

Travel anecdotes: Migrant workers



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NADINE SHAANTA MURSHID

"WILL you have to forget everything you have learnt abroad once the plane lands?" asked one passenger to another on a flight to Dhaka as he quickly got up to push his way forward the moment the aircraft had touched down at the Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport. Another passenger chipped in: "I'm sure you obeyed the rule of the land in Qatar, why can't you do the same here?" The passenger at the receiving end stopped in his tracks; he stopped pushing. He didn't argue. It wasn't a fight waiting to snowball, as one would expect on the streets of Dhaka; it was a conversation. And still others joined in. A young man in a jeans jacket chimed in with a comment about our leaders showing us the wrong path: "Why wouldn't we behave this way? Only the one who pushes can go forward in this country. There is no minette (ethics) in Bangladesh. Only the corrupt can win."

But it has to be said: the migrant workers we see on planes are vastly different from the ones we used to see, say, a decade back. Or maybe, they are the same ones and over time they have acquired and assimilated new behaviours. They know how to use the toilet, for starters. They know how to conduct themselves professionally. They know not to stare, or to ask awkward questions. They are confident and self-assured. And it's with that same unencumbered assurance they will ask: "Apa, can you fill out my form for me?" And in their candid honesty, they will make you feel better about the world, because you realise, with relief perhaps, that they are doing well. You realise that they have come a long way in terms of meeting basic needs of their families and more. And knowing that their contributions to the economy in terms of foreign earnings have kept Bangladesh's GDP growth rate steady despite impediments to economic functions courtesy of a deteriorating political culture, you feel thankful. But in some ways, you also feel guilty that the country is riding on the backs of some of the most hardworking Bangladeshis in the world, who at the same time are given the third degree even in



their own countries. You feel awkward that they are berated by one another for their actions (such as the rush towards the plane exit), while nothing is said about the exponential increase in costs associated with the ongoing impasse -- estimated around Tk. 36,445 crore in 16 days).
Back in Doha, where I had to spend a night, I lost a book at the hotel café. Toni Morrison's *Love*. When I went looking for it, a man we shall call Ali helped me, and it turned out he was a Bangladeshi like me. I didn't find *Love* (and I told Ali to read it if he ever found it) but what that chance encounter gave me instead was Ali's take on how migrant workers are treated in the Middle East. Here's an excerpt from that conversation:
Me: How long have you been working here? A: Three years now.

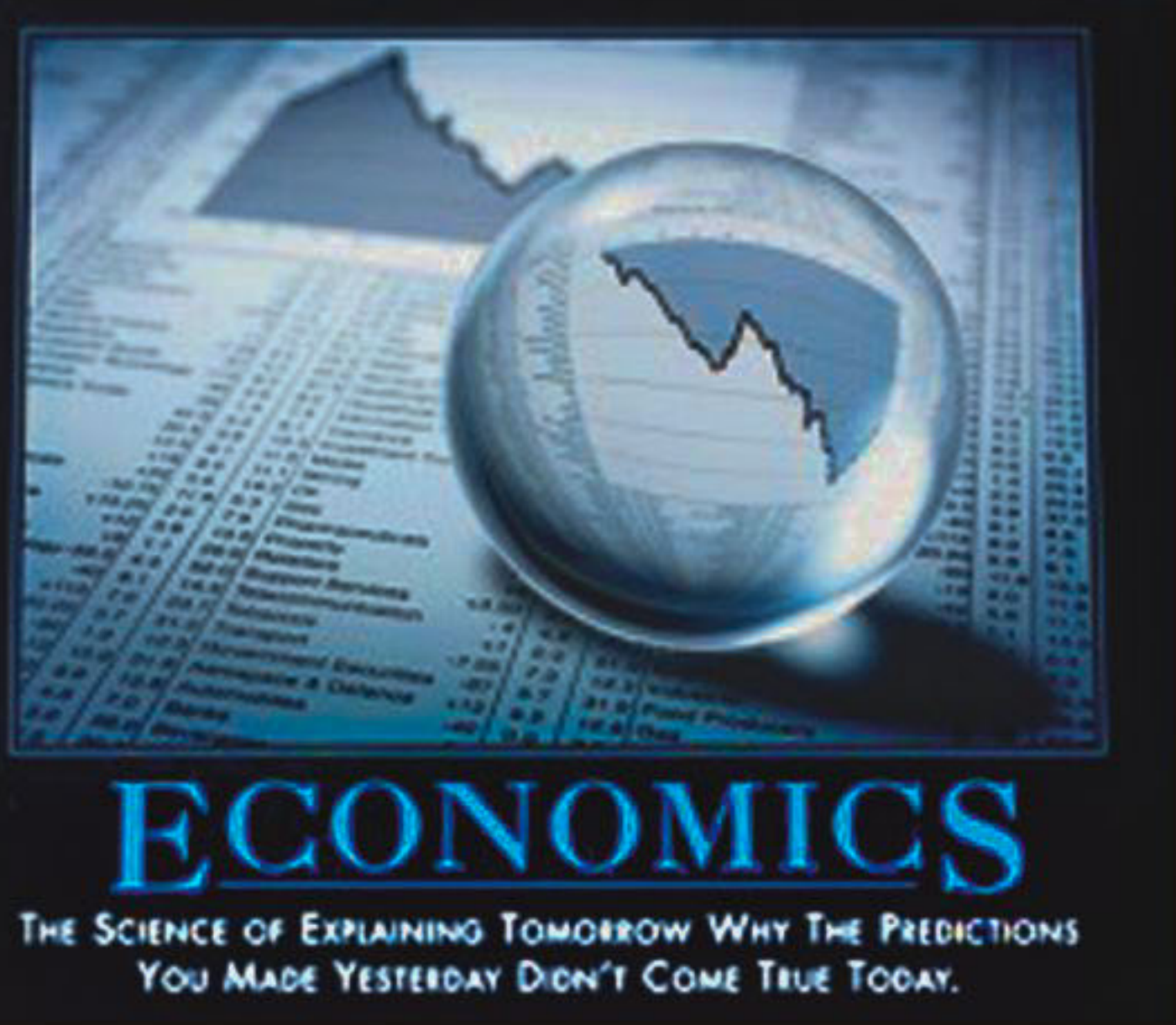
Me: Do you like working here in Doha? A: Yes, I like it here.
Me: But you know... we hear such horror stories about migrant workers being treated badly. A: Yes, there is that. But, you know, these people are very, very rich...so rich that nothing matters to them. That's why they treat people badly. Because it doesn't matter. They are just like that. It's not personal. I make money and I send it to my family. I'm doing well.
And there it was, the coping mechanism of one migrant worker in a Doha hotel. Or we could call it his survival instincts. Or even better his single-mindedness to achieve what he had come so far away for; leaving behind his home, hearth, family and friends, his comfort zone, his emotional social support structure. What struck me were his lucid

thoughts on inequality, his understanding that he, on absolute terms, is doing better than he was when he was in Bangladesh. He seemed to have an inherent understanding that absolute poverty is defined in terms of survival. It reminded me of Amartya Sen's take on relative poverty and how it didn't apply to this man who (on the face of it) found a way to not be fazed by the gold and glitter around him. This was a man, who looked away, perhaps, to cope with the abuse of migrant workers, like the one that Navine, my sister, had met.
Navine, like me, collects anecdotes from people during her travels. We joke about it being "rigorous social research" to further our understanding of the world. So, she had asked this man she had met on a flight about his work only to be told that a mistake on his

new machine-readable-passport had rendered him an illegal worker! He was jailed for three months, his savings and belongings confiscated, his newly wedded wife in Bangladesh not having a clue about his whereabouts because he wasn't allowed a phone call. Without rights, without money, without access to a lawyer he was put on a flight back to Bangladesh after his jail term was over. All his hard work amounting to nothing.
As it turns out, this indiscriminate incarceration of migrant workers in the Middle East who are then deported back to Bangladesh (and wherever else they are from) happens with mindless regularity (we also know about the gruesome beheading of 7 Bangladeshi workers in Saudi Arabia). But we turn a blind eye to all that because countries like Bangladesh are dependent on remittance and they're in the business of appealing governments who will keep renting labour from Bangladesh, who will, in turn keep contributing to the country's GDP.
But that's not the only thing we turn a blind eye to; we are also guilty of ignoring the maltreatment and condescension meted out to them by their own people -- by dalals who exploit labour into trafficking, by airport immigration officers who treat them like C grade meat at a cheap grocery store, by hi-fi college kids travelling on planes with them who think they're better than them because they speak better English.
Given their contributions to Bangladesh, shouldn't they be treated like kings and queens in their home country? Shouldn't they be welcomed with open arms when they land at the airport? Shouldn't there be a special line for them instead of for those with foreign passports? Aren't they the ones who are entitled to feel, well, entitled?
We are quick to point to other nations who mistreat them, as we should, but maybe we should also take a moment to introspect and think about the attitude towards migrant workers in Bangladesh, considering their stellar contribution to their nation. And perhaps then we can think about class privilege and how that modifies behaviours towards migrant workers and start working towards addressing that privilege.
The writer is Assistant Professor, School of Social Work, University at Buffalo and member of the AlalODual Editorial Collective.

Is economics still important?

ABDULLAH SHIBLI
As an economist, I get a lot of criticism about the profession, the discipline, and its role in modern society. Some of these are pretty well known and I will mention three. One, we are too much into model building and do not provide any guidance to real-life problems. Second,



most of our predictions are wrong and we are best at explaining why we failed after the fact. Third, economists never agree on anything, and policymakers often receive contradictory prescriptions from the same person.
A recent critic, one of our best, the French economist Thomas Piketty complains that we have a "childish passion for mathematics and for purely

theoretical and often highly ideological speculation" and that our "obsession with mathematics is an easy way of acquiring the appearance of scientificity without having to answer the more complex questions posed by the world we live in." Pretty strong words indeed!
Well, in spite of all the brickbats and name-calling, we have survived since the days of Adam Smith and manage to thrive even in the twenty-first century where everything is changing at break-neck speed. It would not be an overstatement to assert that economics is the only discipline that has managed to keep pace with the information technology revolution, globalisation of the world economy, and rapid changes in healthcare, medical science, and global warming. However, there are signs that we have now become too smug and might soon find ourselves in trouble unless we pay attention to a question that is often swept under the rug: "What is wrong with economics?"
Let me identify three areas which the profession needs to address in a more robust manner:
1. Income inequality
2. Environment
3. Basic human needs
Underlying the mess we find ourselves in is the belief that all these problems will take care of themselves if we give market forces a chance for a little while without any interference. Taking the three in my list, some of the more naïve amongst us still contend that income will be equally distributed as the economy grows and mouth the old dictum "the rising tide raises all boats." Environmental degradation will be internalised if we let those who are adversely affected strike a deal with those who gain. And finally, to ensure

basic needs, let all who are able to work do so and a free market will ensure jobs for everyone.
At the recent gathering of some of the world's most influential economists at the Annual Conference of the American Economic Association (AEA) in Boston, fortunately there was a feeble attempt to address these concerns. However, the factors that contributed to this current state of affairs are deep-rooted and might take more than one AEA meeting or simple nudges to correct this insufficiency. Ironically, a quick survey of the programme reveals not only the variety of issues that are currently on the plate, but also how exotic and outlandish are some of the themes which occupy the economists in their ivory towers.
So, what are the other symptoms of the malaise that afflict economists? For many years yet, it was well-known that economist dedicate an overwhelming amount of their effort to writing technical papers for obscure journals which often have very little real-world relevance. Some of the popular topics that get most attention are determined by what is fashionable at the moment: deflation, stock market bubbles, default swaps or some other issue of the day. Economics is almost like politics and election in some respects: only those with money or are able to raise money can compete. As we have seen, even in the richest countries in the world, all the firepower and brain have not been able to eliminate poverty, hunger, lack of medical care and homelessness. It would not be too much to compare this situation against the same in Cuba, one of USA's closest neighbouring countries.
Let me take the case of unemploy-

ment in some depth. Economists from developing countries have always been aware of the concept fashionable in the textbooks, full employment, unemployment and measurement of the unemployment rate. Currently, economists paint a very rosy picture for the US economy based on three measures: unemployment rate, number of jobless claims, and number of jobs created. However, anyone who looks around is aware that the job market is very soft. There are people who have left the job market, or have been unemployed for a long time. And then there are those who are underemployed or need more hours. Only, the long-term unemployed count in the jobless rate.
Recently, there was a feeling of rejoicing as the official unemployment rate notches down from 5.8% to 5.6%. Newspapers and media are gloating that good times are here again and that US is alone among its fellow nations in improving the lot of the "average citizen." Really? Who are they and where can you find them? There are unemployed young college graduates (25%), African Americans of all ages, and in the large cities, to mention a few. In our concern with averages and some simple statistics, we have lost sight of the larger picture. Why not report income inequality, cost of health care and the number of uninsured, the growth of wealth concentration, or the share of 1%. When national elections go wrong in countries such as Bangladesh or Zimbabwe, the world media is screaming about the injustices caused by these infractions, but who speaks for the millions who go without a decent meal or can't find medical care? By taking measurements in GDP, unemployment rate and job created, economists are

doing a disservice to the profession and downplaying the more important indicators of human welfare.
Let me take another example, USA is currently the envy of almost all other countries in the world for having come out of the Great Recession of the last decade and for posting decent GDP and employment growth in recent years. So the government and policy makers in Congress feel that everything is hunky dory. However, all other indicators paint a far more complicated picture: wages are stagnant, debts are higher, and people are finding that jobs are less available for the workers who are at the bottom of the rung. Hourly wages fell to \$24.57 in December from \$24.62 in November. The government's report did point to some weaknesses, notably in Americans' paychecks, which have barely kept ahead of inflation during the 5½-year recovery. Unfortunately, these caveats get buried in the footnotes.
Finally, let it be told that not all economists can be accused of "playing the fiddle while Rome burns." Among the brave few, Larry Summers, the former secretary of the Treasury and president of Harvard University, has pointed to several negative trends in America: lower productivity, decline in new businesses, high household debt, slowing population and a persistent decrease of the economic growth rate. Another voice among those who refuse to act as cheerleaders for the government and the mainstream is Esther Duflo of MIT. Her work on Poverty Trap in India is an eye opener for many who have never worked with real people.
The writer is an economist with an interest in policy issues.

QUOTABLE Quote
A good leader takes a little more than his share of the blame, a little less than his share of the credit.
Arnold H. Glasow

CROSSWORD by Thomas Joseph

- ACROSS**
- 1 Atomizer's output
 - 5 Go over 21, in blackjack
 - 9 -- Carlo
 - 10 Doorsign
 - 12 English county
 - 13 "-- Rae"
 - 14 Consider the same
 - 16 Make a choice
 - 17 Istanbul native
 - 18 Tremors
 - 21 Glimpse
 - 22 Pulled gently
 - 23 Marine mammal
 - 24 Uncool
 - 26 Unruly crowd
 - 29 Business bloc
 - 30 Naked
 - 31 Mine rock
 - 32 Horse-related
 - 34 Really impressed
 - 37 Beneath
 - 38 Soda bottle size
 - 39 Bakery workers
 - 40 "Take -- Train"
 - 41 Singer Bennett
- DOWN**
- 1 Place for a muezzin
 - 2 Underwrite
 - 3 Chop-house order
 - 4 Printed matter
 - 5 Still of films
 - 6 First número
 - 7 Coxswain's call
 - 8 Helped out in an office
 - 9 Track contests
 - 11 "Dog-gone!"
 - 15 Not fluctuating
 - 19 Hideous
 - 20 Wisdom bringer
 - 22 "Of -- Sing"
 - 23 Sopping
 - 24 "Dog-gone!"
 - 25 Holiday ring
 - 26 Horse with no wins
 - 27 Cantankerous
 - 28 Saloon orders
 - 29 Spring shape
 - 30 Congame
 - 33 Throw in the towel
 - 35 Petite
 - 36 Memorabtime

YESTERDAY'S ANSWER

S	P	E	D	C	A	K	E	S	
C	A	N	O	E	O	X	I	D	E
A	N	G	E	L	L	E	D	G	E
R	O	I	M	B	A	N	A	P	
S	U	N	G	T	O	W	A	R	S
T	E	A	R	D	R	O	P	S	
M	E	Y	E	R					
F	R	E	E	F	A	L	L	S	
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G	R	A	D	S	R	E	T	R	Y
A	C	T	U	P	S	A	L	E	S
S	E	E	D	S	R	E	S	T	

CRYPTOQUOTE 12-11
KGTPLCJ FSN KTEP PS WS, WS BP ESK!
PGCJCTJC SEOF XS VTEF PSVSJJSKX.
-- MSMC MTNO LB
Yesterday's Cryptoquote: GRATITUDE MAKES SENSE OF OUR PAST, BRINGS PEACE FOR TODAY, AND CREATES A VISION FOR TOMORROW.
-- MELODY BEATTIE

A XYDLBAXR is LONGFELLOW
One letter stands for another. In this sample, A is used for the three L's, X for the two O's, etc. Single letters, apostrophes, the length and formation of the words are all hints. Each day the code letters are different.

BEETLE BAILEY by Mort Walker



HENRY by Don Trachte

