the inherent contradictions of an increasingly globalised country. India basks in the glow of international recognition, but resents the critical scrutiny that global exposure brings.

Not since Sir Richard Attenborough's *Gandhi* has a film about India captured the world's imagination as strongly as *Slumdog Millionaire*, director Danny Boyle's gritty yet uplifting drama about a boy from the slums of Mumbai who makes good as a game-show contestant on the Indian version of "Who Wants to Be a Millionaire."

The low-budget production -- which cost \$15 million to make, a pittance in Hollywood terms -- has garnered both commercial and critical success, grossing \$96 million worldwide as of February 1, and picking up four Golden Globe awards and 10 Oscar nominations. In one among a raft of glowing reviews, Wall Street Journal's Joe Morgenstern hailed *Slumdog* as "the

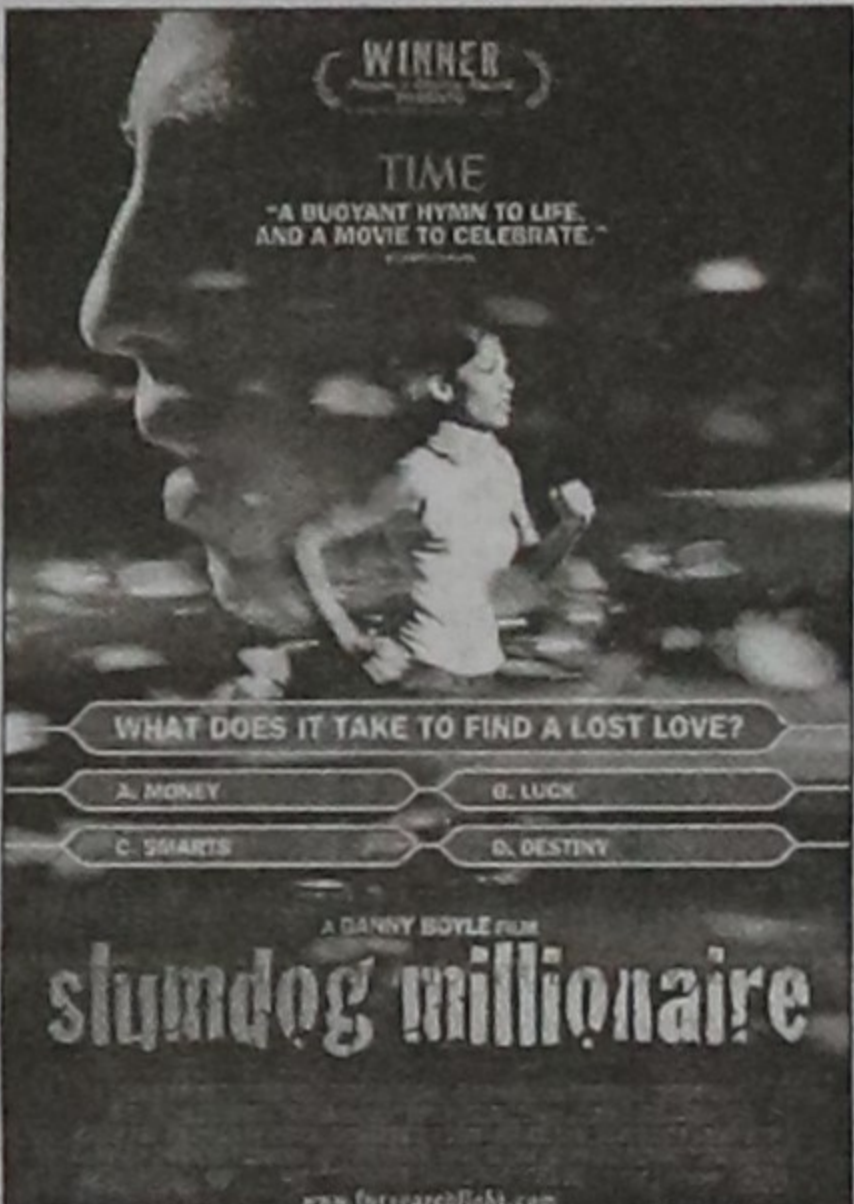
world's first globalised masterpiece."

In India, however, the response to the film has been ambivalent. Commercially, it has failed to replicate its American success. Despite a wave of publicity and an ambitious nationwide rollout, *Slumdog* is showing in half-empty theatres. It trails the box-office receipts of an obscure Hindi horror movie released the same day. And though some Indian reviewers praised the film for everything from inspired casting to an improbable Bollywoodish storyline, it also attracted its share of brickbats.

On his blog, Bollywood star Amitabh Bachchan struck a populist note: "If SM projects India as [a] third-world, dirty, underdeveloped nation and causes pain and disgust among nationalists and patriots, let it be known that a murky underbelly exists and thrives even in the most developed nations."

The critic Meenakshi Shedde dismissed the film as "a laundry list of India's miseries." Interviewed in the Los Angeles Times, film professor Shyamal Sengupta called the film "a white man's imagined India."

In many ways, *Slumdog Millionaire* is a metaphor for India in the age of globalisation. The director, Danny Boyle, and screenwriter, Simon Beaufoy, are British. The male lead, Dev Patel, who plays the part of the quiz-show contestant Jamal,



The other side of India Shining?

is a Gujarati whose family migrated to London from Nairobi. His love interest, Latika, is played by Freida Pinto, a Catholic girl from Mumbai, India's most cosmopolitan city. The novel upon which the film is loosely based, *Q and A*, was written by an Indian diplomat currently stationed in South Africa. The television game show "Who Wants to Be a Millionaire," which supplies the film's narrative backbone, is another British creation. Adapted in more than 50 countries, the show is recognisable to audiences from Beijing to Buenos Aires.

The film's success also underscores India's emergence on the world stage. Indeed, the superficial similarities with Ang Lee's *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, the 2001 blockbuster set in Qing dynasty

China, are striking. Both films draw on the talents of a widespread diaspora: Michelle Yeoh, Dev Patel. Like *Crouching Tiger, Slumdog* taps into Western curiosity about a country whose weight is increasingly felt in ordinary lives. Service workers in the West worry about being "Bangalored," or losing their jobs to less expensive competitors in India. Credit-card and consumer-appliance users routinely deal with customer-service professionals in Gurgaon or Hyderabad.

In America, one no longer has to live in a big city to be familiar with yoga or chicken tikka masala. An Indian company, Tata Motors, owns the iconic automobile brands Jaguar and Land Rover. India-born professionals helm Pepsi and Citibank. Salman Rushdie and Jhumpa Lahiri occupy a similarly exalted place in fiction. To sum up, it seems unlikely that a story set in the slums of Manila or Jakarta would find nearly as large an audience in Boston or Baton Rouge.

For India, one of the most autarkic and culturally inward-looking countries in Asia until the advent of economic reforms in 1991, the benefits of globalisation are easily apparent. In purchasing power parity terms, per capita income more than doubled from \$1,400 in 1991 to \$3,800 in 2006. The ranks of the middle class, broadly defined, have swelled to more than 250 million people. More Indians buy cell phones each month than any other people.

The same story can be told on the corporate and macro-economic level. Since liberalisation, a dozen Indian firms -- spanning banking, pharmaceuticals, software and services -- have listed on the

New York Stock Exchange, and three on the technology-heavy NASDAQ. The United Nations Conference on Trade and Development estimates that a record \$36.7 billion of foreign direct investment flowed into India in 2008. Foreign-exchange reserves stand at a robust \$250 billion.

There are less tangible changes as well. For generations after independence from Britain in 1947, more or less the only way for an Indian to make a mark on the world stage was to emigrate. A.R. Rahman, the Chennai-based composer of the *Slumdog* soundtrack, has not needed to change the colour of his passport to snag a Golden Globe or multiple Oscar nominations. In a broader sense, the same holds true for many of the scientists and engineers who work for General Electric or Microsoft in Bangalore, or for the employees of a clutch of ambitious homegrown pharmaceutical companies with global ambition. India may not quite be centre-stage -- its contribution to world trade remains a slender 1.5 percent -- but neither is it off-stage anymore. If an ambitious government target is met, the country's share of world trade will more than triple to 5 percent by 2020.

Notwithstanding the giant strides made over the past 18 years, Indian criticism of *Slumdog* also reveals the chasm between the country's self-perception and projection and any reasonable measure of its achievements. India may boast home-grown programs in space exploration and nuclear power, but -- as a first time visitor to India immediately notices and as the film mercilessly reveals -- it also struggles to provide its people with electricity, sani-

tation and drinking water. About half of Indian women are illiterate, a higher percentage than in Laos, Cambodia or Myanmar. It is at number 122 -- between Nepal and Lesotho -- on the World Bank index that measures ease of doing business, and 85 on the global corruption index maintained by the anti-graft NGO Transparency International. To put it bluntly, the squalor of the slums depicted in *Slumdog* is closer to reality than an elaborately choreographed Bollywood dance sequence shot on location in Switzerland.

To sum up, by jettisoning socialism and embracing globalisation India has become more prosperous than at any time in more than six decades of independence. But the effects of failed policies pursued between 1947 and 1991 cannot be erased overnight. As *Slumdog* reveals, India is doing better than ever only when benchmarked against its own dismal past.

When compared to the West, or to East Asian countries that have truly transformed themselves -- Japan, Taiwan and Korea -- the gap between India's rhetoric and its reality remains jarring. *Slumdog* may wound national pride, but the answer is more openness not less. As long as chronic poverty remains a central fact of Indian life, the spotlight that globalisation brings will shine on India's software success as well as on its slums.

Sadanand Dhume is a Washington, DC-based writer and the author of "My Friend the Fanatic: Travels with a Radical Islamist." His next book will examine the impact of globalization on India.

© Yale Center for the Study of Globalization. All rights reserved. Reprinted by arrangement.

Israel's inverse exceptionalism

In 1948, some fifty years later, the Jewish colons from the West would create the only state in the twentieth century founded on conquest and ethnic cleansing. Israel is also the only exclusionary colonial-settler state established by the modern Europeans anywhere in the Old World.

M. SHAHID ALAM

CRITICS of Zionism and Israel -- including a few Israelis -- have charted an inverse exceptionalism, which describes an Israel that is aberrant, violates international norms with near impunity, engages in systematic abuse of human rights, wages wars at will, and has expanded its territories through conquest. This is not the place to offer an exhaustive list of these negative Israeli exceptionalisms, but we will list a few that are more egregious.

As an exclusionary settler-colony, Israel does not stand alone in the history of European expansion overseas: but it is the only one of its kind in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Since the sixteenth century Europeans have established exclusionary settler-colonies in the Americas, Australia and New Zealand -- among other places -- whose white colons displaced or nearly exterminated the indigenous population to recreate societies in the image of those they had left behind. By the late nineteenth century, however, this genocidal European expansion was running out of steam, in large part, because there remained few surviv-

ing Neolithic societies that white colons could exterminate with ease; in tropical Africa and Asia, the climate and the pathogens were not particularly kind to European settlers.

The Zionist decision in 1897 to establish an exclusionary colonial-settler state in Palestine marked a departure from this trend. In 1948, some fifty years later, the Jewish colons from the West would create the only state in the twentieth century founded on conquest and ethnic cleansing. Israel is also the only exclusionary colonial-settler state established by the modern Europeans anywhere in the Old World.

In Israel, moreover, settler-colonialism is not something that belongs to its past. After their victory in the June war of 1967, the Israelis decided to extend their colonial-settler project to the West Bank, Gaza, Sinai and the Golan Heights. In recent decades, the demand for another massive round of ethnic cleansing of Palestinians in the "Occupied Territories" -- and even inside Israel's pre-1967 borders -- has moved from the extremist fringes of the Israeli Right to the mainstream of Israeli politics.

Israel is most likely the only country in the world that insists on defining citizen-



Common ground?

ship independently of geography. On the one hand, it has continued to deny the right of return -- and, hence, rights of citizenship -- to millions of Palestinians who or whose parents and grandparents were expelled from Palestine in two massive rounds of ethnic cleansing since 1948.

At the same time, under its Law of Return, Israel, automatically and instantly, grants citizenship to applicants who are Jews, persons of Jewish parentage, or Jewish converts. Under this law, as Mazin Qumsiyeh puts it succinctly, "no Jew emigrates to Israel; Jews (including converts) return (hence the name of the law)."

In addition, the Jewish immigrants receive generous support from the state upon their arrival in Israel. In other words,

Israel turns internationally recognised rights of residence and citizenship on their head, denying these rights to those who have earned them by birth, while granting them freely to those who claim them because of ancient religious myths.

In recent years, critics have increasingly charged Israel with practicing legal discrimination against Palestinians. Such discrimination is massive and blatant in the "Occupied Territories" where Israel has established Jewish-only settlements, connected to pre-1967 Israel by Jewish-only roads. Since June 1967, the Palestinians in these territories have suffered under a system of military occupation, which shows even less regard for their human rights than South Africa's apart-

heid. A former US President, Jimmy Carter, has recently dared to acknowledge the existence of apartheid in the "Occupied Territories" in the title of his new book, *Palestine: Peace not Apartheid*. Instantly, America's mainstream media -- led by Zionist censors -- began savagely attacking President Carter for mentioning the unmentionable. Not a few political and academic careers in the United States have met a premature end for lesser offenses. Jimmy Carter, the octogenarian former president, had little to lose.

Inside its pre-1967 borders too, Israel has allocated rights based on ethnicity. Until 1966, Palestinians in Israel were governed under martial law, which severely restricted their civil and political rights, including their right to free movement, to establish their own media, and to protest or form political parties. Since its founding, Israel has openly tied its immigration policy to Jewish ethnicity. Israeli law defines land to be a property of the Jewish people, owned on their behalf by the Jewish National Fund (JNF), a quasi-governmental organisation. Israel nationalised all the lands belonging to the Palestinians it expelled in 1948, and it has continued to expropriate Palestinian lands under a variety of arbitrary measures. As a result, the JNF today owns 93 percent of all the lands in pre-1967 Israel. Yet, even in his moment of daring, President Carter shrank from addressing the presence of apartheid inside pre-1967 Israel.

Israel is the only country in the world that refuses to define its borders. Its de facto borders have shifted with impressive frequency. At first, the armistice line of 1948 served as Israel's borders; but they

expanded outwards in 1956, 1967 and 1982, because of wars and conquests. On a few occasions, Israel had to retract from the territories it had conquered: from the Sinai in 1957, from the Sinai again in 1978, from Southern Lebanon in May 2000, and from Southern Lebanon again in August 2006. In addition, since the Oslo Accord of 1993, Israel has defined a new set of internal "borders" inside the West Bank to contain and neutralize the Palestinian resistance in a set of regulated Bantustans.

If Israel has not yet reached or exceeded the borders of the mythic David's Kingdom, it is not because of any lack of ambition. The constraint is demographic. In order to expand beyond its present borders, Israel would need a more ample supply of Jewish colons willing to assume the risks of colonization. Fortunately, for the Arabs, these colons are in short supply, as they were before the rise of the Nazis in Germany. Had Israel succeeded in attracting five million Jewish colons after 1967, the Sinai would still be under Israeli occupation, and its borders in the north would extend to the Litani River and across the Jordan River in the east. Luckily, for the Arabs, Israeli expansionism has been stalled by the poverty of Jewish demography. That could change very quickly, however, if Israel decides to soften the requirements for conversion to Judaism. Millions of Jewish converts from the poorest countries in the world, attracted by the promise of a "better life," could start pouring into Israel under its Law of Return.

M. Shahid Alam is professor of economics at Northeastern University. He is author of *Challenging the New Orientalism* (2007). Send comments to alqalam02760@yahoo.com. Visit the author's website at <http://aslama.org>.