

The Virtual Vogue



RUBANA HUQ

KNOT SO TRUE
 BY habit, I shake the morning newspapers violently every morning. This way, I shake redundancy off the pages. Most mercilessly, I call the promotional materials

“redundant”. How many of us actually take time to flip through the glossy prints that promise us a run to the rainbow? Very few, actually. So, while the glossy A4 size “look-at-me” slips through my fingers at 7:30 am everyday, I feel liberated. The noise of the crisp pages dropping to the floor helps me realise that we don't need paper as much as we think we do.

True, a desk calendar is hard to resist; a small notebook for appointment is difficult to do without and a moleskin is to die for. Yet, hasn't a cell phone replaced them all? We have our lives sculpted into our phones. Mails, appointments, to-do lists, reminders, alarms, clocks, photos, notes... everything. Photo albums are getting to be a thing of the past. Watches are occupying more of a vain social space where the wealthy show off their “jumma time” in social media every Friday while sharing their latest acquisition. Diaries, unless initialled and inscribed, are a pre-historic possession. A cell has it all.

The most terrifying part is having a cell talking to you. A digital assistant called Siri is playful. In the middle of huge Dhaka traffic jams, Siri can be superbly entertaining with the programmed responses to questions. Very soon, without us fully realising, we will be speaking to robots. (My son already has a robot cleaning his house). Get used to it. Artificial intelligence is taking over our lives. Science fiction is becoming dangerously closer to reality. And we are tip-toeing to virtual existence, increasingly becoming dependent on digital temptations. One can't read news without ads popping up in the net, one can't have full access to a piece of news without signing up ensuring that the news portal, the website or the entertainment site has full access to the pattern of our desire and taste. If one looks for a hotel somewhere,

the next day one is sure to be flooded with mails from different sites offering “top ten things to do” in that specific area. If, in case, one shop somewhere are bound to sign up, one is certainly and unfailingly going to receive hundreds of offers within the next seven days from different vendors who “sense” personal shopping tastes. That's it. The virtual is sensing us. Tactile is over.

A few years ago, a sleek object landed up on our laps, offering virtual freedom to bookshelves. The object is none other than a Kindle. Thanks to the Apple/I-trappings, many of us read books on Kindle.

paperless today. Every year, the world produces more than 300 million tonnes of paper with copier paper, computer printouts and notepads occupying the largest category of paper product consumption. Today, the usage of paper products has increased from 92 million tonnes to 208 million, which is a growth of 126 percent over the last 20 years. But unfortunately, globally, 45 percent of the paper printed in offices ends up in the bin by the end of the day. And the ones to remain, end up in expensive cabinets. For example, each four-drawer file cabinet

the rainforests on the earth. And in spite of our fashionable conversations about recycling, in reality, paper cannot be recycled indefinitely. After a max of ten times, the fibres break down.

Yet... the paper in the average business grows by 22 percent a year and paper consumption has risen by 400 percent in the last 40 years.

At our end, let us also remind ourselves that we don't need to send greeting cards on every occasion. With a Happy New Year greeting card in December and January, with a Pehela Baishakh



IMAGE: SIGNORITY

It's easily downloadable and saves space. But I still have many friends who complain about not being able to read in a digital object. Many of them prefer the relatively cheap paperbacks while my literary snobbish friends stick to the first out hardcover. I opt for none. For me, Kindle is kind to my spondylitis, my fibromyalgia and my storage. Neither do I have to stuff a fat 600 paged book into my bag, nor do I ask the house help to clean the shelves as much as we used to anymore. This is exactly how spaces have become irrelevant and this is how the virtual is in vogue now.

Once upon a time, one would gloat about efficiency by measuring the towering files on a desk. Times have changed. One boasts of being

holds an average of 10,000 to 12,000 documents, takes up to 9 square feet of floor space. But fortunately, an Asian has lesser to be blamed for as an average Asian consumes six times less paper than an American who uses more than 318 kilograms of paper every year.

Pulp and paper industry, accounting for 4 percent of the global energy use, is the fifth largest consumer of energy and over 60 percent of the roughly 17 billion cubic feet of timber harvested worldwide each year is used for paper and pulp. The paper industry also uses more water in production than any other industry. We also lose around 18 million acres of forest each year, which equals a loss of 20 football fields every minute. In less than 100 years, we will be destroying all

one in April, with Eid Mubarak twice a year, with wall calendars and of course the endless coloured paper flyers crowding our desks (no offence meant), along with the layered, expensive boxes that come as wedding invitations which end up being trashed in the bin almost immediately after they are received and recorded in the appointment log, needn't we ask ourselves if at all, any of this is necessary? And if there's any way of doing this all paperlessly?

So, this is how we go on, gradually treading from our “paperful” existence to a paperless one. At the end of it all, all we want is a clutter free life, space and spirit, don't we?

The writer is Managing Director, Mohammadi Group.

A new Election Commission

Holding free and fair election is the task

THE Hon'ble President has appointed a new Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) and four Commissioners; the reaction of some political parties is predictable. However, those who will assume the reins of the election commission (EC) have long career behind them and may have personal issues but, we believe, it is time to start anew. Admittedly, it is not for the Commission alone to resolve all the problems centring on our elections and politics, and it is the responsibility of all the stakeholders to help the Commission deliver. The task of the new EC is well cut out - holding free, fair and participatory elections.

There is no denying that no one can be politically or ideologically neutral in the true sense of the word. As individual human beings, the newly appointed commissioners may have their own political and ideological leanings and predilections. However, once they assume office of the CEC and Election Commissioners, into which they have been thrust by chance, they have to rise to the occasion and deliver as per their obligations.

Regrettably, the outgoing EC has left the people down. It has done nothing during its tenure for the new EC to emulate. We hope that the CEC and Commissioners designate would keep this in mind.

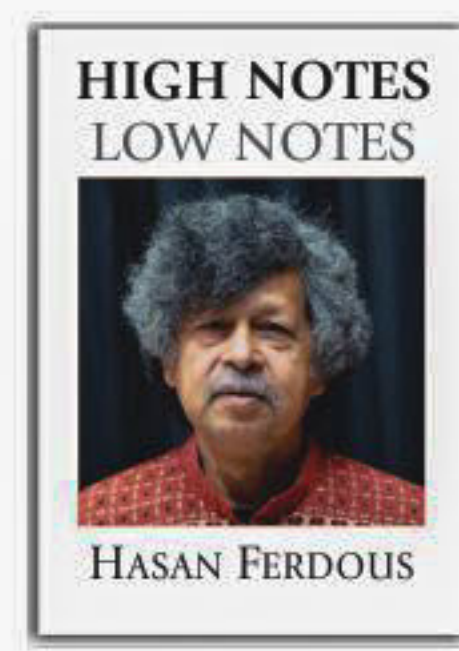
We also hope that the EC is fully aware of the historic nature of its responsibilities. The taste of the pudding, as the famous proverb goes, will be in the eating. What it delivers will determine whether it has lived up to the nation's expectations.

Violence by Myanmar security forces on Rohingyas

Calls for international action

FIRST the UN accused Myanmar of ethnic cleansing and now the Human Rights Watch has accused it of inciting systematic sexual violence against Rohingya women and girls during security operations in northern Rakhine State in 2016. Statements of refugees streaming across the border into Bangladesh have said to the effect that the army and border security guards have often participated in individual and gang rapes of women in around nine villages in Muangdaw district. We have heard that Aung San Suu Kyi has assured of an impartial investigation into the matter but we will take that with a pinch of salt because all said and done, there is skepticism as to how much control she exercises over the military in Myanmar. Myanmar's President's press detail has also said that the commission led by the Vice President will bring to book those responsible, if such statements are proved to be true. Again, we reserve comment on this because such assurances have been given before and yet the wholesale suppression of the Rohingya people, depriving them of all rights has continued but the refugee problem has not been solved. Again, by international and local estimates, nearly 70,000 Rohingyas have fled to Bangladesh and some 23,000 remain internally displaced.

The intensity of military operations against the Rohingyas with looting and burning property, and now the allegations of systematic rape are crimes against humanity which demand a strong response from the UN. It cannot sit on the sidelines issuing statements that the carnage stop. Doing so renders the UN ineffectual. The Rohingya issue is a test case for the international community in its commitment to upholding universal human rights.



HASAN FERDOUS

HIGH NOTES LOW NOTES
 TWO days ago, I received an earnest query from a friend in Dhaka. He was concerned that the US was showing some signs of becoming dysfunctional. Could it be that the Empire itself may soon become a failed State?

Let me assure my friend and others worried about the health of the United States that the news of its demise is highly exaggerated.

Let me explain why.

I don't dispute that it is showing signs of some internal cracks and crevices. This is nothing new, the US - now 234 years old - has gone through periodic cataclysms: a civil war that left it torn, assassinations of its top leaders that hit hard at its core values, a foreign invasion that took nearly 60,000 lives. As a result, the country was bruised and battered, but it always recovered, each time coming back stronger.

Just think of the past 20 years. In 2000, the Year of the Hanging Chad, the US had gone through an election that

alternately described as a “con man” and an “ignoramus” - sits in the White House and the whole world thinks the end of the great Empire is near.

Relax, a bout of indigestion may ruin your day but chances are you will recover soon.

As arguably the world's oldest democracy, the foundation of American democracy is too deep and its institutions too solid to be fatally shaken by occasional tremors. Just look at the way American democracy is correcting itself from Donald Trump's lethal attack. In the White House, we now have a person who considers the presidency to be an extension of his business empire, and as CEO, he is entitled to do whatever he wants to do with it. So he began issuing a bunch of executive orders, including one that banned Muslims from seven countries to travel to the US. He did so completely disregarding its legality and without taking into account its real-life consequences. Just like that, with a single stroke of his pen, he sent the country into a tizzy. But before it hit rock bottom, the falling empire was rescued from within. First the government's own Attorney-General, albeit an acting one, publicly expressed her disagreement with the president and

down a wrecking bull and ultimately stopping it. Democracy is not just elections and peaceful transfer of power, but also institutions that serve as its own bulwark. Judiciary is one such institution, but there are others, including civil society and the media. I have deliberately left legislature out of the list. In today's America, with both houses of its

Congress under the control of a compliant conservative political party and the opposition party still recovering from last November's shellacking, the legislature is at its weakest.

The civil society has stepped in to fill the void. From day one of his presidency, Donald Trump has faced non-stop opposition from the public. Led by grassroot organisations and powered mostly by social media, nearly half a million people - mostly women - took part in a historic march in Washington D.C. on January 21 that questioned the legitimacy of Trump and his professed policies. A 32-year old Bangladeshi woman, whose picture with an American flag worn as a hijab, defiantly challenged the linear narrative that Trump had proposed for his mostly white supporters. Gathered within shouting distance from his White House, the mass of humanity declared that Trump may have won the elections, but the country was still theirs.

That was only the beginning. The next week, as Donald issued his Muslim Ban, the country's airports were taken over by chanting demonstrators who called his executive order “un-American”. Joining ordinary citizens in this spontaneous outpouring of popular protest were celebrities from Hollywood, billionaires from Silicon Valley and intellectuals from the country's best known educational institutions. Suddenly, a new battle line was drawn: it was people versus power. Within 48 hours, the order was halted by a Federal Court, leaving Donald fuming but helpless.

Clearly, the real clog in the wheel has been the media, especially social media. With a compliant ruling party and a disoriented opposition, the media has emerged as the open platform to monitor Trump and his White House bullies, many of whom are known for espousing White Supremacist beliefs. Major newspapers, most TV networks, and upstart media voices in the margins all now closely scrutinise Trump's every move. They have unearthed the role of dark money behind Trump's victory machine, dissected his shadowy links with Putin's Russia and unmasked his conflict of interest as chief executive of the State and CEO of a vast business empire. They bared the Wall Street links of his cabinet nominees and the potential for them to cause irreparable damage to the Republic. It was no surprise that Steve Bannon, Trump's 'Rasputin' in D.C., called the media “the opposition party.”

These are nothing but self-correcting tools that a deep rooted democracy puts in place. However, the tools on their own are no guarantee that democracy will endure, it needs an engaged and vigilant public that would judiciously use these tools. The last few weeks have demonstrated that the American people are up to the task. The bull in the china shop has not been fully restrained, but it knows people are watching its every move. In short, the health of the republic is just fine.

The writer is a Journalist and author based in New York.



was decided by 576 votes in Florida and a partisan Supreme Court, and in the process left the country hobbled by fierce opposition between the two camps. Within a few months, the country got embroiled in a war that left deep wounds which remain unhealed to this day. A few years later, a little-known Senator from Illinois swept the elections using his opposition to the war, but it also gave rise to the so-called Tea Party Movement that swore to fight the first black President to its last breath. The country's racial divide took a seat front and centre, its ugly face completely bare. And now, eight years later, a supremely divisive man -

refused to defend his action. She was soon fired, but her views were echoed by a judge in Washington who declared the Muslim ban unconstitutional and overruled the president. It obviously peeved the president, but there was nothing he could do. His mighty pen was now worthless. The only recourse left to him was the legal one. He grudgingly ordered his staff to seek a reversal through the intervention of a higher court.

This is exactly how democracy is supposed to work, with checks and balances that act as road blocks, slowing

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Water resources need to be explored

Bangladesh can strengthen its economy by exploiting resources from rivers and the Bay of Bengal. Despite having immense potential, these resources remain unexplored due to lack of modern technology, skilled human resources, trained manpower and innovative research. Therefore, illegal fishing, extreme water pollution, and other malpractices are on the rise. Recent reports of eighteen sharks having been hunted in Pirojpur show the gravity of the situation.

The government should focus on cultivating the vast prospects of this sector.
 Shuva Das
 BSMRSTU

Protect South Asia's biodiversity

The vastly populated nations across South Asia are suffering from several anthropogenic issues impacting conservation and management of their vast natural resources, wildlife, and biodiversity in particular. Economic growth, development of infrastructure and industries, and the exponential rise of human population across South Asia are jeopardising natural ecosystems.

People need to be appropriately sensitised regarding the challenges of degrading environment and the loss of endangered species. Holistic approaches through regional cooperation must be taken to tackle ecological problems. The SAARC and ASEAN platforms can contribute effectively to dealing with these issues. Print and electronic media can also play a significant role in raising awareness across all regions. If South and Southeast Asian countries take initiatives in this direction, other nations across Asia, Africa and Latin America will be encouraged to follow suit, resulting in an overall positive global impact.
 Saikat Kumar Basu
 Canada