

# Back to a future jungle?

KAUTILYAN  
KRONICLES



IMTIAZ A HUSSAIN

may not have a choice but to be lovers of the colour green. No one ingrained its essence upon us more in Bangladesh than Rabindranath Tagore. His “Sonar Bangla,” our national anthem, carried us in 1971. With deforestation and desertification threatening us today, its more formidable mission might lie ahead: to instil its messages of trees, breeze, and ever-flowing rivers to not-yet born citizens.

Our generation might not have to

GREEN is “the colour of nature and health,” according to Jacob Olesen, a Dane lover of colours. Since it is also the colour predicting our existence on this planet, humans

worry about human extinction, but we leave a truly raw deal for those we dedicate the future to. Take, for instance, the world’s rainforests. Last year, the world lost the size of Bangladesh in trees, 39 million acres, the second record-breaking loss after 2016 (Hans Nicolas John calculated this for Mongabay, the Norwegian “Global Forest Reporting Network”). Most of these forests lie in the Amazon, and most of it goes to our greater need, food: ranching, agriculture, and commercial fishing, not to mention logging and mining. One-fifth of the Amazon has already been stripped, leaving a far larger proportion of the world precariously poised: the fewer trees in the Amazon, the more rapid rainfall and ocean waters across the Atlantic zone and disappearing ice in the Arctic (there go our RMG markets, business lovers!). Since more than three-quarters of all land animals and plants live in forests, denuding the planet is well underway. As more than

100 species disappear every day, the leash holding the human species also narrows every year. Adding climate change urgencies further exposes how dire and desperate our plight is.

“Green” campaigners, who have long been around, always plead in vain. Fortunately for them, we are now getting “green” soldiers and army, mostly fed from below (less-privileged, countryside dwellers, naturalists, and the first-wave of alarmed city denizens). Their efforts have been more grassroots and tangible than all the words written by pundits (like yours truly), and promises that governments were invented to make.

Imran Khan, Pakistan’s just-elected prime minister and former cricketer found his first success even before entering office. Leading a campaign to fill his country’s northwest Khyber Pakhtunkhwa with greenery from 2014 (dubbed “the Billion Trees Tsunami”), he achieved that in August 2017. At that time, only five percent of Pakistan land had forests (against the UN recommended 12 percent for that region). At a mere cost of USD 169 million, he committed 350,000 hectares to the project, and by 2030, another similar-sized area will be reclaimed from degradation and deforestation (see Rosamond Huttl, *World Economic Report*, July 2, 2018).

He is not the only green soldier reducing the global average temperature to under two-degree centigrade. Even grander has been the efforts of Pakistan’s hitherto closest ally, no, not the United States (where we would expect initiatives on this scale to begin, given the humongous car emission levels and other air-control and nature-preserving initiatives), but China. Globally infamous for generating more smog in the shortest span of time in metropolises like Beijing, the country’s mission to be “developed”, industrialised, and modernised has not prevented it from deploying 60,000 PLA soldiers to plant trees. Forestland will climb to 23 percent by 2020 and 26 percent by

2035 from the current 21.3 percent. Its plan to forest more than 60,000 hectares of land has already been more than half-accomplished, with 33.8 million completed last year and another 6.6 million hectares expected to be done this year. Known as the “Great Green Wall of China”, it should inspire all the countries aping China’s phenomenal economic renaissance (remember when it was the largest world economy from mid-18th Century to the start of the 20th Century, and shared that spot with India in the previous three centuries, there were no “green” problems, like today).

The irony should not be missed: the industrial revolution did not touch China or India then, though the voluptuous material world it spawned elsewhere snatched Mother Nature’s riches in exchange for abuse. With China and India embracing their own industrial revolution, we hope their traditional “green” wisdom will ultimately prevail (and the best test will be fulfilling COP-21 goals on time).

Is there a larger green-saving case than China’s? Fortunately, yes, not measurable in population size, but in area spanned. This is another “Great Green Wall”, a 7,700 kilometre stretch across Africa south of the Sahara. It will span across 24 countries, with 4 million hectares already completed in Senegal. Among its hopes: restore 50 million hectares of land, add food for 20 million people, create 350,000 additional jobs, and neutralise up to 250 million tons of carbon. Unlike China’s Great Green Wall, this one is expected to be seen (like the Great Wall of China is), from outer space, a green signal to the rest of the solar system of the earth’s uniquely precious commodity, indeed, that life exists.

These sporadic cases were not mentioned without a purpose. What Bangladesh can do in similar vein is very much part and parcel of the message. If Pakistan could do it, to drum up our spirit, there should not be any reason why Bangladesh cannot. If China is our largest economic partner,

this “green” Chinese initiative must also be allowed to flow into our far greener deltaic plains to reaffirm that friendship. If Africa can do it amid the most constraints and least productivity of any continent, Bangladesh can do it too. There is no way on this side of rational thinking why Bangladesh cannot, or why Bangladesh should not.

True, Bangladesh does not have the space, and is the fifth most vulnerable country against rising ocean-water and climate-change impacts. These threats should inspire us to begin where vulnerability is the most: along the coast and riverbanks; then stretch into the hills to halt landslides; and eventually embrace metropolises, to give more breathing space to teeming millions.

Any concerted campaign to plant a tree along every river bank should help us get on the scorecard very handsomely, especially with ample people living along those banks everywhere. Turning the degree one notch up, any legislation requiring any individual or company who/which chops down trees for construction purposes, to compensate with 100 more for every felled tree. Given the monsoons and heavily impacted refugees on the Chittagong hills, we can get those refugees and residents to plant trees from now on for future safety: they are not going anywhere for a while, but it does not take a monsoon any more to have landslides when trees have been vanishing faster than rainfalls. With those as the key victims, perhaps Bangladesh could show a world torn apart by refugees/immigrants, and the populism it has helped spawn, that there are mutually beneficial options to resort to.

Green must continue to colour nature and health: from farm fruits, vegetables, and cereals, rather than through biological/botanical machines; and metropolitan garden-paths instead of a sewage- or smog-filled atmosphere.

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PHOTO: TONY KARUNBA / AFP

## Of political parties, general elections and RTI in Bangladesh

SHAMSUL BARI and RUHI NAZ

A positive outcome of the contemporary trend towards authoritarian rule by democratically elected governments around the world is that it is providing a welcome boost to the limping Right to Information (RTI) or Freedom of Information (FOI) movements globally. Faced with shrinking democratic spaces, citizens’ groups and RTI/FOI enthusiasts are coming together to form national, regional and international watchdog bodies to share their strengths, identifying ways to counter the trend. The need for citizens to use RTI to question public authorities on why and how they do what they do has perhaps never been so important.

RTI law allows citizens to seek information from government and public bodies on matters relating to their functions. The idea is to make them more transparent in their work and accountable to the people, the two basic requirements for democracy. If nothing else, citizens’ queries can at least cause consternation for concerned authorities. The hope is, over time, this will lead to better governance.

RTI groups are discovering the value of sharing and discussing experiences in different countries and devising strategies based on good practices. The immense reach of the internet and social media is playing a stellar role in this regard.

Though many governments have adopted RTI/FOI laws only recently, most of them increasingly feel uneasy about them. As they face sensitive RTI requests from citizens, they begin to worry about the impact on their hitherto unbridled exercise of power and

authority. Hence, they quickly develop a negative stance about the law. International RTI/FOI groups see this happening all over the world.

Governments are also discovering that while it is easier to disregard or abuse many other laws of the land, this is not true for RTI/FOI. The law contains specific sanctions against non-compliant public officials, who may be summoned, reprimanded or fined by the Information Commissions. Many in the government, therefore, wish to water it down through amendments. This is motivating RTI/FOI watchdog groups around the world to come together and fight this trend through collective wisdom.

Resistance to RTI/FOI instruments comes not only from governments but also from politicians and their parties. The latter take the view that political parties are not “public authorities” and, therefore, not susceptible to RTI queries from citizens. RTI activists take the view that as political parties ostensibly seek to promote public wellbeing and owe their existence to public support, they must be accountable to the people—political parties challenge the legal validity of this position.

This explains why only seven out of over 115 countries that have adopted RTI/FOI Acts have specifically included political parties as falling within the definition of “public authorities”. As the Acts are normally adopted by national parliaments, most of whose members belong to political parties, the latter have managed to keep themselves formally outside the fold of the law in most countries.

Their position has, of course, been challenged by citizens at National Information Commissions and/or in the

court of law. In a landmark case, the Central Information Commission (CIC) of India ruled that political parties are indeed covered by the Indian RTI Act 2005. But the political parties have so far refused to abide by the ruling. It has provided a rare occasion for them to unite. Government efforts to undo the CIC decision by amending the RTI Act failed in 2013 due to dogged resistance by Indian RTI groups. But similar efforts

continue. In a more positive development, the South African Constitutional Court has recently held that the right to access information and the entitlement to exercise an informed right to vote, implicitly demands that information on the private funding of political parties and independent candidates be made reasonably accessible to the public. The case was precipitated by an RTI request for information from certain political parties about their private funding. The Constitutional Court highlighted the centrality of information to the electoral process and warned against political candidates being able to pick and choose what information should be made available to voters. It also indicated that access to information on private funding could deter

corruption and avoid the appearance of corruption in politics. In Bangladesh, the question of whether political parties come within the ambit of the RTI Act has not been directly contested yet. But, it indirectly featured in a judgement of the High Court (HC) in connection with a writ petition filed by Shujon, a civil society organisation, against a decision of the Information Commission of Bangladesh.

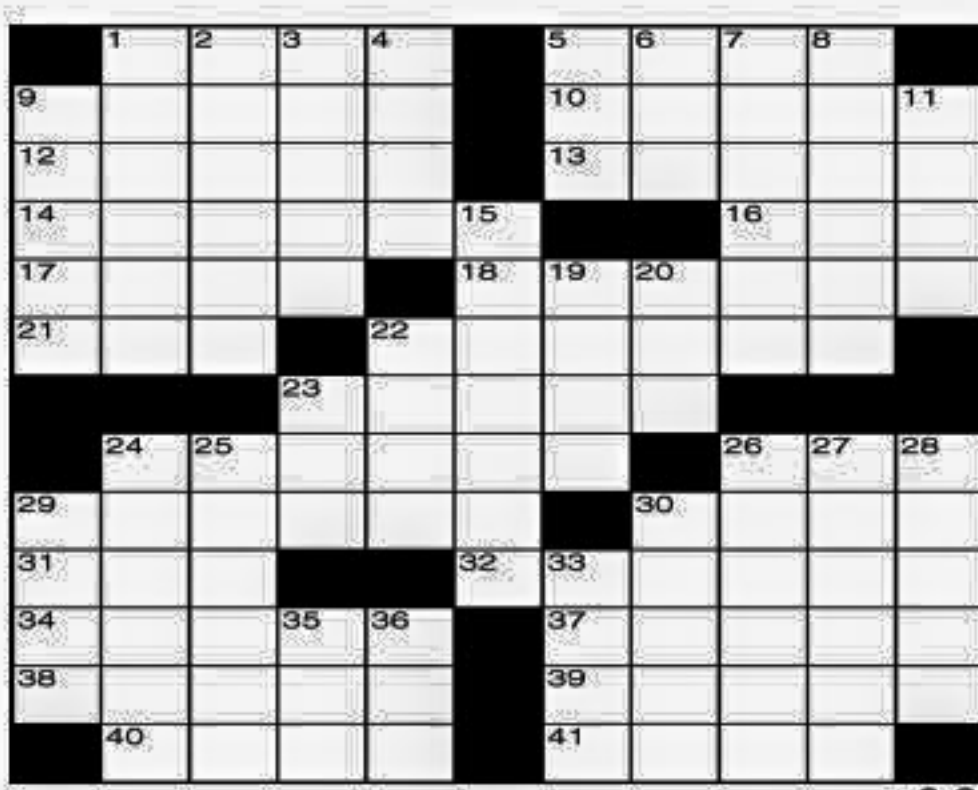
The decision related to a request by Shujon to the Election

Commission (EC), asking for copies of audited annual statement of accounts of political parties, which the latter regularly file with the EC. The EC declined, claiming it was “secret information” for which permission must be sought first from the parties concerned. When

Shujon challenged this position to the Information Commission, the latter sided with the EC, whereupon Shujon filed the writ petition. The HC judgement declared Information Commission’s decision to “have been passed without lawful authority and is of no legal effect”.

The judgement firmly stated that: “Ignoring the people’s right to know, keeping them in dark and playing hide-and-seek with them in a democratic country like us where all powers belong to the people and their mandate is necessary for ruling the country, no registered political party can be allowed to take the stand that the audited statements submitted to the Election Commission were ‘secret information’.”

It went on to add that: “In modern democratic countries, citizens have a



YESTERDAY’S ANSWER



CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

- |                         |                     |                       |
|-------------------------|---------------------|-----------------------|
| ACROSS                  | dog                 | 6 Gene messenger      |
| 1 Sound from an         | 26 Jelly’s kin      | 7 White animal        |
| angry cat               | 29 Shiny trifle     | 8 Restaurant fixtures |
| 5 College brother-hood  | 30 Mystique         | 9 Bags                |
| 9 Christmas Eve         | 31 Flow out         | 11 Untamed            |
| traveller               | 32 Darkfurred       | 15 Horse houses       |
| 10 Relative by marriage | matrtens            | 19 Sailor’s cry       |
| 12 Benefit              | 34 Audibly          | 20 Neither follower   |
| 13 Temple leader        | 37 Pencil part      | 22 Sailing vessel     |
| 14 Elevator             | 38 Get more out of  | 23 High tennis hit    |
| connections             | 39 Notions          | 24 Roof features      |
| 16 Sick                 | 40 Wild guess       | 25 Erase              |
| 17 Make socks           | 41 Brooklyn team    | 26 Romeo’s love       |
| 18 Treated leather      | DOWN                | 27 Sports sites       |
| 21 Used a couch         | 1 Cuban capital     | 28 Ship poles         |
| 22 Brutes               | 2 Shortly           | 29 Grizzly, for one   |
| 23 Toil away            | 3 High-stepping aid | 30 Home               |
| 24 Like a suspicious    | 4 Store event       | 33 Neat as -          |
|                         | 5 Fragrant tree     | 35 Much of N. Amer.   |
|                         |                     | 36 Cotillion girl     |

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