

Dhaka—the second most polluted capital city

Enforce environmental protection laws strictly

A jointly-prepared report by Greenpeace and Airvisual recently unveiled the 2018 Air Quality Report on March 5 and in it, Dhaka has featured as the second most polluted capital city in the world. This report reinforces an earlier report published in September 2018 by the US-based Environmental Protection Index (EPI) on the performance of governments in 180 countries in combating pollution.

Bangladesh has slipped down 40 places between the years 2010 and 2018 and 56 percent of air pollution has been attributed to brick kilns. Though the government enacted a law in 2018 to make brick kilns more environment-friendly, more than a quarter of the 7,772 brick kilns in the country do not make that grade, and this is where more stringent enforcement will be needed.

Looking beyond brick kilns, we must contend with vehicular emissions, industrial activities, construction work and poor waste management—all of which increase the PM2.5 level, i.e. the level of airborne particles which damage the respiratory system causing various vascular diseases. While it is easy to enact laws, what has been missing is the enforcement of those laws. The report ought to serve as a wakeup call, given the increasing risks of air pollution on public health. We need action by regulatory authorities to clamp down on polluters because the cost of inaction results in premature deaths of thousands of people. As pointed out in the report, globally, "every hour, 800 people are dying, many after years of suffering from cancer, respiratory illnesses or heart disease caused by breathing polluted air."

Will we ever see the conclusion of the probe?

Bring Taqi's murderers to justice

THE headline of a report by this daily marking the sixth anniversary of the murder of 17-year-old Tanwir Muhammad Taqi succinctly captured the absurdity of the investigation that ensued in its wake, calling it "a never-ending probe". Six years have passed since the young boy was murdered in Narayanganj, which had moved the conscience of the people, but there has been no notable development in the investigation yet. No charge sheet has been submitted before the court. Nothing at all that could give the bereaved family a sense of closure. Investigative officials have churned out the same elusive response year after year—that "investigation is going on". But the protracted probe into what once seemed like an open-and-shut case, especially after a leaked draft of the probe in 2014 identified 11 individuals including the nephew of a ruling party member, makes one wonder whether the probe has been affected by any extraneous consideration. How long before it is finished and Taqi's murderers are brought to justice?

Taqi's case is not the only unresolved murder case that has haunted us but his is the most notable example in recent years of how the direction of an investigation may change after incriminating evidence linking powerful people are somehow unearthed and brought to the public attention. The protracted investigation of a case where the evidence is clear and the alleged perpetrators are reported to have been identified, casts doubts on the intention of the investigators. Given the sensitivities that surround the case, the authorities should ensure that those in charge of the investigation uphold utmost professionalism and the real culprits are caught. Taqi deserves justice, and nothing less than that will suffice.

MARCH 7, 1971

The voice of revolution

ABDUL MANNAN

MARCH of 1971 is a historic month for us because beginning March 1, the course of history of one Pakistan changed very fast. In the first general election of Pakistan since it was created in 1947, the Awami League (AL) led by Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman won 167 seats out of 169 constituencies of East Pakistan (seven reserved seats for women), of a total 300 seats in the National Parliament of Pakistan.

The elections were held under a Legal Framework Order (LFO) announced by General Yahya Khan. The LFO directed that once the parliament was formed, it would have to draft a constitution for Pakistan within 120 days based on the ideology of Pakistan, acknowledging its theocratic nature. It also said that if General Yahya was not satisfied with the contents of the constitution, he would trash the draft.

AL fought the election on its Six-Point Programme and announced that the constitution would be framed incorporating the programme that promised maximum autonomy for all the provinces of Pakistan. Many, including Maulana Bhashani, the chief of National Awami Party (NAP), questioned the propriety of participating in such an election under LFO. But Sheikh Mujib was no revolutionary and believed in universally practised democratic norms and that elections were the only means of going to power. The Bangalis did not make a mistake in choosing their leader and the party.

Under a democratic system, it is the majority party that is called to form the government. But on February 28, 1971, Bhutto announced that the 120-day timeframe under LFO must be removed, and if Yahya Khan postponed the sitting of parliament, which was scheduled to sit in Dhaka on March 3, 1971, he was willing to discuss the matters relating to Sheikh Mujib's Six-Point Programme and framing of the constitution. Unexpectedly, on March 1, 1971, it was announced that Yahya had decided to unilaterally postpone the sitting of the parliament. He was dancing to Bhutto's tune. Bhutto was the lynchpin in the conspiracy against the people of East Pakistan.

The postponement of the sitting of the parliament was the last nail in the coffin of a united Pakistan. Syed Shahid Husain, a civil bureaucrat from the then West Pakistan serving in Dhaka and a witness to many events leading up to March 25-26, 1971, writes in his memoir, *What Was Once East Pakistan*: "The decision to postpone the session of National Assembly triggered an immensely negative response. Dhaka Radio Station broadcast Mujib's call for public protest in the province against the postponement. But people were unable to restrain themselves and showed spontaneous and forceful resentment by coming out on the streets within half an hour of the announcement... About 150 people showed up in my office and respectfully asked me to order the closure of the office because their democratic rights had been violated. I ordered accordingly."

On March 3, Bangabandhu addressed a huge gathering at Paltan Maidan organised by Purbo Pakistan Chhatra League where a national flag of Bangladesh was formally hoisted and a manifesto of the proposed independent new nation was announced. The national anthem of the would-be new country was also declared. Bangabandhu announced that on March 7, 1971 he would give the formal directives to the nation at Ramna Race Course (present-day Suhrawardy Uddayan) about the future course of action.



Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman delivering the historic speech on March 7, 1971 at the Ramna Race Course in Dhaka to a gathering of over two million people.

Before the March 7 address, the air was pregnant with speculations about what Bangabandhu would announce. Would it be a unilateral declaration of independence or would he announce some sort of compromise? In the morning of March 7, leaders of Chhatra League proposed to him that he unilaterally declare an independent Bangladesh and take over the cantonments. The US ambassador in Pakistan, Joseph Farland, met Sheikh Mujib and in unequivocal terms warned him that if he declared independence, the US would not endorse or support it.

Bangabandhu gave everyone a patient hearing but said very little. He knew exactly what his options were and their possible outcomes. By midday, the vast Ramna Race Course was teeming with millions eager to hear from the "Poet of Politics," a title given to him earlier by *Newsweek*. Syed Shahid Husain writes: "I had noted in my diary that Sheikh Mujib was likely to declare independence on March 7. As a matter of fact, I had heard this on BBC. On March 7, Mujib addressed a mammoth rally but did not declare independence. Yahya must have been disappointed as he had probably hoped that Mujib would proclaim independence and thus provide him the justification to arrest the East Pakistan leader."

Bangabandhu arrived at the venue at 2:45 in the afternoon and spoke for only 18 minutes. It was an electrifying 18 minutes. Not only were the people of entire Pakistan and East Bengal glued to their radios but the world too was holding its breath. However, on orders from the central government, both the radio and TV stations had to abstain from broadcasting the historic speech. In protest, the staff of radio and TV channels walked out of their broadcasting stations. The speech was extempore, and became one of the most memorable speeches ever given by a politician.

While Bangabandhu was speaking, the Dhaka garrison was preparing for an assault on the unarmed civilians in case there was a declaration of independence. Bangabandhu did not disappoint the

waiting millions, but said what he had to in an intelligent and statesman-like way. He ended his speech saying: "The struggle this time is for emancipation, the struggle this time is for independence." A straight declaration would have branded him a secessionist and he would have lost world sympathy.

Bangabandhu declared a programme of non-cooperation unless their demands were met, which included handing over power to the majority party (AL) in the parliament, lifting of martial law, pulling the army to the barracks, and holding an impartial enquiry for the killing of innocent civilians by the army. He directed the people not to pay any taxes, and to observe complete shutdown. All transport vehicles would run, banks would remain open till 2pm and all buildings would fly black flags. As a matter of fact, it was Bangabandhu who was running the civil administration of East Bengal and not Yahya Khan. By all definitions, East Pakistan was lost and the world was witnessing the slow emergence of a new independent nation.

On March 15, 1971, Yahya arrived in Dhaka to talk to Bangabandhu. But it was too late. The die was cast. It was simply a part of the conspiracy to unleash the Pakistan army to annihilate the Bengali nation. On March 25, 1969, when General Ayub Khan abdicated power in the face of a massive student uprising in both wings of Pakistan, he delivered a speech saying that he could not preside over the destruction of Pakistan. He handed over power to General Yahya who did exactly that because that was the pre-determined destiny of Pakistan, a country created upon a flawed ideology.

Bangabandhu's speech on that afternoon has become synonymous with the history of Bangladesh. Long live the spirit of March 7, 1971.

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A Wo-man



RUBANA HUQ

stylish male in his 50s, along with his lovely doctor wife, stands out anywhere because of his warmth and style. So, his response did not surprise me.

Wo-man, according to him, is "wow-man". Right before International Women's Day, this was quite a tribute. A woman is today a wow-man, an evolved species of homosapiens. Standing in 2019, we have just been renamed. Amen.

As a wo-man, I have gotten advice from people to slow down, to take it easy and get some rest, find time for recreation, take periodic breaks and finally accept that it's not good to be restless. But a wo-man cannot rest and things haven't changed much for wo-men for years. We've always played the third fiddle to men. There are no regrets though. Had we not lived in the shadows of men for the major part of our lives, we would not have learnt what we have today. The degree of resilience is undoubtedly greater in women. Hence, one finds thousands of women, dressed in bright colours, mostly with a shawl or their heads covered, marching on the streets, hopping onto buses, checking in at their factories, working hours behind sewing machines, chatting during breaks, making friends, and finally leaving their workplaces to return home, just to cook the last meal of the day, tend to the other daily chores, proving finally that a wo-man has no time for herself.

At the other end of the spectrum of affluence, the scene is different. Young women from reasonably comfortable financial backgrounds have it a little better. Having watched their mothers go through the middle-class housewives' struggle, these relatively comfortable wo-men have reached a point where they wouldn't like to accept any prescriptions on their lives, work, dress codes or their identity. So the well-to-do young wo-men

have it considerably better, the economically disadvantaged wo-men have it tough, and the middle-class young women are still fighting back.

At an informal *adda* of young professionals, just a few weeks back, I was amazed by the level of resilience of these wo-men. Listening to their stories was a humbling experience. The multiple commentaries of how these young women have made it so far stretched from usual stories of wo-men being discouraged by family members down to hair-raising stories of going without money for days. At the end of it all, all these wo-men looked well-positioned to strive for the better. And, their stories mostly boiled down to economic empowerment...



PHOTO: STAR

Today, the wo-men in our readymade garment factories have a voice just because they can hand tiffin money over to their husbands. Wo-men belonging to affluent families have had most of their mothers struggling under the shadows of their fathers, having worked their lives away, leaving them on a better base. Young professional wo-men from lower/higher middle-income groups are being fuelled by need. Point is, conviction matters. Point is, money does too. What do we then have to do for a more inclusive society for all the wo-men around? Here's my humble two cents as follows:

A national credit portal to improve access to credit

In spite of the central bank giving 15 percent from the refinancing scheme to women and in spite of its instruction to private banks to give 10 percent of credit to wo-men, the number of wo-men availing this opportunity is dismal. Only three percent credit was given up to last September. That proves the point.

Wo-men don't have meaningful access to credit. What can be done to encourage an increase in disbursement?

An "area approach" and cluster-based approach could be helpful. This could be set up through the upazila steering committee. A three-member team could be set up at the grassroots level to do the primary assessment. This upazila steering

committee could also endorse the applicant, and could follow up with the procedure. A portal set up to monitor every loan applicant could be connected to the central bank. Every loan request would be recorded at the upazila level. After being vetted by the upazila steering committee, it could be ticked off and at that notification, the district steering committee could take it up, reviewing it further, and then do the final submission.

This portal could be linked to all private banks which would be given access to view, review, accept, and reject applications. The portal could be a free

marketplace of aspiring entrepreneurs, willing to pitch their idea, tempting banks and financial institutions to partner with them through loan or equity participation.

In case the portfolio of the applicant is too small, few applicants can apply together for "group funding." Loans could be given in tranches. There could be a selection committee, constituting representatives from private banks and there could also be a performance-monitoring committee constituting representatives of any wo-men's forum, central bank, and private banks.

Skill up-gradation on the basis of cluster-based training: Training the next wo-men

An upazila-wise training centre to teach the "next level" skill could be formed. The "next" could mean offering a local woman an opportunity to make sweets in a more hygienic condition and packaging it for urban consumption. The "next" could mean offering a seamstress in an upazila an opportunity to collaborate with others and set up a unit to supply tailoring services to the district. The "next" could mean an opportunity for young rural wo-men to form groups to learn to innovate through software trainings.

Viral visibility

Stories of wo-men must be told, shared and rewarded. Wo-men need to be viral.

A national award for "Invisible Heroes" may pave the way as case studies, so that a national policy formulation can be based on grassroots feedback.

The stress on economic empowerment in today's column is so that wo-men don't die of hunger, or struggle for pocket money, or feel deprived of their desires...

Wo-men all over the landscape are the same; our stories are similar and our tears taste the same. Irrespective of the social or economic bubbles that we come from or represent, we are one. May money not dictate the divide anymore, may bias become irrelevant. Unless we stand for the other wo-man, no man ever will. Unless we embrace each other today, tomorrow may never happen.

Happy Wo-men's Day!

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Freedom and the need for introspection

"Ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country." This quote of John F Kennedy reflects the emotions of this month—March. In this month in 1971, the people of this country rebelled against the injustices of the then West Pakistan at the call of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. They became united and declared war, not caring about the dangers and deaths they would have to encounter. They were fearless; their only aim was to make the country independent. Our deepest gratitude to the freedom fighters who were able to free the country only in nine months. They will always shine like bright stars in our sky.

But sadly, after 48 years of independence, everything seems to have changed. It seems that people now do not care about their country anymore; they are obsessed with making money and are willing to go to any length for their petty interests. All sorts of crimes have increased in our society. We have been watching this degradation with deep sorrow and we wonder whether the day will come when we will be able to stand holding our heads up high.

Nur Jahan, Chattogram