

Meeting the challenges of climate-induced calamities

BITTER TRUTH



MD. ASADULLAH KHAN

ecosystem has continued unabated, as evidenced by the monsoon and cyclonic storms like Sidr and Aila, and severe flash floods that continue to ravage Bangladesh's coastlines and different parts of the world.

Global warming is now a grim reality. There is hot air aplenty mostly because of global warming, caused by a galloping increase in carbon emissions by uncaring nations, that has severely hit weather patterns across the world. As the next UN conference on climate scheduled to take place in Paris in December gets under way, the world appears a no better place than it was in 1992, during the Rio meet.

We have been hearing about the environmental problems projected to come to a head toward the middle of the century. But, as one born in 1939, I would surely be dead before 2050. As humans, we are in the habit of planning things – proper schooling, property, savings, insurance etc. for kids. While I became obsessed with such thinking, I realised with a jolt; my kids will reach my present age of 75 in say 2050. And their lives will depend on the state of the world at that time and not on our decisions about savings, property and insurance. Over the heads of our children now hang other threats from world conditions, different from the threats of 1939-45.

While the risk or fear of a nuclear war or terrorist attack haunts us, it is not as acute as what is threatened by nature. The graver problems that could afflict all our children are environmental ones, such as global warming, land and water

degradation.

Why didn't those peoples in the earlier days see the problems developing around them and do something to avoid disaster? As President Obama said in the last climate conference in New York, "Our future generation will not forgive us for leaving an impoverished world for them." One explanation for such failure is the conflict between short-term interests of those in power and the long-term interests of everybody.

Global warming will also add significantly to earth's water problems. Already, around 1.4 billion people live in water-stressed areas, a term defined as having less than 1000 cubic metres of water per person per year. But by 2025, as the UN projections say, about 1.8 billion people will be living in counties or regions with absolute water scarcity. With the existing climate change scenario, almost half the world's population will be living in areas of high water-stress by 2030. The situation will not only imperil human health and development on a vast scale but will also endanger aquatic and terrestrial ecosystems on which much of the earth's life depends.

The growing scarcity of water is also hampering agricultural production, while demand for food is rising. A recent study revealed by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) indicated that by 2050 as many as 150-200 million "environmental refugees" may have fled coastlines vulnerable to rising sea levels, storms or floods, while a sixth of Bangladesh could be permanently lost to sea-level rise and land subsidence.

Water shortages may put the global food supplies in jeopardy and lead to economic stagnation in many areas, triggering a series of local and regional water crises and even water riots. During my visit to Satkhira and Khulna in the recent past, I saw, to my utter shock, that water in most of the ponds in and around Satkhira was just knee deep and had turned salty and totally blackish. This is because tube wells fail to yield as the water table is going down every year.

Drinking water in and around Satkhira is sold in large containers. Almost six years after the

cyclone Aila and a tidal surge hit the coastal belts of Satkhira, Bagerhat and Khulna, people still have no access to salt-free drinking water. The ponds need to be drained of saline water so that rainwater can be used for drinking purpose. The cyclone-induced storm surge brought saline water inland, and all the ponds and tube wells became unusable. Drinking water shortage has become very acute because PSF (pond sand filters), a common practice of getting drinking water in those areas, are not working because of inadequate rainfall.

The prospect of Aman cultivation in this region still seems bleak because of salt deposit on the land. Thanks to Bangladesh Rice Research Institute (BRRI), farmers in this region are now going for salt-tolerant BR 40 and 41 but the seeds are still in short supply. Unhappily, because of a lack of livelihood opportunities, many disgruntled people, who earlier depended on farming and fishing for a living, have migrated to other places.

However despite all the odds that have made life in the coastal region miserable, there is still hope because of environmental awareness. Now efforts are underway to right some of the wrongs in most parts of the world. Unless immediate adaptation strategy is taken, these problems will prove critical in the coming days, as deteriorating soil conditions and changing climate put even more pressure on a badly-strained food supply system.

If the nations of the world take immediate action, the pace of destruction of the global environment, no doubt, can be slowed substantially. Sooner or later, the earth's human inhabitants, so used to adapting the environment to suit their needs, will be forced to adapt themselves to the new demands.

The question that invariably comes—how would societies respond, for example, if the oceans were to rise 3 to 4ft over the next century, as some scientists have predicted? One option would be to construct levees and dikes. The Netherlands, after all, has flourished more than 12 ft below sea level for hundreds of years. Its

newest bulwark is 5.6 mile dam made up of 131 ft steel blocks that remain open during normal conditions to preserve the tidal flow that feeds the rich local sea life, but can be closed down during rough weather.

Poorer countries like Bangladesh have fewer options. It cannot simply evacuate chavs in the Ganges delta or coastline populations. Launching of such massive evacuation plan or resettlement in a land scarce country that involves forbiddingly high cost and expertise is a daunting task. Cyclone-resistant structures built at Shyamnagore on four concrete pillars 7 ft above the ground, with the funding of UNDP after the Aila attack might be a way to save people in times of severe natural calamities.

The first step to an adaptation plan would be to opt for massive tree-planting in the whole country, especially in the coastal zones, because trees temper climate and capture and store water. Trees store 40% of terrestrial carbon and can slow the buildup of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere. Deforestation in mountains can worsen floods in grasslands below, as was the case in China, Madagascar, and more recently in Chittagong.

We have hurt coastal and marine ecosystems directly by draining wetlands, cutting mangroves, trawling oceans for fish and destroying reefs and lagoons. Besides we also damage these ecosystems indirectly as rivers transport to the coasts the effluents of agriculture, industry and urban areas by logging and building dams. This interference with the ecosystem brings in its wake serious catastrophes.

The sufferings of coastal people after Aila and Sidr amply demonstrate what sufferings and misfortune might be in store for us if we fail to adapt ourselves to changed climatic conditions. The affluent nations who are polluters must not only pledge but put in funds at the disposal of the affected countries like Bangladesh to tackle the aftermath of such disasters on a long term basis.

If the nations of the world take immediate action, the pace of destruction of the global environment, no doubt, can be slowed substantially. Sooner or later, the Earth's human inhabitants, so used to adapting the environment to suit their needs, will be forced to adapt themselves to the new demands.

The writer is a columnist of The Daily Star. e-mail: aukhandk@gmail.com

An unexpected lesson on neoliberalism

NAHELA NOWSHIN

"THE impunity of every citadel of patriarchy is intact -- family, marriage, public servants, army, police," observes Dr. Amrita Chhachhi, Professor at the International Institute of Social Studies at Erasmus University, during her keynote presentation themed *Neoliberalism, Sexual Violence, the State and the Women's Movement in India*, which was arguably one of the best sessions I attended at the International Conference on Gender,

One wonders, as the relationship between the economic role and empowerment of women gets stronger and the rich continue to pocket most of the earnings, who does women's work actually serve, let alone empower?

EVENT
International Conference on Gender, Diversity and Development (ICGDD)
Organised by the Women and Gender Studies Department of Dhaka University

WHEN
March 27-29

WHERE
Nabab Nawab Ali Chowdhury Senate Bhaban, Dhaka University

Diversity and Development (ICGDD).

Dr. Chhachhi's speech was filled with boldness, acute insight and passion. She spoke eloquently --although in an impromptu manner-- without losing track of the topic at hand. Most importantly however, it was *what* Dr. Chhachhi spoke about rather than *how* that was most captivating. Leaving the theoretical part of it aside, Dr. Chhachhi spoke simply and effortlessly about the convergence of neoliberalism and feminism by providing *real life, tangible* examples.

Neoliberalism, at the core of which lies a capitalist doctrine, gives way to a system of governance centered around a profit-making model. Deregulation, privatisation and liberalisation of trade and finance are inherent parts of the concept of neoliberalism. Dr. Chhachhi argues that this kind of governance maintains and reinforces "multiple" patriarchies (army, police, court). The same ideals which birthed feminism are now being used to further capitalist exploitation creating new forms of inequality in the process.

To put this into perspective, consider the newest viral *Vogue Empower* ad starring Deepika Padukone. What message is a fashion magazine --that literally cashes in on unrealistic body images of women to stay in the game-- trying to send when it takes on one of Bollywood's (an industry that routinely commodifies women) most bankable actresses to speak about women's 'empowerment'? This is not to undermine *Vogue* or Padukone's genuineness or sincerity (if any) towards this issue, but I think Dr. Chhachhi would agree with me when I say that at the end of the day, it's an *advertisement* which appropriates feminist ideals for capitalist gains... Umm, *Vogue Empower* merchandise, anyone?

Dr. Chhachhi further substantiates the "dangerous liaison" between neoliberalism and feminism by providing examples of 'special sales' or 'bonus offers' available on International Women's Day. A random day chosen by god-knows-who to 'celebrate' women (whatever that means) is actually just another profit-making tool for money-hungry opportunists.

She goes on to elaborate on the term "economic empowerment" of women that is often used by world leaders and NGOs to inspire women to work to



Dr. Amrita Chhachhi

achieve "autonomy". She forces one to question the hidden meaning behind the worn out term. One wonders, as the relationship between the economic role and empowerment of women gets stronger and the rich continue to pocket most of the earnings, who does women's work actually serve, let alone empower?

During the one hour allotted to her, Dr. Chhachhi raised many other eye-opening points that would have made anyone in that room leave with more complex questions than he/she may

previously have had. I was disappointed to see that not a single person had raised their hand to pose questions to Dr. Chhachhi during the Q&A session following the end of her speech. Was her presentation too complex or too pedagogic to understand? I wonder.

I, for one, was left with a slight feeling of dismay at the end of the session given my renewed sense of understanding of the state of affairs facing the world of "feminism," a term whose meaning seems to have

been distorted beyond recognition going by some people's twisted definition of it. Although I have no doubt that the fight for equality is one worth fighting for, it is another question altogether whether we will ever win. Does this mean that as women, we will have to keep "proving" for the rest of eternity that we are just as human as the male species? I mean, what will it take?

The writer is a journalist at The Daily Star.

QUOTABLE Quote

Do not go where the path may lead, go instead where there is no path and leave a trail.

Ralph Waldo Emerson

CROSSWORD by Thomas Joseph

ACROSS

- Sullen
- Insolent talk
- Urge forward
- Solitary sort
- Italian seaport
- Extreme
- Historic time
- Schedule C, e.g.
- CPA's study
- Golf position
- Remains
- Music store buys
- Syrup source
- Phone download
- Brings in
- Message setting
- CPA's pointers
- Government revenue increaser
- Pasture grazer
- Took steps
- Alarm trigger
- Resort site
- Like some roofs

DOWN

- Probe persistently
- Last Greek letters
- On deck
- Old auto
- Course activity
- Incalculable
- Wheel maker
- Bowling round
- Sister of Janet and Michael
- Sumptuousness
- Marketing lingo
- Tent city
- 'Dead --' (Dick Francis book)
- Least strict
- Cochise's people
- Bill of "Big Love"
- Kidman of film
- Said
- Secret supply
- Ocean motion
- Garbo, for one
- Towel word
- Soviet jet

Yesterday's answer

A	T	B	A	T	S	R	E	A	D
S	E	R	I	A	L	A	R	I	A
H	E	A	R	T	O	F	P	A	L
L	I	E	B	O	P				
L	I	A	R	R	E	A	M		
S	I	N	G	P	A	R	R	O	T
U	M	A	P	A	P	A	G	O	O
P	E	N	C	I	L	C	O	N	E
S	E	A	L	S	U	N	S		
F	I	L	E	T	O	F	S	O	L
I	D	O	L	T	I	E	D	I	N
B	O	G	S	S	A	D	D	L	E

CRYPTOQUOTE

HWNSRM OF SFH IU MM SFK LUWH HWCV UKC, ETH XFK LUWH HWCV MCGG. GFMH HWNSRM UKC PTORCO EV HWCNK PUQYCHM.

-- EUZHUMUK RKUQNUS

Saturday's Cryptoquote: GENEROSITY IS GIVING MORE THAN YOU CAN, AND PRIDE IS TAKING LESS THAN YOU NEED.

-- KHALIL GIBRAN

BEETLE BAILEY by Mort Walker

ANYONE WHO WANTS TO GET AHEAD IN THE ARMY, STEP FORWARD!

GREG + MORT WALKER

BEETLE, YOU DIDN'T TAKE A FULL STEP!

I DIDN'T WANT TO GET TOO FAR AHEAD

HENRY by Don Trachte

WE SPECIALIZE IN TUNE-UPS

SLAM

CLANK