

Measuring poverty must be realistic

Take growing inequality into account

WHILE the country is nearing the eradication of extreme poverty and undergoing robust economic advancement, it needs to remodel its outdated poverty measurement method in order to uncover the real picture of poverty, as suggested by eminent economist Wahiduddin Mahmud at a recent launch of two books on poverty and inequality.

Since the mid-90s, Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS) has estimated poverty based on consumption expenditure of a family rather than its income. An income-based measurement model, which is used globally, would have revealed a more accurate scenario of poverty in the country and, thus, allowed the policymakers to address the issue more effectively.

Moreover, such a model would also put a spotlight on widening income inequality in the country. In the immediate post-independence period, the country had a higher rate of poverty, but income inequality was low. Now, while the poverty rate has reduced, both income and wealth inequality has soared to a dangerous level, which implies that the existing measurement model does not reflect reality.

Only months ago, a global financial intelligence company, WealthX, found that Bangladesh has surpassed any other country in the world in terms of increase in super-wealthy population, whereas the country's poorest section has seen their share of the national income reduced.

Incidentally, two experts—former Bangladesh Bank governor Mohammed Farashuddin and Planning Commission's member Professor Shamsul Alam—in separate occasions have warned that the Gini coefficient (an economic term to gauge inequality) may soon rise above 0.5, making the country more susceptible to social unrest.

It is, therefore, imperative that the government explore more ways to identify root causes of why inequality is widening in our country. One of the first steps to do that is to redefine the poverty line so that we can have a picture of how acute the situation really is and act accordingly.

A Hilsa fry ban on its own will not work

Fisher folk not getting food aid

EVERY year the government slaps a ban on catching of the Hilsa fish fry to help the fish spawn properly. But for the fisher folk community living along the Padma River in Munshiganj, it is a matter of subsistence and local authorities distribute free rice during this period. Unfortunately, for the approximately 3,000 fishermen and women, the rice they were promised has not been forthcoming and they've been forced to flout the ban and catching of Hilsa fry all along the shoals of the Padma river in that area is in full swing.

We fail to accept the logic provided by the local authorities that they are still making a list of community members who qualify for the 20kg rice to each fisher folk as compensation for not catching the fish. This programme has been going on for the last few years and hence the basic list already exists. What it points to is sheer mismanagement of an ongoing programme under the Vulnerable Group Feeding (VGF) and this is going to cause havoc with Hilsa supply next season. Since it is already known how many fisher folk earn their living in Munshiganj, authorities should look into what happened to the rice allotted to these poor people. When we are talking about survival, then people will do what needs to be done to feed their families when the social safety net fails to deliver. No amount of policing, fining or jailing for that matter will put a stop to fishing if aid doesn't come through at the right time.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Reimburse students for transport cost

The fact that the question paper for "Gha" unit at Dhaka University was leaked before the admission test is depressing. We welcome the decision of the authorities to retake the exam. However, let us not forget that the admission-seekers, most of whom came from rural or suburban areas of the country, spent a good sum of money to reach the exam hall.

Since it was up to the university to protect the integrity of the exam and it failed to do so, it should take the responsibility to reimburse the students who participated in the previous test for their travel expenses.

Zihadul Islam, IBA, Jahangirnagar University

Leaking private phone conversations

We have noticed with utter concern that phone conversations of mostly opposition leaders have been "leaked" to the media or on social media by unidentified individuals. Leaking private conversations is a dangerous practice that needs to be stopped.

Only the law enforcement agencies are authorised to wiretap phone calls of suspected criminals. So, how come conversations of non-criminal nature are being recorded and then leaked to the media?

Wiretapping without proper authorisation and leaking recorded conversations should be considered illegal and an infringement of individual privacy.

Md Zillur Rahaman, Bhola

EDITORIAL

JAPAN'S SOFT POWER

A Midas touch in waiting!

PLEASURE IS ALL MINE



SHAH HUSAIN IMAM

ISRAELI Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu had kept up his sleeves a unique treat for his guest, the Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe on his visit to Tel Aviv in May of the current year. Segev Moshe,

a renowned culinary expert and Netanyahu's private chef, after the main meal over the diplomatic dinner rolled out the special dessert on the table: "A selection of chocolates served in dark metal shoes for Japanese and Israeli heads of government Shinzo Abe and Benjamin Netanyahu and their wives Akie and Sara."

There is nothing lowlier than a shoe in Japanese culture. Not only do they refrain from wearing shoes at home, you won't find shoes in their offices; apparently embarrassed Israeli foreign ministry officials mumbled a post-haste *pro forma* statement: "No disrespect meant to the distinguished guests," implying perhaps only an artistic license was taken.

An Instagram user commented, "I can't believe that you have put shoes on a table for the Prime Minister of Japan: Reality transcends parody, the sarcastic remark went on—A bit of homework on other people's culture next time will not hurt."

Maybe the rare diplomatic *faux pas* was a garbed riposte to the Japanese soft power diplomatic advances in the Middle East.

A John Deferios Special to Gulf News, September 27, sums up the Japanese campaign for soft power outreach. "Undeterred by fits and starts of reforms (an oblique reference to a slightly reactive dynamic to post-War constitutional restrictions on militarisation), Japan is renewing its soft power approach with a combination of cultural and economic influence that should help build up a reservoir of goodwill for decades to come."

In tangible terms, under the nickname of the Resilience Policy in the Middle East and North Africa, Japan is supporting culture, development training and education in the political and security hotspots of the region.



PM Sheikh Hasina with Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe.

PHOTO: AFP

Egypt, Palestine Territories and Jordan are the sites "where we witness first-hand how Japan is out to steer a volatile region in the right direction."

Even Yemen, Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco and Iraq are poised to be beneficiaries of Japanese soft power gestures. Japan is the third largest economic power in the world. Tokyo doesn't want to rest content with retaining its position as an economic-technological powerhouse but also use its cultural and aesthetic magnetism towards building a softer, humane enlightening world.

Japan is perhaps ideally suited for pursuing such international agenda on the quiet, without self-trumpeting to be inviting any unwanted envious stares. Actually, "Tokyo is a convincing example of promoting the positive image by a non-great power without engaging military means." It maintains a demonstrative disregard of geo-political ambitions. Economic success, urban development, high quality of education, futuristic technologies and above all its mysterious culture, are assets which Japan will employ in the fulfilment of its newly unfolding world role.

According to Joseph Nye Jr the

pioneer of soft power concept, Japan's attractiveness potential is one of the highest in the world. Nye, a political scientist; Harvard University Distinguished Service Professor defined soft power "as the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payments. It arises from the attractiveness of a country's culture, political ideals, and policies. It is much more than "image, public relations and ephemeral popularity."

In elucidating soft power Professor Nye's book underlines the symbolic dimension of the phenomenon thus: The Chinese student demonstration in Tiananmen Square used a replica of the Statue of Liberty. And the newly liberated Afghans asked for a copy of the Bill of Rights.

A great opportunity to put life into Japanese soft power can be the 2019 Rugby World Cup and the 2020 Olympic Games slated to take place in Japan.

In the Autumn of 2019 three big events by Takashi Murakami will be warmly welcomed in Russia. There will be "gentle rains" and Keiichi's "Center of mirrors" on show.

As for Bangladesh we signed a deal with Japan in August for 24 well-

equipped rescue boats. They will be used to ensure maritime security and check terrorism and piracy in the Bay of Bengal. Among a host of other positive engagements, the Bangladesh Japan friendship bridges bear testimony to deeper ties.

According to a news item on September 25, 2018 Taro Kono, Minister for Foreign Affairs, Japan and his Bangladesh counterpart AS Mahmud Ali met during the 73rd session of the UNGA. Renewing their commitments to Japan-Bangladesh Comprehensive Partnership they agreed to further diversify cooperation in light of Bangladesh's elevation to a middle income country by 2021.

It is especially noteworthy that both foreign ministers expressed commitments to further strengthening bilateral ties towards 50th anniversary of diplomatic relations between the two countries in 2022. Bangladesh too has a wealth of soft power potential that needs to be harnessed to enhance the country's image.

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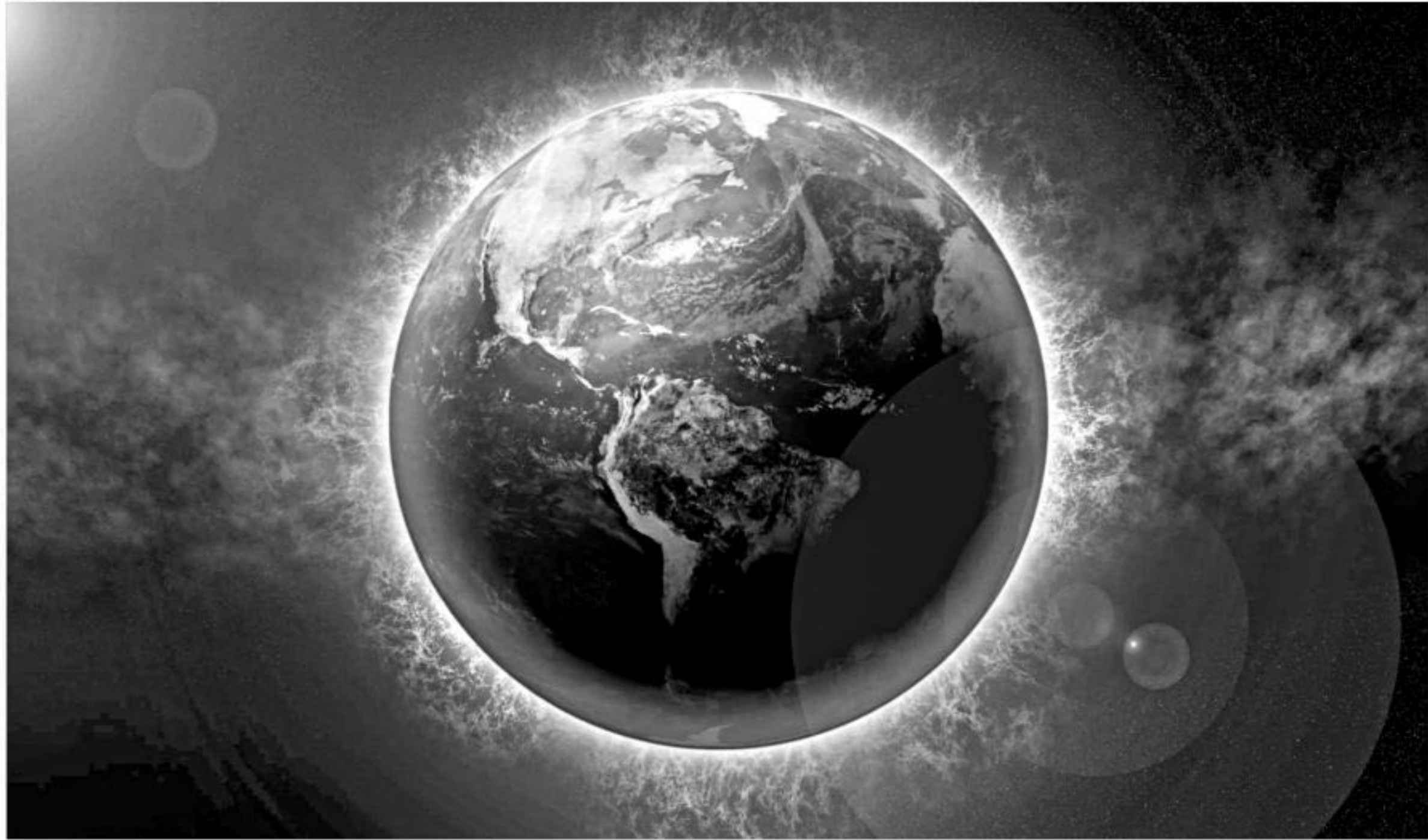
Global warming is impacting how Earth spins on its axis

QUAMRUL HAIDER

ANTHROPOGENIC greenhouse gas emissions might be affecting more than just the climate. For the first time, scientists at NASA presented evidence that the orientation of the Earth's spin axis is changing because of global warming.

The Earth spins from west to east about an axis once every 24 hours, creating the continuous cycle of day and night. The north-south spin axis runs through the North and South Poles and is tilted by 23.5 degrees from the vertical. The axial tilt causes almost all the seasonal changes.

But the tilt is far from constant. It varies between 21.6 and 24.5 degrees in a 41,000-year cycle. This variation together with small fluctuations in the Sun and Moon's gravitational pull, oblate shape and elliptical orbit of the Earth, irregular surface, non-uniform distribution of mass and movement of the tectonic plates cause the spin axis, and hence the Poles, to wobble either east or west along its general direction of drift.



Until 2005, Earth's spin axis has been drifting steadily in the southwest direction around ten centimeters each year towards the Hudson Bay in Canada. However, in 2005, the axis took an abrupt turn and started to drift east towards England at an annual rate of about 17 centimeters, according to data obtained by NASA's Gravity Recovery and Climate Experiment satellites. It is still heading east.

After analysing the satellite data, scientists at NASA's Jet Propulsion Laboratory in California attribute the

sudden change in direction of the axis mainly to melting of Greenland's ice sheets due to global warming. The reason: Melting of ice sheets and the resulting rise of the sea level are changing the distribution of mass on Earth, thereby causing the drift of the spin to change direction and become more oblique. The axis is particularly sensitive to changes in mass distribution occurring north and south of 45 degrees latitude. This phenomenon is similar to the shift in the axis of rotation of a spinning toy if we put more mass on one side of the top or the other.

Since 2002, ice sheets of Greenland have been melting at an annual rate of roughly 270 million tonnes. Additionally, some climate models indicate that a two-to-three degrees Celsius rise in temperature would result in a complete melting of Greenland's ice sheets. If that happens, it could release the equivalent of as much as 1,400 billion tonnes of carbon dioxide, enhancing global warming even further. It would also raise the sea level by about 7.5 meters. By then, the wobbling of the Poles would also be completely out of whack.

water across the Earth is also causing our planet to pitch over.

What does this mean for us? Although something as small as we humans shook up something as massive as the Earth, it won't turn upside down as long as the Moon, which acts as a stabiliser of the Earth's spinning motion, stays in the sky as our nearest neighbour. However, if the shift of the spin axis maintains its present rate and direction, then by the end of this century, the axis would shift by nearly 14 meters. Such a large shift will have devastating consequences for climate change and our planet.

The orientation of the Earth's spin axis determines the seasonal distribution of radiation at higher latitudes. If the axial tilt is smaller, the Sun does not travel as far north in the sky during summer, producing cooler summers. A larger tilt, as could be in the future, would mean summer days that would be much hotter than the present summer days. In addition, it would impact the accuracy of GPS and other satellite-dependent devices.

Since global warming is causing the Earth's mass to be redistributed towards the Poles, it would cause the planet to spin faster, just as an ice skater spins faster when she pulls her arms towards her body. Consequently, the length of a day would become shorter.

Our biological clock that regulates sleeping, walking, eating, and other cyclic activities is based on a 24-hour day. Faced with a shorter day, these circadian rhythms would be hopelessly out of sync with the natural world. Moreover, a rapidly spinning Earth will be unstable to the extent that the Poles would wobble faster. This would create enormous stress on the Earth's geology leading to large-scale natural disasters that will most likely be disastrous for life on Earth.

We may not witness the effects of a rapidly spinning Earth by the end of this century or the next. Nevertheless, the effects will be perceivable a few centuries from now if the global temperature keeps on rising and the ice sheets keep on melting in tandem.

The shift in the Earth's spin axis due to climate change highlights how real and profoundly large impact humans are having on the planet. The dire consequences of the shift in the axial tilt towards a larger obliquity, as noted above, is not a wake-up call, but an alarm bell. There is still time for our leaders to listen to the scientists and formulate a long-term approach to tackle the problem of climate change instead of a short-term Band-Aid approach, as outlined in the 2015 Paris Agreement, which will see us through only to the end of this century. Therefore, our foremost goal before the death knell should be to reverse global warming, or at the least, to stop further warming instead of limiting it to 1.5-degree in the next 75 years or so.

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