International Day for Biological Diversity

Why mainstreaming biodiversity is the call for the day

REZA KHAN

TE have become familiar with the term biodiversity today due to the Convention of Biological Diversity [CBD] that was accepted by the UN Council on December 29, 1993, after which many nations, including Bangladesh, started becoming its signatories. As biodiversity is the foundation of life and is essential for the services provided by ecosystems, this year's theme of the International Biodiversity Day is "Mainstreaming Biodiversity; Sustaining People and their Livelihoods."

Although Bangladesh is considered to be very rich in biodiversity, this scene seemed to have changed a lot since the 1950s. Nevertheless, if we reflect on the recorded biodiversity elements of the country, the list is still quite huge. For instance, the world total of mammals, birds, reptiles, amphibians, fishes, crustaceans and butterflies is 131,859 species, where India has 8,376 or 6.35 percent of the world species and Bangladesh is blessed with 2,242 species or 1.7 percent of the world.

In addition, we have quite a large tally of plant species. The world total of plants is around 465,668 species; India has 47,513 of that number or 10.20 percent, while we have 6,759 plant species or 14.23 percent of Indian flora, as recognised by our Department of Environment's (DoE) report to the Convention of Biological Diversity (CBD) in 2015. However, at present these species seem to subsist only on paper; in fact, some of these species which used to exist in the hundreds or even thousands in the country - only have a handful of their members still existing in Bangladesh. Moreover, some major species have already become extinct.

Bangladesh is one of the first countries to have signed almost all the protocols, treaties, conventions, etc., related to the biodiversity of the country. The country has been a pioneer in banning polybag use, promulgation of the Wildlife Act, Fisheries Act, Forest Act, Environment Act and several others that apparently help conserve the environment, thereby helping to prevent wide scale abuse against our



PHOTO: BLUDEDOTPOST

existing biodiveristy.

While we can be thankful for these laws, I believe that these Acts mostly exist only on paper. In fact, some corrupt government officials and political touts often exploit these laws to harass people at the grassroots in the name of implementing these rules and regulations, while the real culprits who force labourers and downtrodden workers of fields to break the law, continue to operate with impunity. Only formulating Acts therefore does little to empower people at the grassroots, as nothing much is done to support them in their daily quest for livelihood.

Let's take the ban of polybags for example. While this is a laudable initiative, instead of fining grocers or small store owners for using them, factories that produce polybags should be penalised. Moreover, we need to find cheaper alternatives for polybags which would encourage producers, vendors and users to stop using them, before enforcing a complete ban that is often disregarded by the concerned parties. The jhatka ilish ban again looks great

on paper. In practice, however, this appears to be a somewhat misguided initiative, as it will not work in its entirety unless all middlemen are removed, and fishermen get 100 percent subsidies given to them that will ensure that they do not breach the ban during jhatka season.

A recent example of a law that needs to be adjusted for better enforcement is the use of jute bags instead of polybags for commercial purposes. The government, unfortunately, failed to ensure the supply of jute bags to establishments responsible for packing rice, paddy, wheat or other grains. Thus, it makes little sense for law enforcers to

punish grocers or wholesalers who do not use jute packaging, while companies, mills and factories that refuse to use jute bags mostly go unchecked and unpunished.

It goes without saying that tanneries which continue to operate within the city, hawkers and vendors selling their wares on footpaths and overpasses, illegal occupiers of temporary structures and land grabbers hinder environment conservation efforts. However, it will be difficult to stop their illegal activities until they are hit hard at the root. The best way to ensure that they stop polluting and encroaching our environment would be to apprehend them before they even have the chance to carry out their nefarious activities.

If we look at climate change, Bangladesh has promulgated all Acts, and placed the suggested rules and regulations to oblige the international

authorities' protocols on this issue. Funds have been given and supposedly used to conserve biodiversity and mitigate the effects of climate change. However, the actual scenario seems to be a little different from what appears on paper. While committees are formed, and officers, teachers and project directors are employed to make people aware of climate change, there is little development in areas which are most vulnerable to climate change risks. At the grassroots and in remote

villages, people are still unaware of the benefits - both economic and environmental - of biodiversity conservation or climate change mitigation. Fishermen at the Sundarbans, for example, continue their harmful pursuit of catching shrimp larvae just as they used to about a decade ago, killing millions of other fish eggs and larvae on a daily basis in the process. These discarded and unused fish are extremely important for commercial fishery and aquatic biodiversity. It's unfortunate that due to these activities, the Sunderbans is gradually turning into a fish desert.

This continues to occur despite the fact that millions have been reportedly spent from biodiversity conservation and climate change mitigation funds to provide alternative livelihood options to these impoverished, vulnerable people. In fact, people of the Sunderbans have even lost their fear of wild animals like tigers or snakes while fishing for fish eggs and larvae, thanks to the pressures of earning a livelihood for their family and dependents.

In conclusion, I would like to stress on the importance of a bottom-up approach in the discussions of conserving biodiversity, instead of continuing the top-down approach that is currently followed by the government, NGOs and donor agencies while formulating and implementing projects. It is only then that we can ensure that our environment is protected but not at the cost of people's livelihoods.

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To quit or not to quit?



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we face in our everyday life is when to call it quits. Ordinary mortals seem to have a better sense of when to draw

with dogged persistence. However, as we go up the social or career ladder, we tend to develop the habit of "hanging on" to our positions, beliefs, ideas and power. This malady is most pronounced amongst the political class, especially the plutocracy -- with presidents and prime ministers attempting to perpetuate their rule in the name of "serving the people". The question is: "When does tenacity turn into obduracy, and when does ambition border megalomania?"

The human habit of never giving up is inculcated in us almost from childhood and runs into our formative years at school. Most of us remember

our class teachers narrating the wellcommon known legend of the Scottish King dilemmas Robert the Bruce. Cowering in a cave after his defeat in a battle, Robert learned his life's lesson from a spider that was persistently trying to spin a web. It fell and failed several times, but finally succeeded. Inspired by the spider, King Robert turned his defeat into victory against the more superior British force.

Admittedly, persistence is a virtue. However, it may become counterproductive when it wears us down, or when we become utterly frustrated and disappointed. Life has no rewind button and at times we need to make hard choices to either continue on the same path or change course. And sometimes we have to tell ourselves: "I have done my best, but this is not to be. Let me surrender and move on to something else."

Astonishingly, most people find it hard to reach this realisation. Hence the key is to ask oneself before embarking on a task whether one's ambition is realistic or not. In this case,

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2 Dozing

4 Dress edge

5 Beginning

6Worried

45 Red ink items

1 Reduces to pulp

3 E. B. White book

7 Peruvian coins

9On the beach

17Melody

10 Ham and lamb

8 William Styron book

22 Uncle, in Acapulco

the time old serenity prayer comes in handy: "God grant me the serenity, to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and

wisdom to know the difference!" Even if we are successful and have accomplished our goal, there is a time when we must "quit" to make room for someone better or savvier. Unfortunately, most people hold on to their ambitions and cannot let go. As I noted above, political leaders cling to power even after they realise that they are no longer effective or popular, either because they have become ineffective or times have changed. Similarly, artists who have outlived their peak cannot forsake the glamour of public adulation and many of them go into deep depression. Is it just the "Robert Bruce syndrome" or a more complex psychological phenomenon? The simple truth is that we humans have a natural aversion to be perceived as "losers". But life cannot be lived as a constant battle of losing or winning. If we have chosen a vocation that

does not match our inherent talent or skill, why waste a lifetime trying to achieve that goal? I remember as a young mother, I insisted that my son learn to play the violin because I wanted to live my dreams through him. He must have realised early on that this was not his forte, but lacked the courage to quit lest he disappoint his parents. One day I went to a school concert where he was to play a solo piece. He came on stage with his violin and the moment he started playing a string snapped. There was an embarrassing silence. He reacted quickly and asked a fellow violin player for his instrument and completed his performance! The audience applauded him for his presence of mind and determination to continue despite the hiccup. But to me it was apparent that he did not want to be a violin player. I asked if he wanted to discontinue his lessons and he said yes. I am glad we made the decision before he reached the "breaking point", where there would be a showdown, or valuable time and

resources would be wasted on an activity that he did not have a natural aptitude for.

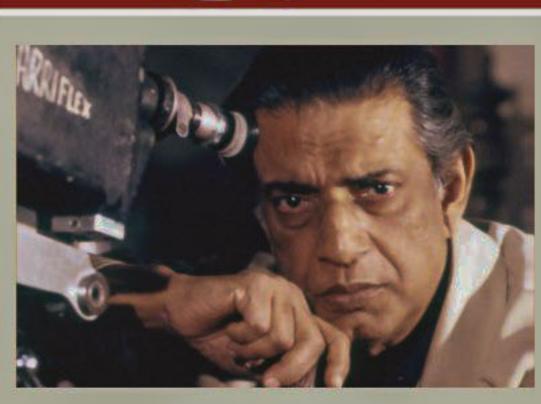
Perhaps the most poignant lesson I learned about quitting at the right time was from my music guru Kanika Banerjee. She stopped performing publicly while still at the peak of her career and devoted herself to teaching. She would humbly say, "I want my fans to remember me at my best. I must not linger on until I lose my voice and my listeners are disappointed in me." For me she will always remain a singer with an eternally beautiful and

melodious voice. Robert the Bruce's story teaches us an important lesson about never giving up on our ambitions. However, a strong case can also be made for the biblical proverb -"There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under the heavens."

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PINK WINGS THAT I NAMED

"COTTON



SATYAJIT RAY

The only solutions that are ever worth anything are the solutions that people find themselves.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

1 Swaggering 6 Teagrowing region 11 Pallid

12 Untethered 13 Criticizes 14 First letter

15 That lady 16 Hearing range 18 Twisty fish 19 Director Burton 20 Schedule Corg.

21 Location 23 View over 25 Lady Gaga's "-- It

Happens to You" 27-- Moines 28 Small porch

30 Skin woe 33 Bullring call 34 Jam ingredient

36 Spell 37 Hand signal 39 Not at home 40 Clark's partner

41 Burning

43 Bit of history

26 Crop destroyers 28 Shirt part 29 Golf goal 31 Kind of network

24 Cruise setting

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38Shading

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