

India's river linking project A disaster-in-waiting

SHAMSUDDOZA SAJEN

IN a recent interview with BBC, India's minister of water resources Uma Bharti unveiled her government's massive plan to divert major rivers including the Ganges and Brahmaputra. According to the Guardian, the project is just waiting for a rubber stamp from the environment ministry of India. While we do not want to be alarmists, it is hard to ignore the fact that, if implemented, the project will rob Bangladesh, a riverine country, of her very lifelines.

The project involves channeling water away from the east and south of India to the drought-prone areas in the north and west through rerouting major river courses. This means digging canals everywhere to link rivers defying the ecology of the rivers. Bangladesh has been formed as the greatest deltaic plain at the confluence of the Ganges, Brahmaputra and Meghna rivers and their tributaries. So any diversion of the natural flow of the rivers will be like redrawing the geography of the area.

The project is based on an overestimation: diverting water from where it is surplus to dry areas. Himanshu Thakkar of the South Asia Network for Dams, Rivers and People (SANDRP) told the BBC, "There has been no scientific study yet on which places have more water and which ones less". In the dry season there is hardly enough water in the rivers to meet the minimum demands of the river-adjacent areas. Where is the surplus water for diversion? A ruling BJP member Murlidhar Manohar Joshi aptly



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said that the plan would be like transferring wealth "from one beggar to another beggar."

What basically goes wrong with the concept of the project is that it sees a river only as a source of water, not as an entire ecosystem. Any intervention in the ecosystem affects the whole community and wildlife dependent on the river. Thakkar accused the Indian water authority of disregarding this very fact. According to SANDRP, 1.5 million

people will be displaced and 104,000 hectares of prime forested land will be submerged while the effects on other life forms are unpredictable. On our side, we are clueless because our water ministry does not have any substantial study on the possible consequences of the river linking plan. When asked about his reaction to this unilateral move by India, the state minister for water resources urged the Indian government, in his habitual manner,

"to take Bangladesh's water needs into consideration". It seems our government was not even aware of the progress of the project that could spell disaster for Bangladesh.

India's reply to Bangladesh's concerns is equally vague: "We don't have the details, but we will ensure Bangladesh gets its share of water too", said a statement issued by water resources ministry of India. Such patronising rhetoric is hardly

reassuring. We have learnt enough from the experience of the Farakka Dam which was built to divert water from Ganges to Hugli River. The reduction in water flow has proved disastrous for Bangladesh including the loss of fish species, the drying of Padma's distributaries, increased saltwater intrusion from the Bay of Bengal, and damage to the mangrove forests of the Sundarbans.

This unilateral move by India is a clear violation of the basic tenet of all the international regulations regarding water bodies i.e. no withdrawal from commonly shared water body without mutual agreement. The provisions of the Ganges Treaty unequivocally expressed resolve of both sides to solve the water sharing issue through mutual consultations and negotiations, and not to do anything detrimental to either side, specially the lower riparian.

But we also failed to raise or even hint at the issue of India's grand design which, if ever implemented, would create consequences, equal to half a dozen Farakka dams combined together, strangling the existence of Bangladesh. Does it reflect our overall apathy towards our rivers? Our rivers are dying of thirst due to rampant encroachment and pollution. We couldn't care less. It seems we are more interested in politicising the water issue rather than protecting our water sources, upon which our lives depend.

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How zakat can eliminate poverty

ALI REZA

AROUND 1400 years ago, a system of social security was introduced which turned semi-barbaric, desert faring Arabian tribes into one of the most prosperous and advanced nations in the world. This social security system involves transfer of surplus wealth from the rich to the poor to alleviate poverty in a sustainable way so that all people can enjoy their legitimate rights to live a life of safety and dignity. This groundbreaking economic system is called zakat.

Mentioned in the Holy Quran 88 times, zakat is considered as one of the fundamental pillars of Islam and an indispensable instrument of the Islamic society. All the scholars of Islam unanimously agreed that, to be a Muslim, it is mandatory to pay zakat if s/he is eligible. This eligibility criterion for paying and receiving zakat is also clearly defined in the Quran. However, due to lack of awareness, the concept of zakat is often misunderstood in our society. Every year we can see how some zakat payers distribute food and clothes of inferior quality to the destitute people who often fall victim to stampede to collect those alms in the name of zakat.

Contrary to this malpractice, the wealth of zakat should be distributed in such a way so that the receivers can bring significant changes to their lives and livelihoods. There is no way of considering zakat as a tax, alms or donation; rather, in the Quran, zakat has been stated as the indisputable right of the poor, needy people.

The Centre for Zakat Management (CZM) has come up with the goal to establish zakat as a tool to alleviate poverty and discrimination in a sustainable way by proper utilisation of zakat funds. Established in 2008, CZM has launched various initiatives to distribute the zakat funds to all segments of poverty-ridden and



destitute people in our society.

CZM's flagship project called Jeebika is a livelihood and human development programme through which 5404 families of more than 20 districts have become self sufficient by getting themselves involved in different income generating activities with the help of zakat fund. In principle, CZM officials transfer the zakat fund to the zakat recipients in several instalments while providing them training on different need-based professions, enable them to

access the market and provide support to manage the collective zakat fund. In the year 2015 alone, there has been an increase of 59 percent in the amount of fund transfer since a total of 197,00,000 BDT has been transferred to 1470 families in 10 different districts.

Besides, CZM has been running two specific initiatives to encourage entrepreneurship among the youth and women through skill development and self-employment. These initiatives are called Naipunno Bikasha and

Mudareeb, thanks to which, last year, more than 1000 youth were trained on different professions and 770 of them were employed in different organisations.

With two of its programmes, called Genius and Gulbagicha, this welfare organisation has taken the initiative to utilise zakat fund to spread quality education among poor, underprivileged children. Every year, it provides scholarship to thousands of students all over the country and imparts capacity

development training to them. It also has another dedicated pre-primary education programme for the poor children living in urban slums and remote rural areas.

With its own pre-primary learning centres, CZM has been providing innovative learning equipments and nutritious food for the children. With another initiative called Ferdousi, CZM has started to utilise zakat fund for the improvement of maternal and neonatal health. It provides free medicine and treatment by specialised doctors to pregnant and lactating mothers and organises awareness-raising sessions in the least privileged communities.

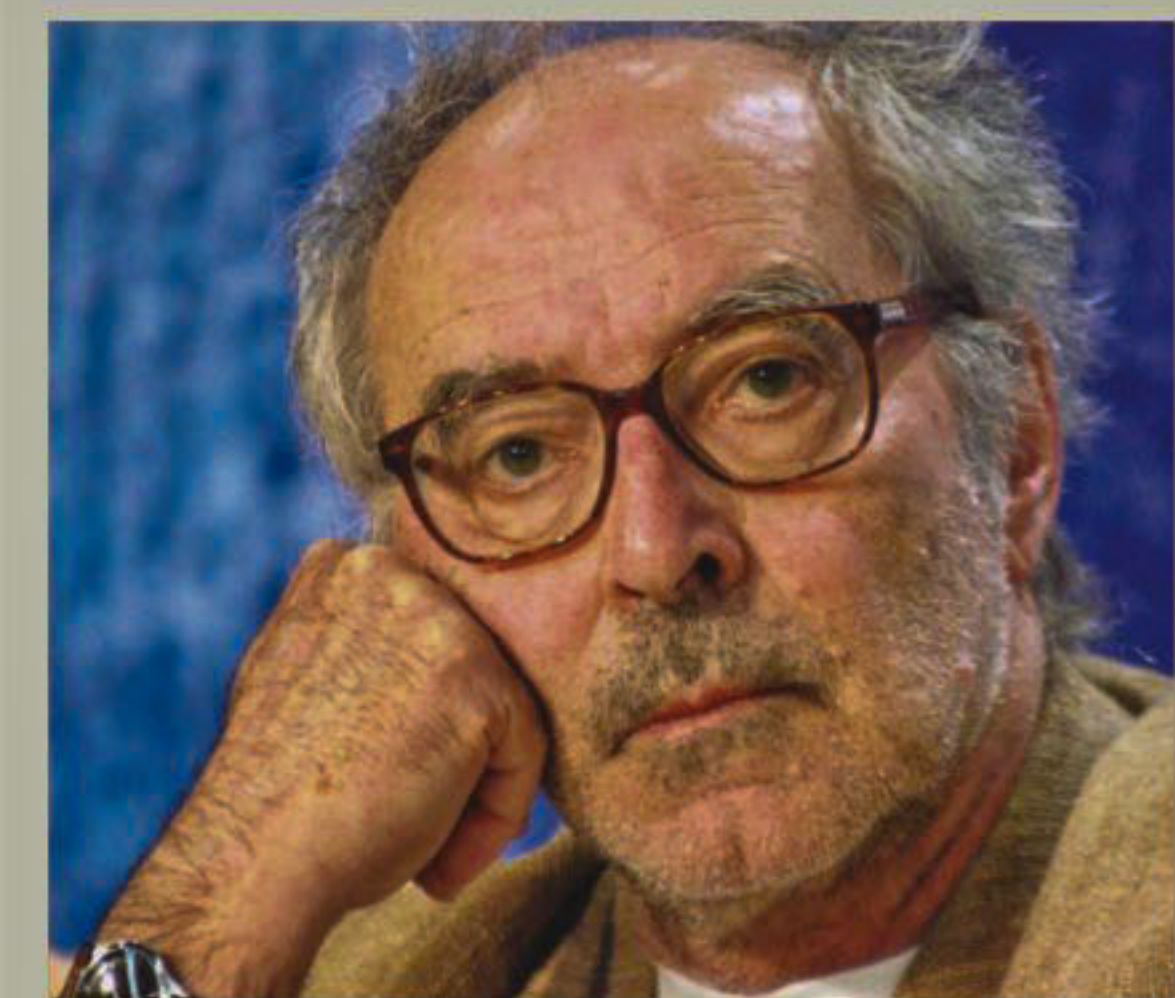
Besides these, CZM regularly organises motivational and awareness-raising programmes to make people aware of the true concept of zakat. Every year it organises 'Annual Zakat Fair' where different organisations participate, scholars and leaders take part in the discussions and beneficiaries of zakat share their inspiring stories. For its contribution to ensure sustainable development, CZM was awarded the Islamic Economy Award 2015 in the Waqf & Endowment category by the Global Islamic Economic Summit, Dubai, United Arab Emirates.

According to a research done by Dr. Kabir Hassan, Prof. University of New Orleans, it has been calculated that each year BDT 25,000 crore of zakat can be obtained from Bangladesh and if distributed properly each extremely poor family can get two million taka from this huge fund. Zakat, in fact, is an opportunity, a possibility for Bangladesh to fight poverty in a sustainable way. If this system of social security can be utilised effectively like the initiatives taken by CZM, it will be very possible for Bangladesh to break free from the vicious cycle of poverty and be a self sufficient, prosperous nation.

The writer is General Manager, Center for Zakat Management (CZM).

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QUOTABLE Quote



JEAN-LUC GODARD

Photography is truth. And cinema is truth twenty-four times a second.

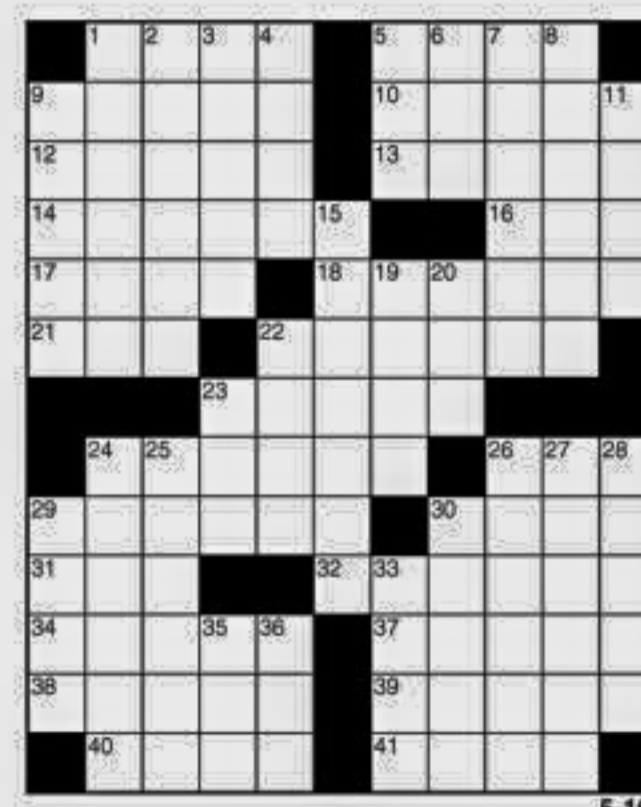
CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

- 1 Walrus's cousin
- 5 US-owned island
- 9 Core group
- 10 Finish
- 12 Visitor from space
- 13 Rich cake
- 14 Turn
- 16 Cereal bit
- 17 Iowa city
- 18 Game akin to horse-shoes
- 21 Danson of "CSI"
- 22 Run, as an exhibition
- 23 United Nations wavers
- 24 Sales offer
- 26 Femur's upper end
- 29 Make fun of
- 30 Heredity unit
- 31 In the style of
- 32 Give to charity
- 34 Headquartered
- 37 Delaware Capital
- 38 Newsmen Kroft
- 39 Portents
- 40 Genesis garden
- 41 Monthly bill

DOWN

- 1 Bible dancer
- 2 Fixed copy
- 3 Regions
- 4 Easter lead-in
- 5 Obtain
- 6 First número
- 7 Skilled
- 8 Change genetically
- 9 Cem unit
- 11 Household critters
- 15 Considered analogous
- 19 Longing
- 20 Treaty org. since 1948
- 22 Not naked
- 23 G-man's org.
- 24 Interact
- 25 Angel blank
- 26 Angel's home
- 27 Purpose
- 28 Jury makeup
- 29 Applies makeup
- 30 Treasure guardian
- 33 Stench
- 35 Genesis woman
- 36 Bear's lair



YESTERDAY'S ANSWER

CREE SLEDS
HEXES TENET
ITALY AGAVE
PAC REY BOA
SITTSIN SLUM
LAWNMOWER
AGATE
DATESTAMP
FOGS SORROW
ATE HEM MOE
TENSE ADORE
ELDER NOTED
SLATE TORY

