

Global trends and Bangladesh

A.N.M. MUNIRUZZAMAN

THE world is going through fundamental changes and the global scene is in transition. The trends that we see today in the global scene are obvious and will drastically reshape and transform the world we know today. It is always difficult to make strategic predictions and it may be impossible to completely envision a new world but trends can be seen to be analysed both in global context and as it applies to us in Bangladesh. Unless we keep a track of the rapid and vast geopolitical shifts and changes that are taking place we could very easily be overwhelmed as and when they occur.

The recently published report of the US National Intelligence Council titled 'Global Trends 2030: Alternative Worlds' has carried out a deep strategic horizon scanning and analysed the findings to come up with a set of mega trends we will experience. The trends however exist today in some form but will gain further momentum in the coming years to influence and shape the strategic landscape.

The first of these mega trends is Individual Empowerment, which will further accelerate in the coming years to become the major engine of change. The rise of the vast global middle-class with better education will cause a tectonic shift in the structure of society and state. The state and the classical power elite groups will lose their monopoly over state power to individuals and networks of individuals. This power shift will have both positive and negative impacts, we will see more innovative individual efforts in solving long-standing global challenges and at the same time individuals and small groups will have greater access to lethal and disruptive technologies like cyber instruments and bio-terror weaponry, enabling them for large scale violence -- which was the sole monopoly of the state.

The second mega trend will be the Diffusion of Power. This diffusion will be seen at all levels -- starting from the state to the global power structure. As the centre of gravity of global power shifts to Asia we will also see the emergence of new powers, in addition to China, India and Brazil, regional powers like Colombia, Indonesia, Nigeria, Turkey will exert more power and influence on the international system. It will usher in a new kind of multi polarity which will be a multi-multi polar world. The shift in national power will also experience a fundamental shift in the nature of power itself. Modern communication technology will bring about multifaceted and multilayered groups and networks that will exert their influence on the state and the international system.

The third mega trend will be the rapidly changing nature of Demographic Landscape. The growing world population will reach around nine billion by next twenty years. The nature of the demographic patterns will be different in different geographic regions of the world and will also determine the economic potentials and political state of these states and regions. Much of the western and developed world will have a declining population growth trend and therefore experi-

ence rapid aging while the developing world will continue to have fast population growth with a youth bulge where a significant portion of the country will be under 35 years of age. The pull and push factor of this very different demographic trend in the north and south may result in large scale trans-boundary and transcontinental migration. Most countries, particularly in the developing world, will go through rapid urbanisation which could be very chaotic at times. It will be an uphill struggle for the developing world to meet the needs of this fast growing population and satisfy their rising expectation.

The fourth, and a significant, mega trend will be the growing nexus of Food, Water and Energy Security. Due to the rapid increase of the global population and the demands of increased consumption styles of the bulging middle class the demands for these critical resources will grossly outpace the supply (demand will grow by 35%, 40% and 50% for food, water and energy respectively).

It is critically important for our leaders and us to clearly identify the challenges that lie ahead of us, and to analyse them with objectivity so that we can adopt the right strategies to overcome them.

The situation of these unsustainable conditions will be further aggravated by impacts of climate change. As water availability declines, a large portion of the global population will become vulnerable to water stress both from the quantitative and qualitative perspectives. Lack of access to clean and safe water will also bring about challenges to human health. Increasing demand for food caused by increasing population and calorie intake will put new pressures on food supply. As supply of water for irrigation becomes short in supply and more cultivable land is lost to new climate conditions like saline intrusion or a rising sea level, food production will continue to decrease in many parts of the world. The numbers of food insecure people will increase in large numbers bringing the possibility of social disorder or conflict.

The supply of traditional sources of energy will continue to decrease while the demand will rapidly rise. Specially, energy thirsty fast growing economies of China, India, Brazil, etc. will put additional pressure on energy stability of the world. Energy is central to many of our economic growth activities and production; it will therefore impact severely on various sectors. We are destined to live in a world of significant resource scarcity unless we become more innovative in sourcing and adapt to new ways of living. The world may truly be a different place in the next 15-20 years.

In an interconnected world such mega trends

will certainly have global influence. It is therefore important to analyse these trends to predict how much influence it will have on Bangladesh over the next two decades. Bangladesh has seen vast empowerment of different sections of society, and especially of rural woman. As education and literacy rate continues to climb there is also an increase in the ranks of a new middle class. This new class of empowered people will find their rightful place in society and demand more accountability from its leaders. There will be greater disenchantment with the current state of "politics as usual" and there will be greater demand for delivery by the state. Empowered by the Internet these people will call for more transparency in governance and try to put an end to the culture of looting the state. The state will also lose its monopoly over information and thereby its ability to manipulate the information space.

The centrality of power at different cores from the capital, family, socio-political elite, etc will come under severe challenge. The only way for these groups to remain relevant to the system will be to accept a logical diffusion of power. If they fail to see the change they could be swept away by a new breed of citizens (or netizens). Powered by the net and social media these citizens will form various networks to voice their aspirations or protests and bring pressure on the state (the recent example of millions of missed calls on a cellular network is a case in example).

A major impact in the country will come from the rapid demographic expansion and a youth bulge that the country will experience. If it is not managed well then it can explode in many forms. In fact, the NIC report lists Bangladesh among the top 15 countries at high risk of state failure due to poor human ecology and resilience. The country faces grave challenges from the nexus of food, water and energy. Food production will decline in the coming years due to the impacts of climate change and will be unable to meet the ever growing demands of upward demographic graph. Water shortages will increase in a more climate change induced scenario. A large part of the coastal area of the country will be lost to the rising sea creating millions of climate refugees. We will be energy insecure unless we are able to find sustainable sources of energy and invest in green energy.

However all is not gloom for Bangladesh in the future as it is also considered a potential emerging country by many. But it is critically important for our leaders and us to clearly identify the challenges that lie ahead of us, and to analyse them with objectivity so that we can adopt the right strategies to overcome them. We should remember the words of caution from John Maynard Keynes (1937), "... the idea of the future being different from the present is so repugnant to our conventional modes of thought and behaviour that we, most of us, offer great resistance to acting on it in practice."

The writer is President, Bangladesh Institute of Peace and Security Studies (BIPSS) and Chairman, Global Military Advisory Council (GMAC) on Climate Change and Security. E-mail: president@bipss.org.bd

Memories of Saraswati Puja

BIJOY LAL BASU

HERE is a certain universality about Saraswati puja celebrations in Bangladesh. It's a special occasion not only for devotees of the Sanatan religion but for students of other communities as well. For 16 years now -- except 2009 when I was away for higher studies abroad -- I offered my *anjali* (flower offerings) in Jagannath Hall with students of the Department of English. It has always been a moment of great joy and satisfaction for me. The entire Hall takes on a solemn yet festive look with visitors from all around mesmerised by the grand and stunning ambience in and around the mandaps. The sound of conch shells, amplified chants of sacred mantras and devotional songs from the central temple fill the air. After the *puja*, it's time for prosad and cultural programmes which do not stop with the end of the *puja* but often extend into the night. I have been lucky to observe and experience *puja* in Jagannath Hall.

And yet my most abiding memories of Saraswati *puja* are those from my school days in Comilla! In that rural setting there was no glitz and glamour in *puja* observance. There was no extravagant decor, no fancy set up and of course no lighting. The protima (idol) was bought from the local potter or craftsman; the mandap was a make-shift one inside our school building, put together with whatever was locally available. All in all, it was a simple affair.

Preparations for the *puja* at an individual level, however, would begin much earlier. I, along with

some boys and girls from the same neighbourhood, would get busy searching for those tall and slender shrubs known as nolkhagra, which we would then cut and fashion into 'pens' to write with on the day of the *puja*. We were supposed to write Saraswati prayers all day on banana leaves! The ink would come from pastes made from coal

prosads to be distributed afterwards. It was not always clear to me whether it was the *puja* or the *prosad* that brought them in droves. Probably both! As for me, there was something that I would never want to miss out on -- collecting 'Bell leaves' used in the *puja* and putting them inside my textbooks with reverence!

Amidst this meticulous and energetic preparation and observance for the blessings of Saraswati, there were two lapses that would particularly fill me with a sense of fear and guilt. Saraswati is not known for retribution among deities in the Hindu pantheon but my inability to fast would make me feel uncomfortable. On the morning before *puja* I would often ask my mother if it would be all right if I took light snacks. Mother always came to my rescue saying: 'Yes, Saraswati would understand!'

The other problem that I faced was with the "injunction" on studies! Seniors warned me that the day was not for studies but for aradhana, but I could never think of a single day without books. That would be too painful! So in the afternoon and evening I would tentatively pick up a book and try to read without any apparent show of serious intent to give my uncles and aunts the impression that I was not reading but "just" browsing!

Was Saraswati angry with me for violating the two norms for the day? Surely my sincerity in the pursuit of learning constituted the extenuating circumstances under which my offences were forgiven!



and water! To us, school-going boys and girls of Chinamura Laxmi Narayan High School, a ritual like this was as much a sport as it was a service to the goddess of learning!

On the day of the *puja* we would throng to our school to find our fellow classmates, senior and junior students as well as teachers, gathering there as well. Non-Hindu students of the school would gather too, with no less enthusiasm, but would settle down at a distance. They would observe all *puja* activities keenly and wait for the

The writer is Assistant Professor, Department of English, University of Dhaka

SHIFTING IMAGES

The dark side of art



In the opening scenes of "Zero Dark Thirty," a CIA operative is shown repeatedly torturing a terrorist for information on Osama Bin Laden's courier. The prisoner is water-boarded, put on a dog leash, starved, beaten up and packed into a wooden cage. The cage door is closed and the screen goes dark. What happens next is left to the imagination of the audience...

The film, based on first hand accounts of the hunt for bin Laden (as the credit states), has been mired in controversy, receiving both accolades (for its cinematic quality) and brickbats. Much of the criticism has centered around Oscar-winning director Kathryn Bigelow who is accused of portraying brutal interrogation techniques as effective means for gathering vital information on terrorists. However, several reviewers have contradicted this view as unfair and misplaced. In their opinion the film depicts that clever detective work followed by a heroic Navy Seal operation ... and not merely torture ... helped track and kill bin Laden.

Let me clarify that this column is not a critique of "Zero Dark Thirty." The movie, however, raises some serious questions related to the role of art in society. Hence, I considered it worthwhile to probe into the broader theme of art's role in changing and challenging people's perceptions by taking a bold stand on ethical issues like torture.

Like most of us, artists do not work in a vacuum. The political and social climate affects their creativity. However they, in turn, can influence audiences by providing a basis for introspection and dialogue. It is my firm belief that if art is not aligned to a social or political cause, it becomes sterile and in the long run stagnant.

For me the film's verdict on torture is, at best, ambiguous -- since it leaves the issue open to audience interpretation. Perhaps this ambiguity is intentional on the director's part. While publicly stating her belief that "torture is reprehensible" Bigelow has defended the film as depicting "the truth." She has claimed that she remained true to history in portraying the harsh interrogation methods employed by the CIA to obtain information on Osama bin Laden's whereabouts.

The controversy surrounding "Zero Dark Thirty" thus raises an important question about "artistic license" -- more precisely about the extent to which an artist can veer from cold reality dictated by facts and take an independent moral stance. In short, one can legitimately ask: Is an artist's job confined to that of a "narrator" of historical facts? Does she not have an obligation to present an informed point of view on key issues that impact society?

Like most of us, artists do not work in a vacuum. The political and social climate affects their creativity. However they, in turn, can influence audiences by providing a basis for introspection and dialogue. It is my firm belief that if art is not aligned to a social or political cause, it becomes sterile and in the long run stagnant.

Historically, musicians, authors and filmmakers have been instrumental in initiating political and social change, since they have the ability to express themselves with proficiency and conviction. An example close to our home and heart is embedded in the history of Bangladesh. Secular nationalistic music, poetry and even paintings not only spearheaded the Bangladesh freedom movement but also played a major role in disseminating the idea of an independent homeland -- "Shonar Bangla."

In eras past, most art survived and thrived because of state patronage. Even so, artists managed to express their views through subtle, even esoteric, messages. Fortunately, in this rather "permissive age" of social media, artists can choose to be independent of government or private support and express their views with impunity.

Hence Bigelow's insouciance in the treatment of torture in "Zero Dark Thirty" is surprising, to put it mildly. She defends her case by claiming that objectivity is an integral part of artistic freedom and that her "depiction is not endorsement." True, but by "depicting" that torture yields results the movie has created the impression that the end justifies the means.

Besides, it is a known fact that there is a large segment of the American population, including some members of the administration, who continue to question the justification and effectiveness of enhanced interrogation methods. Any story depicting the use of torture as an information-gathering tool should have included these voices of dissent. Bigelow's narrative fails to do so. This omission is tantamount to tacit support, since there can be no neutral ground on a subject that has such a powerful impact on humanity.

Bigelow may be a great filmmaker, but, in not giving a clear signal on a key moral issue like torture, she falls short of her responsibility as an artist.

The writer is a renowned Rabindra Sangeet exponent and a former World Bank employee.