

Climate change will make inequality worse

Vulnerable countries need more support

A recently released UN global report on climate change resilience has brought to the fore again the critical state that countries like Bangladesh are in, as far as environmental and socio-economic impacts are concerned. Climate change remains one of the major threats to achieving Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the report has reiterated. One of the main thrusts of the SDGs is to reduce inequality in countries by making development inclusive. But with the increase in natural disasters in countries that are already struggling with poverty, there will be more people impoverished and greater inequality.

The study, in fact, points out that 95 percent of the poor coastal people in Bangladesh are adversely affected by climate change which makes poverty reduction an even bigger challenge for the country.

An estimated 400,000 people relocate to Dhaka every year from other parts of the country. 70 percent of slum dwellers have relocated to Dhaka because of some environmental shock. This vicious cycle of urban poverty and inequality becomes almost impossible to break.

Thus the need to boost efforts to increase people's resilience to climate change. The UN report states that so far the international resources given for this have been inadequate.

Governments of the most vulnerable countries must be supported with adequate funds (as promised at the Paris Agreement) that will be channelled to mitigate climate change impacts and help countries cope with the huge economic and humanitarian challenges that they will face.

As climate change will affect food security, adaptation policies must be made and implemented including more efficient growing of crops, developing new variety of crops (e.g. flood resistant paddy) and better water management techniques. Countries must also create more jobs for people to reduce inequality, which in turn, will help to mitigate climate change impacts.

A commendable effort Worth emulating

A group of women formed a volunteer group named "For a Bit of Smile" back in 2014 to help communicate with cancer-ridden children receiving treatment at Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Medical University (BSMMU). The initiator of the group, Fatimatul Bokul was moved by the plight of these children and helplessness of their parents when she visited the cancer ward.

Soon, she and her friends were bringing toys for the children to play with and attempted to provide counseling to parents. It takes great empathy to reach out to children suffering from a disease such as cancer. Day after day, these volunteers came to share the pain of the guardians and perhaps bring a smile to the patients, many of whom were terminal.

So, what began in 2014 has continued for the last two years and now has a team of dedicated people who find time out of their busy schedules to come and provide free, essential services like, emotional assistance and financial aid to some 300 children. The original group of 5 has expanded to a team of some 40 volunteers. Their work serves as an inspiration, especially in the age of consumerism where values were long thought to be on the wane. It is refreshing to find people like this in our midst, to remind us that all is not lost, that there are those amongst us who serve others less fortunate with no thought of gain. It is our hope that more such people would come forward and emulate Bokul and her team's work.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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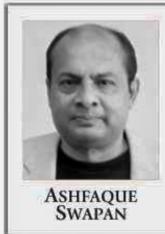
Gulshan DCC market fire

A devastating fire engulfed Gulshan1 DCC market this week and gutted hundreds shops. After 15 hours of toiling efforts, finally the firefighters managed to douse the fire. The fire gutted the shops both upstairs and downstairs, leaving the businesses undone. It was irreparable loss caused on the part of the businessmen. The firefighters had nothing to do but to watch the scene as they have lack of firefighting equipment to fight such a huge fire. I think firefighters must be equipped with modern fire-fighting equipments and be imparted with modern training so that they can provide quicker responses to any catastrophic situations like the Gulshan inferno.

Md Zonae Emran
Via email



The quirky charms of 'Aynabaji'



ASHFAQUR SWAPAN

I don't find Bangladesh's cinema appealing. Despite encouraging beginnings with films like *Mukh O Mukhosh* and *Surjonan* in the 1950s, Bangladesh's cinema has not lived up to its potential. Aside from a few films by the late Alamgir Kabir, and much later, the late Tarek Masud, Bangladesh has embarrassingly little of worth

to show for six decades of filmmaking. My own favourite Bangladeshi film remains Mashiuddin Saker and Sheikh Niyamat Ali's *Surjo Dighal Bari* based on Abu Ishaq's eponymous novel.

During the Pakistan era, commercial Bengali cinema, quite a different kettle of fish, made some attempt to reflect Bengali life, but its efforts fell short. Stories were formulaic, the acting overwrought. Its assumptions strained credulity: Heroes and heroines had a disconcerting habit of breaking into songs and dance; the rich father of the heroine often sported a dressing gown at all hours.

After independence in 1971, commercial cinema entered a brave new fantasy world. Culturally untethered, gaudy and utterly spurious, this gauche

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cultural confection sprang from the fevered imagination of filmmakers struggling to ape Bollywood. The discerning moviegoer deserted Bengali cinema; Bangladeshi cinema returned the favour.

No wonder *Aynabaji* has created such a fuss.

In Atlanta, where I live, I learned from social media that after a triumphant release at home, the Bangladeshi film *Aynabaji* had garnered an extraordinary following among Bangladeshi expatriates. Bangladeshis hosted two sold-out screenings in Chicago. Around 1,600 people filled a large cinema in Brisbane, Australia. Other US cities scrambled to host screenings.

When I reached Dhaka, I found the film running to packed houses three months after its release. I tried to get tickets twice and failed. My sister Alpana came to my rescue and pulled a few strings.

The popularity of *Aynabaji* reflects the thinking moviegoer's hunger for intelligent cinema, though the rapturous response seems a wee bit out of proportion.

Having said that, there's a lot to like about *Aynabaji*. The production values are superb, thanks to filmmaker Amitabh Reza Choudhury's background in advertisement films and its exacting production standards. The cinematography is particularly noteworthy – aerial drone shots, long shots and overall nuanced photography give a marvellous, captivating, visceral feel of Dhaka.

Ayna, the film's protagonist, is an actor by passion. This leads him to a strange, dark profession – he plays a

double for well-beeled convicts and does time in jail for them. He meets a neighbour, an attractive, single woman, and they become close. The relationship changes Ayna, he no longer wishes to do what he does. But the choice is not his, it turns out. He is compelled to take one last assignment. Things go badly wrong. The story ends with a dramatic twist.

The film's appeal stems from its honest, sharp-eyed take on contemporary reality, backed up by witty dialogue, some good acting and excellent production values.

As a straight narrative, the film is not convincing – there are just too many holes in the story. An exchange of a convict with his double happening repeatedly in broad daylight in busy streets? No way. The romance between Ayna and his girlfriend, effortlessly transcending a yawning socio-economic gap, is too far-fetched.

Aynabaji is more powerful when considered as a stylised, modern-day parable. Wrapped in whimsy, leavened by an impish wit, it is reminiscent of the imaginary English world of Jeeves created by P.G. Wodehouse. Its take on life is similar to the stylised storytelling of the 2014 film *The Grand Budapest Hotel*. Underneath the humour lies very dark hints of barbarity and injustice. Its Dhaka is an enchanting figment of the imagination. The lush green, the open-air rooftop home, the gorgeous view of the riverside, the free and easily navigable streets – we only wish this Dhaka existed. Wonder of wonders, there's even a car chase!

In the end, *Aynabaji*, despite some flaws, has some searing observations of contemporary reality. We realise that the politically connected and wealthy, often synonymous in Bangladesh, can flout justice with impunity. For all its quirky humor, *Aynabaji* is enveloped in a gentle sadness about how vulnerable ordinary people are to the cruel vagaries of fate and the callous machinations of the wealthy. It's a touching, deeply affecting fairy tale, but one that is deeply anchored in reality.

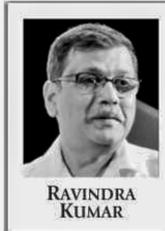
One swallow does not a spring make, but it's enormously heartening to see Bangladeshi cinema take baby steps towards creating cinema that's a thoughtful record of the human condition as experienced in Bangladesh.

A Correction and An Apology

In my last article ("Remembering the Bright," Dec. 24, 2016) I mistakenly identified martyred 1971 intellectual Ghiyasuddin Ahmed as Ghiyasuddin Chowdhury. I knew him by his nickname, my beloved, respected Bachchu mama. I deeply regret the error and beg forgiveness from his family members in particular and readers in general.

The writer is a contributing editor for *Siliconer*, a monthly periodical for South Asians in the United States. He has been writing for US-based South Asian media for over 25 years.

Cash-starved India assesses its pain



RAVINDRA KUMAR

Two months after India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced the controversial decision to withdraw currency notes of Rupees 500 (USD 7.4) and 1,000 from circulation, his country is still reeling from the effects.

On November 8, Mr. Modi had sought 50 days – until December 31 – for things to become normal after an estimated 86 per cent of currency notes were abruptly withdrawn from circulation. But the calculations of his government have proved as accurate as the Prime Minister's count of 53 days as 50.

On January 1, Indians were exactly where they had been for days after the November announcement – in queues outside banks and at automated teller machines to withdraw their own money for use in an economy that is still largely cash-driven in terms of the everyday transactions that make up life. There are

initially with new 2,000 notes – for which no one seemed to have change – and later with Rs 500 notes in a new series was said to have several objectives.

Mr Modi had said these were to snuff out black money, detect fake notes and paralyse underground groups sitting on large piles of extorted money. Later, spin doctors put it out that it was all part of government's plan to make India a digital, cashless economy.

By themselves, the objectives were unexceptional, even laudable. But as is always the case with pious intention, there is more to the story.

Black money has two faces – the first worn when tax has either not been paid or underpaid on honestly earned income, and the other which is the fruit of crime, extortion or corruption and is spawned by the first.

Paying tax is part of a social contract whereby the citizen agrees to give to government a portion of earnings in order to secure services that include infrastructure, defence and, most important, social security. Sadly in India, this has largely been a contract neither party – citizen or State – has honoured.

state levies a tax surcharge on citizens. Seventy years after independence, a majority of Indians have no social security to speak of.

The other face of black money – fruit of crime and corruption – is a necessary component of the social fabric. Bribes are sought – and paid – to navigate the cumbersome processes of an opaque bureaucracy, to secure government contracts, to avail undeserved tax sops and to overcome the intrusions of the policeman, the taxman and the alderman. It is not without reason that most politicians and many bureaucrats are considered corrupt.

The cash for paying these bribes comes from under-invoicing exports (and sales), over-invoicing imports (and purchases) and evading local taxes through the device of what is called a "kutcha" (handwritten and loose-leaf) invoice.

The fact that most of the "old" cash in circulation has been deposited into bank accounts would suggest that very little of it was "black" and thus debunks Mr. Modi's primary hypothesis. The truth



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limits to the cash they can withdraw – Rs 4,500 (USD 66) a day from ATMs or Rs 24,000 (USD 354) in all every week from their accounts – and there seems little hope of respite in the foreseeable future.

The distress is so acute in India's villages – where some two-thirds of people live – that India's Central Bank was forced to issue instructions that 40 per cent of cash supplies be sent to rural areas.

Characterised by policy flip-flops and shoddy implementation, the decision to withdraw old notes and to replace them

Who breached the contract first is a moot question, as indeed whether the two parties worked in tandem to do so. Less than four percent of Indians pay income tax and as for farmers, even the richest of them, pay no tax. The result is that governments – at the federal and provincial levels – have performed pathetically in terms of meeting social obligations.

Things are so bad that in order to meet two of its most basic commitments – public sanitation and education – the

though is that almost every one with unexplained cash on hand on November 8 has found a way to bring it into the system.

Money changers – formal and informal – in Delhi's Chandni Chowk, Kolkata's Bara Bazar, Singapore's Lucky Plaza and Bangkok's Sukhumvit Road were happily accepting old Indian notes at a 70 to 75 percent discount until the last week of December. The cash changed overseas found its way into India



through porous land borders with Nepal and Bhutan and was deposited into bank accounts of friends, relatives but mostly of low-income strangers who offered the service at a charge.

Of course, all deposits above a threshold limit will be scrutinised by the taxman but clearly many Indians think this is a procedure they will "manage" (another Indian-English word with myriad connotations) because taxmen are believed, for the most part, to be notoriously manageable.

The irony of Mr. Modi's anti-corruption measure though is that it gave birth to a new class of the corrupt – bank officers and tellers, petrol pump operators, railway counter clerks, school and municipal body cashiers (until December, old notes were accepted for fuel, train tickets, school fees and local body taxes) – who had the power to change old into new notes.

But cash isn't all bad. It can't be because after all it is an instrument of the state. A majority of Indians prefer to receive wages and make payments in cash. They find it convenient and reliable, while plastic and digital transactions are deemed suspicious. Digital security in India is suspect; just six weeks before the demonetisation, an estimated 3.2 million ATM cards were hacked.

While India scores fairly high on the World Bank's index of infrastructure – ahead of Greece, Saudi Arabia and Thailand – the benefits do not percolate to the country's interiors where power supply is erratic and internet connectivity spotty. In essence, the government's hope of a digital India is far-fetched in at least the medium term.

With most of the cash that was in circulation before November 8 now deposited in banks, many believe it is only a matter of time before it re-enters the system and does all the things – good and bad – that it once did. If that happens, Mr. Modi's venture would have failed.

Two consequences though will be inevitable. One, the taxman will have become even more powerful. Two, someone will have to pay for putting people to such misery. Mr. Modi must hope it is not he who does.

The writer is Editor, *The Statesman*, India. (This is a series of columns on global affairs written by top editors from members of the Asia News Network and published in newspapers across the region.)