

Debunking the myth of clean coal



MANOJ MISHRA
RECENTLY, Seoul hosted the two-day National Adaptation Plan (NAP) Expo Asia 2017 at the Marriott Hotel, organised by the Least Developed Countries Expert Group (LEG) under the UNFCCC. Delegations from 20

countries, including one from Bangladesh comprising both government and non-government officials, attended the expo to share their experiences of formulating and implementing National Adaptation Plans (NAPs). The pioneer in formulating NAP, Bangladesh had plenty to share with other climate vulnerable countries.

Dr Atiq Rahman, executive director at the Bangladesh Centre for Advanced Studies, made an excellent presentation highlighting the climate risks facing Bangladesh and the innovative adaptive solutions that are coming out from community groups in collaboration with other stakeholders. His speech was both well-received and inspirational in that he showcased the resilience of the grassroots of Bangladesh in the face of all odds.

Any discussion on climate vulnerabilities and adaptation in Bangladesh automatically warrants a debate on the coal-centric energy development path our government has chosen. As expected, the issue came up following Dr Rahman's presentation, and he did well to articulate the tension between providing electricity to off-the-grid population and climate mitigation efforts. I completely agree with his argument that Bangladesh should not be burdened with the responsibility to reduce GHG emissions at the cost of denying economically backward classes the fruits of 'development.'

However, the coal question is often misunderstood. The debate over the excessive reliance on coal-based thermal power generation has very little to do with our negligible role in the exponential accumulation of atmospheric GHGs. Just to give you some context, in 2013, coal's share in power generation was about three percent. The 2016 Power Sector Master Plan proposes to raise it to 50 percent, totalling about 20,000 megawatts by 2030.

I recently interviewed several key figures associated with the anti-Rampal movement.



What I understood from those conversations was that the anti-Rampal protest is not really about global GHG emissions. Instead, the focus is primarily on the issue of local environmental vulnerability. The moral question that dogs these protesters is: what kind of a future are we imagining for our future generations? Will they be able to breathe freely and dream of weaving a future unencumbered by the senseless choices made by their overzealous forefathers? Are we pushing them to a dystopian future for the momentary benefit of our own?

The official narrative tries to frame the coal question as a binary choice between coal and energy poverty leading to widespread economic underdevelopment. This is a highly fallacious argument. Saying "no" to coal in no way precludes us from extending electricity coverage to off-the-grid areas. Electricity

can be generated from a variety of sources and that too in an environment-friendly manner. We are supposed to believe that the supposedly low cost of generating coal power makes it the only viable option, although prima facie evidence suggests otherwise: domestic electricity tariff is skyrocketing as we embrace more coal and fossil fuel.

The Institute for Energy Economics and Financial Analysis emphatically notes, "coal-fired electricity is no longer the economy-builder its proponents say it is... Today governments and private interests worldwide concede - even emphasise - the economic and environmental destruction of coal." The 2017 Bloomberg New Energy Finance Report declares in no uncertain terms that renewable energy will "push coal and natural gas plants out of business by 2040" worldwide.

Indeed, renewable energy prices are plumm-

ing across the globe, contrary to our government's claim. Recently, solar power became cheaper compared to coal-fired electricity in the Indian state of Rajasthan. The same trend is visible in the United States, China, and several other countries in Latin America and Europe. In fact, the US and China are engaged in a trade war over the plummeting prices of photovoltaic panels.

The secret to keeping coal power "cheap" is the direct and indirect subsidies such projects enjoy. The socio-ecological costs are often excluded when calculating the price of coal power. Ecological economics makes it amply clear that when the humongous costs of dealing with coal-related water contamination, waste cleanup, air pollution, health hazards, and biodiversity destruction are internalised, "cheap" coal does not remain so cheap. The taxpayers are then left to shoulder

these essential but externalised costs to keep the projects floating.

During that discussion at the Expo, one of the government officials reiterated the official narrative that the proposed ultra-super-critical technologies to be used in Rampal will minimise ecological side-effects. I am sure his was an honest explanation. However, these assurances ring hollow. I am really befuddled as to why despite the availability of such miraculous technologies like India, to wash coal clean, countries like China, India, England, and the Netherlands are shuttering coal-fired power plants.

In March this year, China shut down the last coal-fired power plant in Beijing to tackle air pollution. Perhaps, we can export the clean coal technology and know-how to China! Clean coal is really an oxymoron; it is a multi-billion-dollar marketing scam launched by the US coal industry to mislead the public.

It is hypocritical of China and India to shut down coal power plants in their backyards while encouraging us to tread that forsaken path. They are simply gift-wrapping their pollution problem and outsourcing it to us. If China with its tremendous financial and technological might cannot deal with coal-related air pollution in Beijing, there is no way we could solve this problem with our limited ability.

Coming back to adaptation, already our coastal zone is grappling with the adverse effects of climate change. Increasing soil salinity, drinking water shortage, health problems, new vector-borne diseases, agricultural productivity decline, climate-induced migration are a fact. These coal-fired power plants will only aggravate the situation by contaminating the remaining drinking and irrigation water sources, jeopardising public health with higher incidence of cardiovascular and respiratory complications, and destroying livelihoods through unintended consequences. By building these coal-based power plants in the coastal areas, we are doubly punishing a group of people who are already struggling to adapt to the climate-induced disasters.

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Guardians of heritage

Lives spent preserving Afghan culture



BINA SHAH

THIS month's famed Afghan historian, Nancy Dupree, died in Kabul at the age of 89, after having dedicated her life to the preservation of Afghan culture. She collected thousands of documents relating to the recent history of Afghanistan from the Soviet invasion in 1979, even though she'd had to leave Kabul for Peshawar and the United States because of the lack of security during the Afghan Taliban rule. Still she persevered, sending documents by horseback through the Khyber Pass to the Afghanistan Centre she established in Kabul for her life.

Dupree's reason for this painstaking, backbreaking work was her belief in the importance of a people knowing their own history. Afghanistan has a rich, diverse past, that includes Greek and Buddhist heritage. She had written a guidebook to the Bamiyan Buddhas in the 1960s, the magnificent statues in central Afghanistan that the Taliban blew up in 2001, in their campaign to efface that heritage.

The Taliban's attack on Afghanistan's history made Dupree only more determined to convince the Afghans of its importance.

There are other examples of people risking their lives to preserve culture in conflict zones. Habibullah Ali, an employee of Habbul Ham, saved thou-

sands of Afghan film reels from the Taliban in the mid-1990s. The Taliban had decreed all forms of popular culture entertained illegal during their rule. Ali and his colleagues hid film canisters in the building behind false ceilings and brick walls so that they wouldn't be destroyed. According to a report in *Financial*, Ali said, "We were very scared but by God's grace we were able to save the movies and now we have this culture alive."

Five workers at the National Museum in Kabul risked death to save some of the priceless treasures from the museum that could have been destroyed or stolen, like thousands of others lost during the years of civil war. An employee of the museum, Shairazuddin Saifi, was in charge of this underground preservation effort; the collection he'd helped save went on display in Perth, Western Australia. Asked by ABC News why he'd done it, he said, "My life was not important, because I accepted the risk. It was our national asset and our history for the new generation that was very important for me."

A story with a sadder ending is that of Syrian archaeologist Khaled Al-Asaad, who was beheaded at the age of 82 by the militant Islamic State group in 2015 for refusing to lead them to valuable artefacts and antiquities that had been hidden for safekeeping. His corpse was hung from a Roman column in the central square of Palmyra, an ancient city on the Silk Road, with connections to the Roman



General view of destruction in Aleppo's ancient Umayyad mosque, in the UNESCO-listed northern Syrian city, April 2013.

and Byzantine empires. Maddened at his non-cooperation, IS killed living history by murdering Al-Asaad, who was an authority on Palmyra's history and a scholar of Aramaic. "Al-Asaad was a treasure for Syria and the world," said his son-in-law, Khalid Hariri.

Economic and technological advances are the visible signs of a nation's march towards progress and modernity, but a nation's cultural and historical heritage reveals the struggles of its people on that path. Preserving that heritage is a way of keeping the past connected to the present and to

the future: it is a service to humanity. Nancy Dupree, Habibullah Ali, Khaled Al-Asaad and Shairazuddin Saifi recognised the impermanence of their own lives against the larger backdrop of an entire civilisation. They weighed their own insignificance—and all human beings are, in a sense, insignifi-

cant—against the rich cultural and historical heritage they would pass down to their children and future generations. And they decided that they would risk the risk.

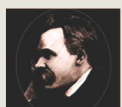
These cultural guardians realised that as well as looting these treasures for their own financial gain, regressive ideologies like the Taliban and IS wanted to rewrite history. As George Orwell said, "Who controls the past controls the future. Who controls the present controls the past." Eliminating entire swathes of history, especially pre-Islamic history, shores up their own authority, making their reign seem eternal and unquestionable. If you pretend that nothing came before you, then you can assert there is no force strong enough to replace you.

In Pakistan, we have a severe lesson to learn from these examples. There are many elements who would like to enact the same damage upon our pre-Islamic history and few cultural guardians willing to risk their lives to save it. More dangerously, our history is deleted from our textbooks, so future generations have no way of learning about it. As the Economist obituary for Nancy Dupree states, "If a people did not know their history, she kept saying, if they did not revere their culture or care for the monuments around them, their nation could not stay alive." It's a warning we would be well-advised to heed.

Bina Shah is a writer and columnist in Karachi. She is the author of the novel *Still a Child* and a Season for Martyrs.

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QUOTABLE Quote



FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE
GERMAN PHILOSOPHER

We can see nothing today that wants to grow greater, we suspect that things will continue to go down, down, to become more thinner, more good natured, more prudent, more comfortable, more mediocre, more indifferent... together with the fear of what we have also lost our love for him, our reverence for him, our hopes for him, even the will to him.

The sight of man now makes us weary—what is nihilism today if it is not that?

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

- 1 Makes beer
- 6 Surgical tool
- 11 Change the boundaries of
- 12 Ooze
- 13 Not obtuse
- 14 Paris river
- 15 Adam's grandson
- 17 Young person
- 18 Depleted a bank account, and then some
- 22 Rogers and Orishon
- 23 "Scram!"
- 27 Dined at home
- 29 Mall business
- 30 Account book
- 32 School near Windsor
- 33 Atomic particles
- 35 Misbehaving
- 38 Start

DOWN

- 1 Card game
- 39 Use
- 41 Illuminated
- 45 "I have no idea"
- 46 Cutlery piece
- 47 Trades
- 48 Madrid mister
- 1 Lingerie item
- 2 For fun, for short
- 3 Flightless bird
- 4 Cancer, Scorpio, or Pisces
- 5 Use up
- 6 Rent payers
- 7 Chopping tool
- 8 Spades or clubs
- 9 Writer Ferber
- 10 Olive part
- 15 Sphere
- 18 Spoken
- 19 Cast a ballot
- 20 Stared at
- 21 Flood
- 24 Dorothy's mark
- 26 Dorothy's dog
- 25 Magnetic metal
- 26 Addition
- 28 Fine droppings
- 31 Regret
- 34 Chats
- 35 Does a checkout
- 36 State frankly
- 37 Almanac fill
- 40 Little rascal
- 42 Light metal
- 43 Alien craft
- 44 For every

YESTERDAY'S ANSWER

- | | | | |
|--------|-------|-------|------|
| GREY | HAIR | REBEL | HAIR |
| RELAX | ABSEN | REBEL | HAIR |
| OPART | ABSEN | REBEL | HAIR |
| POTTED | GOT | REBEL | HAIR |
| USE | REBEL | HAIR | HAIR |
| PED | GUESS | HAIR | HAIR |
| CORPS | | HAIR | HAIR |
| DECRE | NEW | HAIR | HAIR |
| DRESS | ALI | HAIR | HAIR |
| RAY | STIFF | HAIR | HAIR |
| AGORA | OLIVE | HAIR | HAIR |
| NORAD | RAVES | HAIR | HAIR |
| KNEED | SPENT | HAIR | HAIR |

BEETLE BAILEY



BY MORT WALKER



BABY BLUES



BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT



DO YOU CAN DO THAT?

