

THE BENEFITS OF OPPRESSION FOR THE COMMON MAN

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As a proud Bangladeshi of the 21st century, I embrace the role of the oppressed. I credit my therapist for this—"Look at the silver lining," she says, "focus on the positives". So I do.

I used to be a politically aware person, now I'm too smart to be. Thankfully, this has opened up brain space for other activities, some arguably life saving, like eating at Dhaka's ever-expanding choice of restaurants. I used to write scathing statuses on the state of the state. Fortunately, those thrill seeking days are behind me. Now my newsfeed boasts an impressive array of food photography to truly drive home my vacuous millennial status.

As a citizen, my biggest concern is now me, which is indeed just as it should be. Of the many failing banks, which bank has a relatively lower chance of collapsing so I can put my meagre salary in it? Of the many contaminated produce in the market, which one looks dull enough that I can reasonably suspect they forgot to spray cancerous chemicals on it? Of the many ways to die on the roads, is sitting in endless traffic having my life sucked out of me by pollution the least painful?

Being able to focus on myself has done wonders for my self-esteem, just as my therapist predicted. Previously, I would worry about journalists, academics, diplomats and even the common man simply disappearing off of the streets. "Where is security of life? Where is liberty?" I would fruitlessly post on Facebook, much to the *birokti* of my other common man friends. Most would be *birokti* because they had achieved the nirvana of blissful ignorance earlier than me, and so my pessimism messed with their aura. A few would question my grammatical choices—shouldn't there be a 'the' before security of life? Now that I focus on myself though, and post food photos on Facebook, the number of likes has improved dramatically. This has had a direct impact on my self-esteem, making me feel needed and valuable. I am a better me today because of oppression. Kudos to the powers-that-be.

This is why I don't understand the ever-dwindling number of people who protest against oppression. Why are you so negative? Why are you fighting against happiness? Yes, it may be true that there has been a discernible fall in your quality of life, but the state has told us there has been sustained economic growth for the past decade, and so, really, it's your own fault for not drowning in the *jowar of unnyon*. If you'd just be more positive, and grateful to your master like those garments factory workers who work for nothing... Have you considered seeing my therapist? She's really good.

Undoubtedly, the state has also done an admirable job of cleaning these riffraff off of the streets. Some of the tools they have used—and I enumerate them here simply as a lesson for other countries so they can learn how to make their own citizens happy too—have been: fostering a climate of fear leading to self-censorship,



ILLUSTRATION: ISHMAM JUNAID

Section 57 of the ICT Act, enforced disappearances etc. Indeed they have served up such a smorgasbord of oppression that the common man has genuine trouble figuring out which one to focus on. Genius, that.

Now that I am convinced of the good oppression brings to my personal life, I would humbly like to suggest a couple of further moves the state can embrace to truly complete this cycle of happiness.

The state can, I believe, more vigorously indoctrinate people with the truth. The unvarnished truth is that oppressing the citizenry is what's keeping the hordes of extremists at bay. Whilst the Dhaka-based elite already understand this, and thus form the bulk of the blissfully indifferent, the pesky proletariat appear to still be confused. Has communal harmony really improved, they whine, given we are now enacting laws, such as the Acquisition and Requisition of Immovable Property

Ordinance 2017, that make it easier and legal to take over properties, including places of worship, owned by minorities? The government must deal firmly with these disbelievers who deny the truth. Despite the budgetary pressure this will create, for the sake of the nation the state must consider increasing oppression. It is heartening that wise policymakers have already begun taking steps in the right direction.

I also believe the state must manufacture the benefits of economic growth. Disney's abiding popularity is proof positive that people like fairy tales, and the fairy tale of bumper economic growth even as the common man's real household income has plunged in the past decade is a fantastic story which gets better with every telling. If the proletariat complain of shooting onion prices, shoot them with onion spray. Given Bangladesh

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We live in parallel worlds—one in which everything seems to happen in a single moment and another in which nothing seems to happen at any moment.

Let me explain.

In our so-called reality, we sit in vehicles for at least two to four hours a day on average and still have the audacity to wonder whether we will make it to the meeting, *doa*, inaugural ceremony, what have you. We watch helplessly as the SUVs of VIPs zoom past us by going on the wrong road, as rickety buses long past their expiry dates swerve by to stop at places that are nowhere near the bus stops, and all kinds of vehicles—two-three-four-six wheelers—decide they all have to be first in line, but end up in a massive tangle that will choke the streets for infinity. Or so it seems. Meanwhile, petty thieves have a field day robbing passengers of earrings, mobile phones, backpacks—somebody has even reported an ice-cream cone—while the traffic stands still.



CARTOON: SADAT

INNOVATIONS FOR SURVIVAL AND STRANGER THINGS

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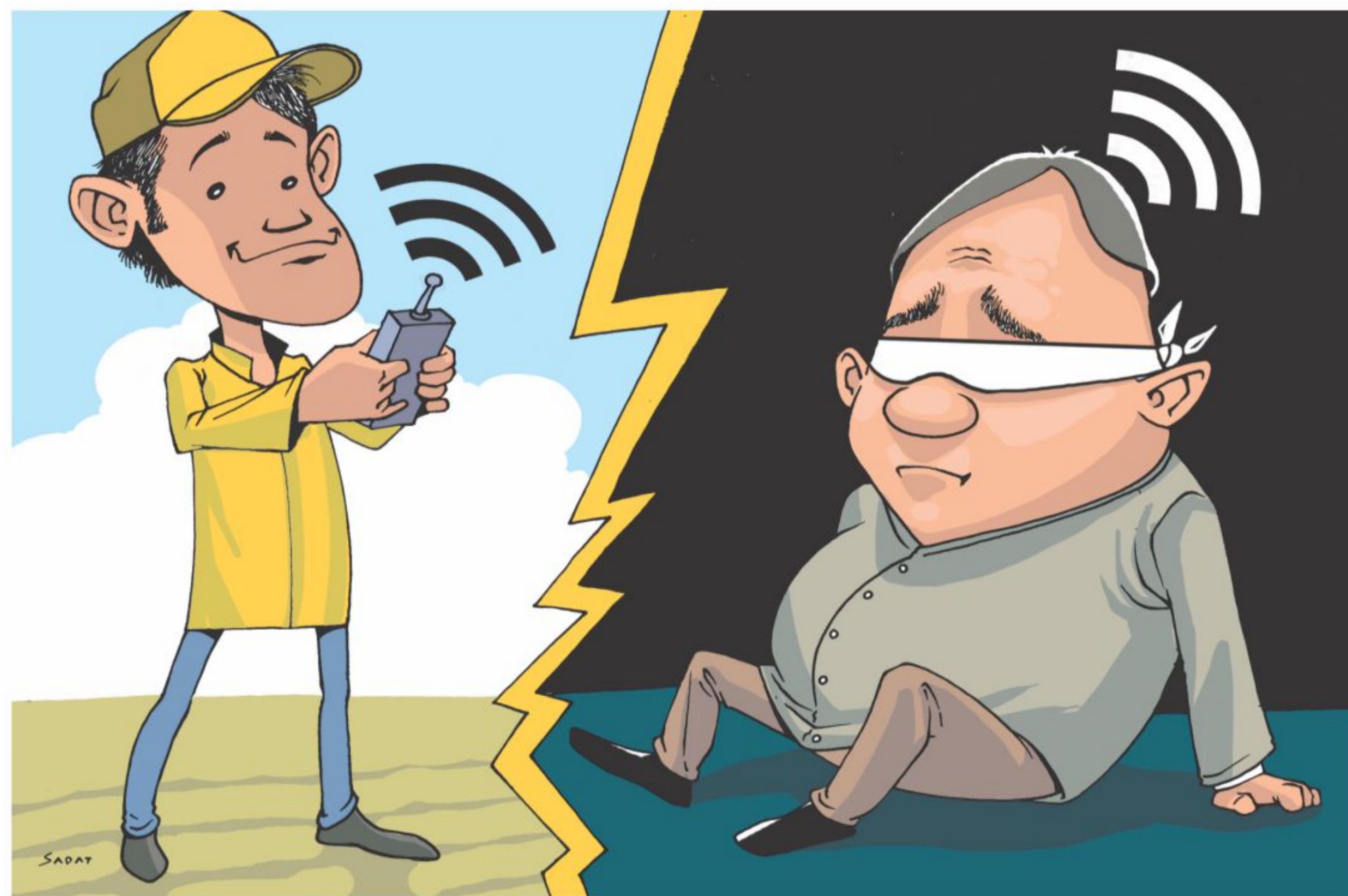
Meanwhile other bizarre things happen or don't happen. People disappear into thin air, families are destroyed, the missing make it to the headlines. But then nothing happens. It's bizarre—nobody, not even the most vigilant of law enforcers who are so efficient about catching some fool "liking" an FB post considered "seditious" or "blasphemous", not even these highly trained, highly qualified Ray Ban ambassadors can give one teeny weenie clue as to what happened to a human being after he had gone missing.

Then out of the blue, some secret spell is cast and some of the missing just appear out of nowhere—in some other town or even another country. You could be "abducted" in Motijheel, taken to "Narnia" and end up in Narayanganj. The most curious thing is that those who are lucky enough to return are mysteriously mum about what happened to them while in captivity—for months sometimes. Maybe they have been given some sort of amnesia-inducing serum, maybe they were hypnotised. Maybe they just don't want to be spirited away by the Wizard of Oz.

There are lots of unsolved puzzles to keep us awake at night—mostly why in one dimension so many things happen and in another, nothing, nada.

But that's not what this digressing tirade is about. A new year is here and we are supposed to be thinking positive and talking about the wonderful, endless possibilities—basically a third dimension of reality named "Candide's World", after the character created by Voltaire, a delusional optimist who is taught by his mentor that "all is for the best" in "the best possible of worlds".

So given the apparent existence of parallel worlds that intersect and create a significant amount of havoc to our beings, the only answer to dealing with chaos of any kind is that thing called "innovation". Innovation is basically our defense mechanism acting out in a brilliantly creative way to come up with a solution that no other soul has thought of. If you think about it, everything you touch, use, smell or see is an innovation, a response to some need. Think of a life without disposable diapers, antacids, Q-tips or even soap—oh yes and toothpaste and toothbrushes. Young ones, think of a life without Snapchat, Uber or the heavenly fast-food combo of burger-fries-soda that initiated you into the "real world" and freed you from a life of eating disgusting pureed mush your mother was determined to force-feed you.



CARTOON: SADAT

So what am I getting at really besides trying to increase the word count? No seriously people, it is time to wrack our brains and innovate all over again.

Take the traffic situation. Let's face it, nobody is going to solve it so we may as well learn to live with it—just like our cyclones and floods. We must develop coping mechanisms. This goes beyond writing novels to kill time, breaking Angry Bird records or writing mini articles for FB posts while marooned in a cloud of carbon monoxide. No, think more creatively.

Think mini parties inside the car, if you or your friends/associates/relatives/colleagues have such a vehicle at their disposal. Meetings, birthday parties and spontaneous hangouts can be arranged inside vehicles complete with food and beverages (plus throw-up bags, just in case). In fact, you can pick up your friends along the way, chit-chat and then drop them off on the way home. Yes, if you have a driver he will be privy to all your potty-mouthed, inane jokes and scandalous gossip that

old friends tend to share. But that is a small price to pay considering the mirth and merriment you will experience knowing that you are never going to be late for the party.

For the majority of people who travel on public transport—well, we are working on it.

The traffic situation has created the demand for all sorts of innovative services that may provide employment to many. We have already an app that locates useable toilets in the vicinity of where you are stuck. Now what the private sector can do is Überise the whole thing with establishments, households and shops offering your nearest toilet no matter where you are. Yes, it will be a challenge to find your vehicle after the definite relief you have attained. This too can be solved with flying hovercraft pick-ups that will literally pick you up and drop you off on the roof of the vehicle you were originally in. Sounds too farfetched? Well so did "face recognition" to open doors just a few years ago.

Other services that can be included in the "everything you need in your car" phenomenon are mobile masseuses (to hell with the nosy parkers gawking at you from outside), moving make-up artists who have perfected the art of putting on eye-shadow and liquid eyeliner without making you look like a raccoon, two-hour mobile tutors for the kids on their way to school or home, mobile therapists who pick up and allow to soothe your nerves and get you to that Zen state where you don't give two hoots that you are in the exact same spot for exactly 80 minutes and special "gridlock meals" on wheels with good-looking male or female servers on

rollerblades delivering whatever your heart desires.

Now coming back to innovations for our latest problem—people disappearing into thin air without a single witch, wizard, dementor or alien abductor in sight. Rich countries where pets are treated like royalty and offspring have started introducing microchips that are inserted in a dog's shoulder blades to trace every movement of the beloved pet. Folks it is time to get microchips in our shoulder blades, tooth fillings or ear piercings. Why? So that when someone you love or know, or you for that matter, is hit by the invisible headless hunter and disappear without a trace, there will be a tracer to show the exact location of the disappeared. Of course in the wrong hands this will backfire and everything will depend on who gets to them first—the goodies or the baddies, who are invisible by the way. But at least it is a start, albeit pathetic, to solving the most mysterious mystery of this country right now.

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